

The Ghost of Shelly Dee

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Chapter 1

“Do you know you’re dead?” asked a clear, female voice.

The silence of the dead was the only response.

Moonlight sliced through the fog as it drifted among gravestones. In this eerie half-light, shadows ebbed and flowed like some midnight ethereal tide.

“Give us a sign of your presence,” commanded a clear and loud male voice.

The hooting of an owl answered, echoing eerily through the fog.

“Is there something you’d like to communicate to this side?” asked the first voice. More silence. Nearby stood the cemetery’s only crypt, a decrepit, crumbling concrete structure with a rusting iron door. Faded Latin etchings added to the aura of antiquity. Hidden in the shadows, it slept, sagging like a tired old watchman.

“Let us help you. We have your son Drew here. Do you have a message for him?” offered the second voice in his commanding tone. A cricket droned with airy indifference. The playing shadows coalesced into three figures, their backs to the

crypt, all their attention focused on a small, unassuming gravestone.

A third voice broke the silence in a quiet, respectful tone. "Lets get out of here. I told you my parents wouldn't be here." Drew stepped forward, his features caught in the moonlight revealed a shaggy mop of dirty blond hair and clear blue eyes that looked far away at the moment. He let his fingers slide along the top of the twenty-six-inch tall stone. Carved in simple English, it read:

Here lies Gabriel Canny
1975 - 2011
and his devoted wife
Samantha Cromwell-Canny
1976 - 2011
Survived by their
beloved son Andrew
and loving mother Bethany.

It was no crypt. It was the farthest thing from one. Simple and cheap was all Drew's grandmother could afford. This was the first time he had visited his parents' grave since the funeral. His classmate and friend Jen had insisted.

Jen stepped forward, respectfully taking off her black knit cap. She reached for Drew, letting her hand rest for a moment on his forearm before shyly pulling back.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Drew paused a moment before nodding.

The third figure stepped forward, taller than Drew and Jen. "Come on sis, are you guys ready to go or what?"

Jen shushed her brother. "Shut up Ron. We'll leave when I say we leave."

Ron shrugged his little sister's reprimand off his gangly frame with practiced ease. "The portable DVR camera was recording so if something showed up, we caught it," he said with a pat to his shoulder bag, "and I've stowed the tripod too. I've got the K-2 Meter and the thermometer. The K-2 was obviously a disappointment, and the thermometer ran a steady sixty-four

degrees. Pretty warm for May in Ohio, huh? If this holds up, its gonna be a great night tomorrow for a romantic moonlit walk with the ladies after the school dance.”

“Whatever doofus,” replied Jen. “You’ll be lucky to get a Freshman girl to dance with you. You can forget about leaving the building with one.” Jen was short for her age. She was pretty, with big brown eyes and long brown slightly wavy hair. And she was smart; Drew thought she might be the smartest one in their entire eighth grade class. She reached for a small chrome digital recorder resting on the gravestone and held it to her mouth. “End EVP session, State Street Cemetery.” Pushing a button she slipped the recorder into her jacket pocket.

“I really wish we had caught something Drew,” she said earnestly. “We still might have an EVP on tape.

“I told you we wouldn’t catch anything,” replied Drew without emotion. “If you want to catch ghosts, the only ones in this graveyard are at the other corner,” he said waving his hand in the direction of Cemetery and State Streets. Looking up he could see two figures standing in the corner, some hundred yards away. Drew shuddered.

“We’ve been all over this graveyard and never caught anything and all of a sudden you tell me there’s ghosts over there,” said Jen incredulously. “I don’t believe it.”

“Suit your self,” replied Drew, stuffing his hands in his pockets and heading toward the west entrance on Wallace Drive. He didn’t expect her to believe him. He barely believed it himself, and he was the one seeing the ghosts. Yet he had hoped she would be different. Her father owned the local gadget store, a sort of Radio Shack meets James Bond amateur spy place, but more importantly her father was the founder of Ghost Patrol; Athens’ very own paranormal investigation company. She was his last hope.

“I’m sorry Drew,” said Jen. “I’m not trying to be mean. It’s just that we live right there,” she said, pointing across Wallace Drive to an old three story colonial house nestled among ancient elm trees. “Our father’s been investigating ghosts for a long time and we’ve sort of been over this graveyard like a million times and haven’t found the slightest bit of evidence.”

Drew looked over again at the two apparitions in the far corner of the graveyard. He could see them plainly. A man and a woman, and they were arguing. He couldn't hear what they said. Sometimes it was like that. Sometimes they could look like they were yelling right in front of him, these ghosts, and he would not hear a peep. Other times, he couldn't see them at all and yet they would be loud and clear, and talking to him too! Those were the most terrifying. The two apparitions weren't making a sound though and even though Drew could see them, he knew that Jen and Ron wouldn't. "They're there right now," he said quietly.

Jen looked in that direction, squinting through the night. "Who?" she asked, but she was unable to keep the skepticism from her voice.

Drew shrugged. "I don't know them. A man and a woman, and it looks like the man is sorry and the woman is crying maybe. I don't know it's kind of far."

Ron pulled his camera out and quickly pushed record. "Maybe we should check it out?" he asked, hopeful.

Jen looked at her brother and then to Drew. Her face softened. "Okay," she said, "We'll try and make contact. Let's go."

Ron hustled forward, then stopped. "Wait, where am I aiming this thing?" he asked.

Jen and Ron were both staring at Drew. He stepped forward and said, "This way," and led them toward the corner. He didn't creep up on them. He was pretty sure he didn't need to. This type of ghost wouldn't see them. Wouldn't even know they were there. They were like a broken record, playing the same old song, over and over. Drew led them to within ten feet of the dramatic ghostly scene playing out like a silent movie.

"There," said Drew. "Point the camera toward these two gravestones. I bet they are theirs," he commented and walked over to read them.

Jen interrupted him. "What are they doing? What do they look like?" she asked.

Drew looked up and really studied the two figures. "The man is tall, maybe thirty years old, and fit. He's wearing a suit and tie, but there's something funny about the style. Maybe its

old. He's got a vest on underneath the jacket and he keeps pulling out a watch from a chain in the vest pocket and checking the time. The woman? She's got long dark hair and...she's beautiful."

Upon uttering those words the woman looked directly at him. He was struck dumb. Had she heard him? Could she see him? Did she know they were there?

Jen said, "Beautiful, huh?"

Something in her tone distracted Drew and he looked over at Jen, breaking his eye contact with the woman. Jen was standing with her arms crossed and looking peevisish at him. Did he do something wrong?

"I uh," he stuttered.

"Anything else lover boy or is that all you got?" sneered Jen.

He definitely did something wrong, but what? He looked back at the woman who no longer looked at him. "She's wearing a gown, sort of a pale green thing and it looks fancy, but it looks wrong too. Not something you'd see in Cosmo, that's for sure."

"You'd know, wouldn't you," teased Ron. "You got a lifetime membership to Cosmo, don't you."

Drew scowled at Ron's attempt at wit. "It's called a subscription and I didn't know they offered lifetime subscriptions Ron. Tell me, when did they start?"

"They've always had them. They got a box on the enrollment card you can check for lifetime--wait a minute!"

Jen and Drew chuckled. Ron was thirteen, a year older than his sister Jen and was as outgoing as could be. The funny thing was, he was kind of on the dorky side. You could say everyone liked him, but it was more like everyone knew him because he was always showing up and chiming in and acting like the coolest kid in town. But he was so obviously not that person that people found it funny and endearing in its own way. He had straight black hair with a slightly skinny, long nose that held up his thick black-framed glasses.

Drew went back to his study of the scene playing out before them. "She's throwing her arms up and he's yelling at her," he continued.

“What are they saying?” asked Jen.

“I can’t hear anything. I can only see them. It looks like he’s telling her he has to go or is going to go. She looks like she’s telling him not to, or, or, or maybe if he does he’ll be sorry. Something like that.”

“Ooh, it sounds juicy,” said Jen. Keep rolling Ron and keep talking Drew. Maybe we’ll catch something.” She pulled out the recorder and pushed play. “EVP start, couple arguing, State Street Cemetery,” she said and then held the recorder toward the gravestones like she were a reporter waiting for a comment from her interviewee.

“Why are they standing in a cemetery arguing?” asked Ron.

It was an excellent question and until he asked it they were in the cemetery. But something changed as soon as Ron uttered those words. Drew wasn’t in the cemetery anymore.

“They aren’t,” said Drew amazed at the change. “They’re in a house. We’re in a house. In the foyer by the front door. There’s a passage off to the left to a sort of living room, and an old staircase with a polished wooden banister running up straight away, and to the right there is another passage with one of those grandfather clocks against the wall by the stairs. Now he’s pulling the door open and she keeps shutting it.”

Jen interrupted. “Wait. We’re in a house? When did we get there?”

“Shush,” said Drew. “I don’t know what’s happening, but we’re all in the house now. Now he’s got the door open and he’s walking out and she’s got him by the arm. No, now he’s shaken free and he’s running down the steps. She’s on the porch, but she’s stopped at the top of the steps and she’s screaming. He, he’s stopped at the edge of the street and he’s turned back. He’s smiling now, but he’s not happy. I don’t understand it. He’s waving now and whoa!”

“Noooo!” wailed the woman.

All three froze at the sound, clear as can be it cut through the cool night air.

“What just happened?” asked Jen.

"He stepped into the street and got hit by a bus," said Drew in disbelief. "She screamed."

"You heard that, right guys?" asked Ron excitedly. "I think I got the audio on my recorder, how about you Jen?"

"She's running down the stairs now and into the street," reported Drew, enthralled by the scene unfolding before him. "He's pretty messed up and she's on her knees hugging him. He's, he's spitting up blood, but he's smiling up at her and she's crying. Now, now he's, I think he's, he's gone."

"Gone?" asked Jen. "Where did he go? Is she still there? What's happening?"

"No, he's not gone-gone. He's still there, lying on the street. He's dead I think. Oh my god. NO! NO!" Drew leaped forward and stretched his arms out, desperately he reached for her but his arms grasped nothing. He slumped forward, head bowed. A muttered, "No," was all Drew could manage.

"What happened?" asked Jen, her curiosity piqued.

Drew looked up at Jen and she took a step back when she saw the anguish in his eyes. "She jumped in front of a car driving the other way. She's dead too."

"Wow," said Ron. "Pretty heavy stuff."

"You okay?" asked Jen.

Drew sat down. "They're gone. The whole thing is gone. Its over." He put his head in his hands and fought back tears.

"They weren't your parents Drew, and that's not how your parents died anyway. They were in a car accident, not hit by a car, or a bus," argued Jen, trying to lift his spirits.

Drew let one sob escape before he mastered himself. Rubbing his eyes fiercely he stood. "I'm fine. Let's go." He stomped off leaving a stunned Jen and Ron staring after him a moment before they took off following.

"I'm sorry," said Jen catching up. "I know it must still hurt."

"You don't know anything Jen," shouted Drew. "You think you can conjure up my parents, but they're gone. I told you they were gone, but no-oh, you have to come out here to make contact."

"But you said you saw them-" she started.

"I did see them!" shouted Drew, now totally losing it. "But they're gone and I'll never see them again and those two people from that, that, God, I don't even know what just happened, but they're dead too! And I saw the whole thing!" Drew stopped walking at the Wallace Drive entrance, a mere break in the low rock wall wide enough for three to walk through. Trembling, he sat down on the wall and put his head in his hands.

From the corner of his eye Drew saw a shadow move between the break in the rock wall. He stood and peered closer, trying to see what was moving in the dark.

Jen walked up behind him. "What is it Drew? Do you see something?"

The shadow jumped and Drew stumbled back into Jen. Jen squealed, startled and scared by the sudden movement. When they caught their balance they stood facing yellow eyes glowing in the moonlight.

"Midnight!" scolded Jen after a deep breath. "You scared us you naughty cat!"

Up on the wall sat a black cat, yellow eyes staring curiously at the two teens.

Drew shooed the cat and sat down on the wall again. "Stupid cat," he said to no one.

"That's Midnight, Mrs. Kelly's cat and he's not stupid," said Jen tartly. "He's the best mouser in the neighborhood and friendly too. He probably just wanted some attention."

"Whatever," said Drew and once again put his head in his hands.

Jen sat next to him and awkwardly placed a hand on his shoulder. He flinched but let it stay.

"I'm really sorry Drew," she said. "I didn't mean for things to get so crazy. I thought it might help, you know, trying to make contact with your parents. Maybe you could talk to them, they could tell you they love you one more time. I dunno."

Drew looked up, eyes watery. "I know you meant well Jen. It's tough sometimes and this new thing, seeing ghosts everywhere? It's got me pretty freaked out."

"I know," said Jen quietly. "Its not every day a thirteen year old suddenly starts seeing the dead."

“That’s just it,” said Drew. “That’s what I don’t get. Why me?”

“I don’t know,” said Jen. “Maybe because you have something to offer them?”

“What could I possibly offer them?” he asked.

Jen shrugged. “I don’t know. My dad says ghosts hang around sometimes because they don’t know they’re dead. Sometimes they need help crossing over. Sometimes they need to leave a message for someone, or they’ve left something unfinished. Its difficult to understand and even harder to help, but maybe, just maybe you can help them. “

It was Drew’s turn to shrug. “I don’t think so. I can barely get through a school day without screwing something up. How am I supposed to help anyone?”

Ron had stood quietly off to the side, giving Jen and Drew their space, but now he stepped up. “I don’t know how Drew, but I figure one thing is for certain. You wouldn’t see what you see if it weren’t for a reason.”

Chapter 2

Drew left Jen and Ron standing on the steps outside the side door to their house, climbing on his bicycle with a half-hearted wave goodbye. Pedaling through the night he turned left onto State Street. He took a right onto South Congress and followed that through town to Richmond Avenue. Street lamps were dim orbs in the fog, but there was enough light to see as the road cut through the campus of Ohio University. Eventually he crossed the Hocking River and passed the sprawling old campus of the Athens Asylum. Now it was a museum and offices, but that did little to change the feeling of the place. He pedaled faster. It was the creepiest place ever, even before he started seeing ghosts. Now it was a place he dreaded ever going to. Unfortunately, he had to pass by it on his ride home. He took the right onto Dairy Lane that skirted around the asylum to the south before it turned and left it behind. Trees hugged the road on either side. The fog that wheedled between the trunks and boles could hide anything. He pedaled faster, sweaty from the effort, yet clammy from the cold. The trees ended, or rather, they fell back away from the road a space. The road turned and just ahead was another cemetery on the right. The street lamps

were few and far between now and as the road veered to the right the trees encroached again. Although he couldn't see it in the night and through the fog, he knew it was there. He thought he could almost feel it. Then, he came through the fog into the clear night air and on his right was the dirt access road to the cemetery. He started to pedal faster, but a sudden urge stopped him and he slammed on his brakes. His bike skidded to a halt at the entrance to the dirt road. This was a night for cemeteries.

He looked up into the darkness. Not knowing why, he started up the dirt road to the cemetery. He had been there before, in the daytime. He lived with his grandmother only a quarter mile away so as curious boys do he had ventured out and found it. He had never been there at night, and certainly not since he started seeing ghosts. It was a cemetery that belonged to the asylum. In a hundred feet the cemetery opened up to his left. Little stone markers in neat rows marched off into the dark, but curiously there was no fog here. He rode up to the gate, a simple stone archway and he got off his bike. He leaned it against one side of the archway. He took off his backpack and pulled out a flashlight. He dropped the pack with his bike. He flicked on the light and started forward.

The cemetery was bathed in moonlight and the flashlight wasn't really necessary, but it made Drew feel better. He walked forward quietly as though he didn't want to disturb anything. Or anyone. He chose a row on the right at random and walked along. He flashed the light on the markers as he went. No names were engraved on these stones, only numbers. What a terrible fate, he thought, to be left for eternity without a name. As he walked, the row was heading toward the tree line on the far side. Suddenly he caught movement ahead of him and to his right. He flashed the light over but there was nothing there. Cautiously he moved toward where he thought the movement had come from, four rows over and up a bit. He stopped. Something rustled nearby. He stood in silence, holding his breath. His heartbeat was drumming in his ears, but the rustling sound didn't repeat. He started forward once more and the moon slid behind clouds, leaving the night pitch dark. A few more markers went by and he froze. He heard it again, the rustling. Where was it coming

from? He was definitely headed for the sound, but what was it? There wasn't any place to really hide.

The sound eluded him once more and so he started forward again. He flashed the light about but revealed nothing. Suddenly something moved to his left and he nearly jumped out of his skin. Stumbling back a step he flashed his light on two glowing eyes and heard a hiss, a sound like a cat. Seeing the eyes he stepped sharply back and stumbled over a marker behind him, and sat down hard. The eyes winked out and the rustling returned. From his backside he caught the rustling in the beam of his flashlight. It was only a raccoon and it quickly waddled off. He chuckled nervously to himself.

"Just a stupid raccoon dummy," he chastised. He got to his feet and dusted himself off. He turned and found himself face to face with a woman. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. He felt like he got punched in the stomach. There was no air in his lungs with which to scream. The woman looked solid enough. She wore a hospital gown. She had long black windblown hair. There was no wind. Her eyes were dark and far away and she had a mark or scar on her forehead. She stood there and stared through him, drool slid down her slack jaw, her arms useless at her side. Then she stretched those useless arms out and stepped toward him and all of a sudden the air rushed back into his lungs. He let out a terrified scream and he dropped his flashlight and ran.

He made it to his bike and jumped on, slung his backpack over one shoulder he took off without looking back. He didn't stop until he was home and even then he jumped off his bike, ran up the steps and crawled through the window he left open. His heart pounded and he tried to be quiet as he shut the window, but the old casement let the window slip between his trembling fingers and it slammed closed. With a muffled curse he headed for the stairs. All hopes of getting to his bedroom undetected were dashed when the upstairs hall light came on. At the top of the stairs stood his grandmother, looking anxious at first, then angry, and then she softened.

"Drew honey, what are you doing?" asked his grandmother.

She was the sweetest woman and he felt bad doing it but he lied. "I was getting a snack, sorry. Did I wake you?"

She took a step down the stairs and stopped with a frown. "With your backpack on?" she asked.

He was good and well caught. "I uh, I."

She interrupted him with a wave. "Save it Drew, I wasn't born yesterday and I heard that squeaky bicycle of yours coming up the road. Now, are you going to tell me what you were really up to?"

Drew hung his head sheepishly. When he looked up, she was down the stairs now and she put a hand on his shoulder. "Tell me honey."

"I was, I went to visit mom and dad," he said in a whisper and looked at his feet again.

She sighed, like a wind through the tall grass, and her blue eyes were full of concern. "At this hour? Whatever for?"

"I dunno," he mumbled. What was he supposed to tell her?

She must have believed him though because she pulled him close and hugged him. He could smell her body wash, lilac, and her thin, frail arms quivered as she hugged him tight. Then, she pushed him to arms length and studied him close. "Dear you're trembling all over and pale as the moon. What happened?"

Scared, and not really knowing how to tell her about his newfound ability to see ghosts, he did the only other thing he knew how to do short of lying. He evaded the topic. "I don't want to talk about it," he said. "Can I go to bed? I'm tired and I've got school tomorrow."

She held him for a moment under that searching glare she was so good at. Then she became stern. "That's right you have school in the morning and afterwards, I want you right home. No excuses. We'll talk about you running around all hours of the night then, and your punishment."

One final searching gaze and she released him. He ran upstairs like he was shot out of a cannon and once in his room with the door closed he threw himself on his bed, light on, clothes on, it didn't matter. He didn't think he'd get any sleep

anyway. He couldn't get that horrible image of the drooling woman out of his mind. Eventually, it was replaced by that couple arguing and dying and at some point he fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter 3

Drew woke to the smell of bacon, still in his clothes and the lights still on. He stretched and shuffled into the bathroom to shower. After, he dressed and went downstairs to face his grandmother, but she was gone. She worked the counter at Majestic cleaners and did some alteration work for extra money when she could. She left a note next to a plate of bacon and scrambled eggs. It read: Don't forget, I want you home right after school.

He ate his breakfast mechanically, not really tasting anything. Finished, he rinsed his plate in the sink and put it in the dishwasher before he grabbed his backpack and left. He jumped on his bike and headed off to school, but he made a point to stop at the graveyard and retrieve his flashlight. The battery was dead, but batteries could be replaced. There was no sign of the woman from the night before and the graveyard was quiet, almost peaceful. He didn't stay.

When he arrived at school Jen was waiting for him. He ignored her. He propped his bike into the rack outside the gymnasium and proceeded to lock it up.

“How did you sleep?” she asked. “Never mind,” she said not waiting. “We caught the scream on audio and the video looks like a black mist formed for a minute and a half before the scream and then it just vanished. Amazing stuff!”

She couldn't hide her enthusiasm. For a young ghost hunter, she struck evidence gold. Drew could care less though and he shrugged and walked by her, into school. She raced in and fell in beside him in the hallway.

“Did you hear what I said? We caught it! We caught the voice and something manifested on video! Do you know what this means?” She nearly bowled over a fellow student not watching where she was going.

“No,” said Drew. “And I don't care either.” He kept walking, turned down a hall and then up a flight of stairs, toward his locker. He wished she would leave him alone, but knew she wouldn't. Her locker was three down from his anyway, so she'd be headed there too. But he didn't have to like it.

He pulled up in front of his locker. She stopped at hers and they both started the spinning dials on their combination locks. She opened hers on the first try, but Drew was distracted and missed a turn and had to start over.

“I'm sorry about last night upsetting you Drew. Really I am,” she said earnestly.

He looked over at her and could see it on her face. She was sorry. All her excitement was gone and all that was left was concern. It made a lump form in his throat. He coughed it out and opened his locker. “Thanks,” he mumbled as he fumbled for his math and science books, his first two classes of the day.

“I want to thank you too,” she said.

He looked up at her again and could see the excitement begin to creep back into her face. He shrugged and shut his locker and headed for Home Room. No chance losing her there either. They shared the same Home Room.

“I told my father it was you who found them, you who saw them,” she said.

He pulled up sharply. “You what?”

“Yes, he’s going to submit the findings to his regional Ghost Patrol chapter and wanted to give me the credit. But I thought you deserved it, so I told him it was your finding.”

Drew groaned. “I can’t believe you did that!” he started, his voice rising. “I don’t want anything to do with that and I don’t want anyone knowing I’m a-,” he stopped, pitching his voice low now. “I’m a freak,” he whispered. “You take all the credit Jen. Don’t mention my name.”

“I can’t do that, and besides, it is your find. I just held the recorder and Ron the video. We wouldn’t have caught anything if you didn’t point us in the right direction.”

“You can and you will Jen,” he warned in a low voice. “If you don’t I’ll, I’ll...” He trailed off, aware of his impotence. What was he going to do, beat her up? Well, he wouldn’t hit a girl. Stop talking to her? Big deal! She talked enough for the both of them. Ignore her? He stopped outside their Home Room door and it suddenly dawned on him that he didn’t want to ignore her. Why? He couldn’t rightly say. Maybe because she now shared his secret and didn’t think he was a freak? Possibly.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll tell my dad to leave your name out of it, but I want to tell him about you.”

“Good,” he said and opened the classroom door and went inside. “But I won’t talk to him and I won’t tell him anything,” he said and slumped into his chair in the back of the class.

“Oh come on Drew,” she pleaded. “He’s not going to laugh at you. He’s seriously into this stuff and he really might be able to help.”

“Doesn’t matter, cause even if I wanted to, I was caught coming in last night. I have to go straight home after school and talk about my punishment.”

“Oh,” said Jen slipping into the chair next to his. “Well, than another time.”

“Maybe,” shrugged Drew as the bell rang.

School was unpleasant for Drew. The images of last night intruded on his thoughts and he wound up getting scolded by two of his teachers for not paying attention, and barely escaped detention in his Social Studies class when he nearly fell asleep. When the final bell rang he was only too happy to head for home,

regardless of the punishment that awaited him. It was Friday and the weekend and no more school until Monday and that thought cheered him.

That is, until he found Jen waiting for him by his bike, perky smile and all.

"Are you going to the dance tonight?" she asked. "It's the Spring Social. Everyone's going."

She was acting very casual, but he sensed something like expectation in her tone. "I dunno," he replied, unlocking his bike. "I've probably got myself grounded for the weekend so even if I wanted to go, I doubt I'll be able."

"Oh," she said, looking dejected. "I hoped, well, maybe your grandmother will be easy on you. Will it help if I come over and explain it was all my fault?"

"No," he said. "I think you've done enough, haven't you?"

She looked hurt by his words, and he immediately regretted them, but he was too stubborn or too proud, or probably just too stupid, to take them back or apologize. Instead he just stood there dumbly.

"You know there's that story about the girl in the gym," she began rather sheepishly.

Then he did lose it. He knew the story. "So that's it. You want me to go see the ghost of Shelly whatever her name is who supposedly killed her self beneath the bleachers? I should have known. Thanks but no thanks, I'm outta here!"

"Wait," she called. "I didn't mean anything!"

But he was gone. He pedaled as fast as his legs would take him. He hadn't made it a hundred yards before he skidded his bike to a stop. He was at the end of the drive where the buses idled and kids climbed on. He stood and looked up the steps into the lead bus. His gaze was riveted on the bus driver, a middle-aged dark-skinned woman who smiled half-heartedly at the kids as they boarded. But it wasn't her that captivated his attention. Rather it was the creatures around her, or maybe a better way to describe them were creatures attached to her. There were four of them and they were small, maybe three feet tall, and black shadowy masses, indistinct forms shaped vaguely human. There were eyes of a sort, sparkling black orbs that stared hungrily at

the bus driver as they...sucked on her. There was no other way to describe it. She didn't seem to notice them. No one did. Kids climbed on, and brushed past them without a word, and she smiled wanly as they passed. He had seen something like these things before, but only once, and then only one was present. He thought of it as a soul sucker though he couldn't see anyone's soul. They reminded Drew of leaches, how they attached to a person's arm or leg or back, it didn't matter. They attached and they sucked the blood of their host. But these creatures didn't suck on anything physical, but they pulsed as though they fed on something invisible, which made Drew think of a soul. Yet the bus driver was unaware.

He thought back to the last time he saw one. It was outside the grocery and an old woman was sitting waiting for a ride. He had watched the creature with awe as it sucked on the old woman until her ride pulled up and honked. Once the horn went off the creature fled, or disappeared really, seeming to shrink into itself until it was no longer there. He got an idea and jumped off his bike and climbed onto the bus. The driver stopped him.

"Honey, this isn't your bus. You got to have a note to ride."

Drew smiled pointed out the window behind her. As soon as she turned he reached over and leaned on the horn. It was loud and she nearly jumped out of her seat. All the kids laughed.

"Lord child, what's gotten into you? You better have a note!" she hollered. "I ought to drag you in to the principal's office anyway!"

"Sorry," said Drew, but he wasn't. Well, maybe for scaring her, but the creatures, the soul suckers were gone. He turned to go, but she caught his arm.

"Sorry ain't good enough hon, you better tell me your name," she ordered.

He didn't want to give her a name, but she had a grip like a vice on his arm. Suddenly Jen was beside him.

"It was my fault ma'am. I double-dared him and called him a bald chicken if he didn't beep your horn just now," she said. "Proved me wrong," she added with a rueful smile.

The bus driver held them under her stern gaze for a moment. "I know you girl, don't I?" she asked.

"Maybe so," said Jen, though she didn't recognize her.

"You're Don's girl, aren't you?" she said. "He owns that electronics store downtown."

"That's him," she said dejectedly. "You shop there?"

"No honey, I know your dad from years ago. Went to school with him," she explained. "In fact, I live right around the corner from you, on Brown Avenue? I ought to take a walk on over this evening and tell him his girl is making mischief."

Jen looked sheepishly at her shoes worried she had got herself in a fix. The bus driver stared hard at Jen for a few more seconds before her face split in a grin. "Well I'll be blessed if I can't stay angry with two mugs looking as guilty as you do. Don't go doing that again now, though, this is serious business, busing. Go on, get outta here before I change my mind," she said with a laugh. "And tell Don, Wanda Myrna says hello. Don't worry child. I won't get you into any trouble. This time," she added in warning.

Drew skipped off the bus after Jen and climbed on his bike. He said, "Thanks. I owe you one."

Jen smiled. "No you don't. We're even. But tell me, what the heck was that all about?"

Drew hesitated. He didn't want to get into it, but she pushed.

Her investigative instincts kicked in. "Tell me you didn't just see something," she whispered.

At least she had the decency to whisper, he thought. "I did," he said quietly. "But I don't want to talk about it."

"Come on Drew, you can't hide from this," she urged. "You have to talk to someone. Why not me?"

"Not now," he said, but she grabbed his arm and held his stare until he said, "Okay, later. I'll tell you later okay?"

She let him go with a satisfied smile. "Thanks Drew. I'll be patient. See you around?"

"Sure," he said, and then he left. He headed home and wondered what exactly he promised and why.

He leaned his bike on the porch railing and climbed the steps up into his grandmother's house, his house really. He supposed he needed to start to think of it as home. It was all he had now and so was his grandmother. She was waiting for him in the kitchen and she had been baking. The smell of chocolate chip cookies was enough to make his stomach growl. There were two glasses of milk and a plate of cookies on the table and she was busy dipping one cookie into the milk as he walked in.

She took a bite and let a moan escape her lips. "So good, cookies and milk," she expounded. "Why do we think these are just for kids?"

He shrugged off his backpack and stood, wondering what exactly her mood was as he contemplated their "talk" of punishment.

"Sit," she ordered sternly.

He obeyed with alacrity. His grandmother was not one to be defied, not that he ever considered doing so. In fact, he couldn't remember a single instance of her spanking him. It was part of her aura that just the threat of her unhappiness was enough to make him obey.

"Cookie?" she asked, softening, and pushed the plate towards him. He was utterly confused and looked at the tray and then to her again. She smiled and said, "Eat. That's an order and the first part of your punishment."

There wasn't a hint of anger to her smile and it completely disarmed him. He reached for a cookie and sunk it into the milk he let it sit for a second, to soak up the milk, then, he pushed half of it into his mouth. He let his own moan of delight escape his lips.

"Now, the second part of your punishment is this," she began, and the cookie went tasteless. "You are going to the Spring Social tonight and you're going to have a good time. Then you are coming home by ten o'clock and you're not going to sneak out again. Understand?"

He nodded his head mechanically, waiting for the other shoe to fall.

“And the next time you get the feeling you want to visit your parents, you tell me, okay? Did you even think I might want to come?”

He was completely bewildered. Wasn't he supposed to be getting punished?

“Listen Andrew honey,” she began and her voice was full of concern. “I know this last year has been hard on you. It's been hard on me too, God knows, but it has been much worse for you. I know you miss them dear and so do I. I wish there was something I could do or say to make it better, but there isn't. The only thing I can say is that time heals all wounds. And even that isn't quite right. I still miss my Ben,” she said wistfully, referring to Drew's grandfather. “That was fifteen years ago and I still get broken up some times. It's going to be the same for you dear. Some days will be harder than others and you're just going to have to soldier through those days. You have your entire life before you. You're going to live a long time, and your going to be happy, mostly. I'd be lying if I told you you'd be happy all the time, but mostly is true enough. And you're going to grow up and find a girl and marry her and have a family of your own some day. And then you're going to understand where I'm coming from now. I want you to be happy, and your parents want you to be happy. School has been tough, I know. The principal called me and told me about the trouble you're having and he likes you and wants you to do well and so do I. So please honey, talk to me when you need to talk and when you think about your parents, think happy thoughts. But most importantly, remember they love you and they wouldn't be happy to hear from the principal that you aren't getting along.”

And just like that he was crying. He couldn't help it. The tears came hard and fast and he sobbed like a little boy and he didn't remember when he climbed into his grandmother's arms but there he was sobbing into her shoulder, enveloped by her lilac scent.

After a while he stopped and she brushed the hair back from his forehead and dabbed his eyes with a kerchief. “There-there dear,” she said. “It's alright.”

"I'm sorry," he said, gaining control. "I shouldn't have snuck out last night. And I'll try and do better in school, I promise." He took a breath and was about to tell her his secret, but something stopped him.

She held him at arms length by his shoulders and studied his face. "Good," she said, but something in her eyes told him she knew he was keeping something from her. But she ignored it, leaving him his space to talk when he felt the need. He wanted to, but he just didn't have the words right now.

"But about the dance," he said after a moment of awkward silence. "I don't really want to go."

"No buts," she replied sternly, "Part of your punishment young man. You need to get back into the swing of being a boy and so you are going to the dance and that's that."

Her word was final, and he knew there was no point in arguing. It didn't keep him from dreading the night though. He had the horrible feeling something bad loomed this evening.

Chapter 4

Drew's grandmother dropped him off outside the school gym at seven sharp with a promise to pick him up at ten. Kids arrived steadily and he joined the throng. Inside, the gym was decorated with balloons and streamers in the school's green and black colors. Nothing too extravagant as this was only the Spring Social. The school's prom would be next month and for that they would go all out. Athens was such a small town that the entire high school was included in their social events. It didn't make sense to have a Senior Prom for thirty seniors expense-wise, so the entire school, grades 8 through 12 were invited. It made for a packed room too, and this principle was applied to all their events.

Drew wore a pair of jeans and a red sweater and sneakers, nothing fancy. Most of the kids there were dressed casually, though a few were wearing shirts and ties and Drew spied one girl in a fancy pink skirt that flared from the waist and fell to her ankles, and a strange design on the front bottom corner he couldn't make out. She wore a black blouse and a matching pink scarf tied around her neck. She stood alone in the far corner, by the end of the bleachers. Shadows obscured her

features, but her posture made him think she was embarrassed. Probably her mother's idea, he thought, and experienced a brief pang of longing, knowing his mother would probably have made him dress nicer too. He would have hated it, he knew, but it saddened him anyway.

There were tables set along one wall that held finger foods and a giant punch bowl studiously guarded by four teachers. A DJ set up his table in the corner. The sound system consisted of two speakers about three feet high and erected on tripods and were blaring the latest Maroon Five hit. There was one light set up on a tripod in the center of the floor, right on the giant bulldog logo, that flashed in changing colors. The bleachers were pulled out on both sides and kids sat in knots here and there or stood around as though waiting for something. The overhead lights were mostly off, giving it that dim, dance hall feel. The only thing lacking was the dancing, though it was early.

Drew didn't feel like talking and so he climbed the bleachers and sat by himself in the shadows of the very top row. He watched the crowd mingle. Some kids laughed, others nervously glanced around. The older kids started the dancing first, mostly girls, while the boys stood and stared like a pack of hungry dogs watching a steak left unattended, but unsure of how to get it without getting in some sort of trouble.

Then he saw her. Jen. She walked through the double doors and looked around curiously. She was wearing an off the shoulder red dress with a white belt, and red shoes, nothing too fancy, but not something she would wear to school on a normal day. Maybe picture day. Or to a dance. Her brown hair fell down around her pale shoulders in gentle waves and seemed to catch what little light there was and sparkle. She scanned the room deliberately, her lips quirked in a small smile like she knew something everyone else didn't. She probably did, he thought. Then she made eye contact with him and his stomach lurched. She beamed a smile up at him and headed his way. She climbed the bleacher steps daintily and sat down next to him, smoothing her dress very lady like.

"Hi," was all she said.

"Hi," replied Drew.

They sat for a few moments before Jen broke the silence. "So you came."

"Yeah," he said.

"I thought you weren't?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"I'm glad you did," she said.

She suddenly found her feet very interesting.

Drew looked at her feet and thought they were nice shoes. Her whole outfit was nice. Not knowing what else to say he settled on, "You look nice."

She flashed him a look and he thought she was blushing, but she turned her attention back to her shoes and her hair fell forward, obscuring her face.

"Thanks," she mumbled. Then she looked up at him again and said, "So do you."

He turned red himself, embarrassed by the compliment and knowing that he really didn't look any different than any other day. He suddenly felt underdressed. He mumbled his own, "Thanks," but was starting to feel hot and his throat began to dry out. "I'm going to get some punch. Want some?" he offered, standing.

She looked up at him, her big brown eyes seemed to stare right through into his brain and see his thoughts. His face felt hot and she smiled and said, "Yes please, that would be nice."

He took the steps two at a time in his haste to get some punch and cool off. As he wended his way through the crowd he noticed a group of girls from his grade look at him and then start to giggle. They made him self-conscious and he hurried past them. He even checked his zipper to make sure it was up. Why were they laughing at him? He guzzled a paper cup-full of punch and then filled it again along with a second for Jen. Then he headed back. As he passed the group of girls he kept his head down, but they giggled again and his ears started to burn. He quickened his pace and nearly dropped the two cups in his hurry as he bumped into an upperclassman.

The boy turned and snapped, "Watch it puke or I'll give you the royal treatment!" The group he was with laughed and

one made a loud flushing sound and then pretended to be drowning.

Everyone cracked up at that except for Drew who mumbled sorry and moved quickly off. Regaining his perch he gave a cup of punch to Jen and guzzled half of his immediately. In her intuitive way she noted his discomfort.

“What did those girls say to you?” she asked.

His face burned. “Nothing. They just started laughing,” he said harshly. “Is everyone in this town always so mean?”

She was quiet a moment and then replied, “No. I know you’re new here, but everyone is really nice. You should give people a chance.”

It was true he was new. And he really didn’t have any friends. His parents had moved here just over a year ago, taking jobs as professors at the university. They were so excited to be coming home to Athens to raise him in the town they grew up in. Then the accident happened only a few weeks later and Drew never had a chance to adjust. He was the new kid, for one, and that alone made him feel awkward and inhibited, but he was also ‘that kid whose parents died’ too. The result was he shut himself off from everyone. He made it through most of this school year by the skin of his teeth and a little generosity from sympathetic teachers. The truth is, he never did his homework or studied much at all, refused to play sports he used to enjoy, and he skipped school at least once a week. That last earned him a close relationship with Officer Mallory of the Athens Police who doubled as the town’s truancy officer.

“I would if they deserved it,” he said sullenly, but he didn’t feel that was the truth.

“Those girls down there you say were laughing at you?” she began. “They are the popular girls in our grade. They don’t like me, but they don’t laugh at me. They ignore me and say things about me to each other behind my back. But they don’t have the courage to be mean to me to my face. I think they think you’re cute. Otherwise they would ignore you like they do me.”

“Well they sure have a funny way of showing it,” he said.

“Don’t you see? You’re the new kid and you haven’t made many friends yet and after what happened,” she stuttered

through those words before soldiering on. "They see you as a mysterious boy whose sort of bad but everyone thinks not deep down, and, and...well cute." She finished this last statement with another long study of her feet.

He thought there might be some truth to what Jen was saying. At least about the middle part, but he hadn't made *any* friends, and he certainly didn't see himself as cute. Though he was only thirteen and his experience with girls was small and that was being charitable.

"What do you see?" he asked suddenly.

She looked up quickly, surprised by the directness of his question.

"What's up guys?" called Ron, halfway up the bleachers heading towards them.

Drew noticed Jen's look of relief at Ron's arrival and immediately thought she was glad to be spared from spending another minute alone with him. It left a sour taste in his mouth and his stomach queasy.

Ron sat on the other side of Drew and slapped him on the shoulder. "How're you doing Drew? Get enough sleep last night?"

Drew shrugged, but didn't reply. He noticed Ron was carrying the DVR in its shoulder bag. "Going to video the dance?" he asked lamely.

Ron laughed. "Heck no. I've got bigger fish to catch than silly girls. At least for the moment. Maybe later I'll get out there and shake what my momma gave me. The girls could use a little Ron-Ron getting his groove on."

"You mean Ron-Ron getting his dork on, right?" laughed his sister.

"Whatever," he said, shaking off the gibe. "You guys eat anything yet?"

"No," said Jen. "You hungry Drew?"

Drew shrugged. "I dunno."

"Let's get some grub before we get this party started," said Ron, clapping his camera bag.

"Come on Drew, at least come down and try a cookie," coaxed Jen.

The truth was, Drew wasn't very hungry, but he didn't really want to sit by himself. Or rather, he didn't want to sit without Jen, so he agreed.

As they walked down the bleacher steps he spied the girl in the fancy dress, still standing alone, off to the right and looking shy. The girls that laughed at him were standing off to the left and he would have to walk right past them to get to the snack table.

Jen sensed his tension and said, "Try smiling at them and saying hello."

He didn't feel much like smiling, but for some reason he didn't want to disappoint Jen so as they shouldered by, the girls all stared at him. He waved and smiled wanly and said, "Hi," and was surprised by the chorus response.

"Hi Drew," they all chimed together.

Once passed, he could hear them as they giggled in fits.

"See," said Jen. "I told you."

For some reason he didn't hear the smugness in her tone you would expect from someone being right. Instead she seemed...angry. He caught her glaring back at the group of girls for a quick second. Once at the table though she handed him a plate and took one for herself. They walked along the table and Jen took a finger sandwich and a cookie. Ron piled his plate with finger sandwiches, cookies, and a handful of Doritos.

"Here," he said, handing the plate to Drew. "Hold this while I get some punch."

Drew stood there, his own plate empty. Jen gave him an exasperated look and said, "Give me your plate." She then took his plate and handed him hers and asked, "You like tuna fish?" He nodded and she went and got him a finger sandwich and a cookie.

"There," she said with a smile, and traded plates. "You should eat something."

Ron grabbed his plate and they headed back up the bleachers where they sat and ate. Ron was wolfing sandwiches and chips like he hadn't eaten in a week. Jen daintily nibbled on her sandwich and Drew took a bite mechanically. It wasn't bad though so he took a second bite.

“So,” said Ron through a mouthful of food. “As soon as we finish eating we can get started.”

Drew was confused. “Started with what?”

Ron looked first at Drew, agog. Then he turned to Jen and said, “You didn’t tell him?”

Jen looked sheepishly at her brother and then to Drew. “No.”

“Tell me what?” asked Drew.

“I don’t know Ron,” began Jen, but Ron rode over her.

“Only the biggest ghost legend at Athens High,” he said enthusiastically.

Drew wasn’t amused and he groaned, but Ron either didn’t notice or chose to ignore it.

“Shelly Dee, a senior in 1952 who hung herself beneath those bleachers,” said Ron pointing across to the bleachers on the opposite side of the gym.

Despite his dislike for the direction things were headed Drew hadn’t heard a full account of the story and couldn’t help his curiosity. “Why did she do that?”

“Her boyfriend dumped her at the Spring Social,” he explained, his eyes danced with excitement. “Called her all sorts of names and everyone laughed at her. She lost it and ran off crying. No one saw her, but the rumor goes that she ran into one of the closets where she found a rope and then went under the bleachers and hung herself.”

“Seems a bit crazy to kill yourself over a boyfriend,” said Drew.

“Totally,” agreed Jen somewhat too readily.

“Well, that’s why I always try to let the ladies down easy,” boasted Ron.

“Whatever, dork,” shot Jen. “Easy to let them down when they were never up to begin with, isn’t it Ron-Ron?”

“Whatever yourself,” Ron shot back. Then he turned to Drew. “So every year Shelly Dee comes to the Spring Social, looking for her boyfriend, wanting another chance and one last dance.”

Drew looked at him skeptically. “Really?”

Ron shrugged. “I dunno. That’s the story anyway.”

"Has anyone ever seen her?" asked Drew as he chewed thoughtfully.

"Yes," declared Ron while at the same time Jen said, "No."

They looked at each other, irritated. "Well," Jen explained. "No one recently anyway. There are some who claim to have seen her years ago, but no body's got any proof."

"That's where we come in," plugged Ron. "I've got the gear and you've got the talent. We'll go set up beneath the bleachers and start a session. If she's here, you'll see her and we'll catch her on film or audio. Just like the graveyard!"

Drew wasn't convinced and he certainly wasn't about to crawl under the bleachers looking for a dead girl who hung herself. He was about to tell them they were on their own when he caught Jen looking at him. She had a sort of expectant, pleading look on her face and his refusal died on his lips. How did she do that, he wondered?

"So you'll come?" she asked and there was no mistaking her plea.

He couldn't find the words to refuse so he shrugged and said, "I guess I can take a quick look around. What does she look like?" he asked, taking another bite.

"Well, she's got brown hair she wears in a pony tail," began Ron.

Drew scoffed. "Look around Ron. Half the girls here are wearing their brown hair in pony tails," he said looking around the gym himself. "You'll have to be more specific I think."

"Well," continued Ron thinking, "she was supposed to have been wearing a black blouse if I recall."

Drew scanned the crowd as Ron described her. There were lots of black blouses out there.

"And she wore a pink skirt," added Ron.

That narrowed it quite a bit. Only a few pink skirts dotted the gym floor.

"It was a poodle skirt Ron," said Jen.

"What's a poodle skirt?" asked Drew.

"It's a skirt that flares at the waist and has a poodle design on the front, usually on one corner," explained Jen.

Drew stopped chewing. Why did that sound familiar? He scanned the crowd in earnest now.

“And she wore a pink scarf tied around her neck,” finished Ron.

Drew nearly choked. He remembered and his gaze went directly to the girl he saw earlier, standing by the end of the bleachers alone. There she was, pink skirt, black blouse and pink scarf. It was too far and too dim to see what adorned the front of her skirt but Drew would have bet his left arm right then that it was a poodle.

“What?” asked Jen, “What is it?”

Ron was quick on the uptake. “You’ve seen her?”

Drew couldn’t speak. He was staring at the girl, at Shelly Dee. He thought he might faint.

“You don’t look so good,” said Jen.

Ron jumped up and pulled out his camera quick. “No Drew, you don’t. You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he said, his excitement bubbled up. “Or are seeing one now.”

Jen gasped. “Can you see her?”

Drew still couldn’t speak. He couldn’t even breathe.

Jen shook him roughly. “Say something!”

“She’s, she’s right over there,” whispered Drew and pointed.

Ron drew a bead on the direction and up came the camera. “Where! Let’s go!” he nearly shouted.

“Oh my god, you do see her,” exclaimed Jen as she stood.

“She’s right over there, at the end of the bleachers,” said Drew.

Ron leapt down the steps.

“Wait,” shouted Drew. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said. He couldn’t shake the shy, embarrassed look he thought he saw on the girl. He suddenly didn’t want to bother her, like it wouldn’t be right. But Ron hadn’t heard.

He was nearly down the steps when Jen shouted. “Stop Ron!”

Something in her tone froze him in his tracks. The music was loud, but her shout got his attention. It also drew the attention of several others who now looked curiously at Ron and

his camera. Ron looked up at Jen with an inquiring look of his own. "This is what we came for!" he shouted back.

Jen went after him. Drew didn't know what else to do, so he followed. At the floor Ron looked at Jen and said, "What's gotten into you?"

Drew stared at the girl and said, "I don't think you'll catch anything running up to her. I think you'll probably scare her away."

"Okay. Okay," started Ron, as he searched for an angle. "You're the boss. What should I do?"

Drew was unsure himself. At floor level he couldn't see her anymore through the crowd. He didn't want to bother her, but he suddenly felt drawn to her. Without a word he started forward.

"All right!" said Ron excited. "I'm right behind you bud!"

People watched them now as Drew walked lead footed, a wan expression on his face, while Ron followed his every move, camera up and on. Jen brought up the rear nervously. Drew made it half way across the floor and the crowd parted, probably because of the camera behind him, and there she was, eyes locked right on him. She had a scared look in her eyes. She gripped her skirt tightly in both hands. He took another step and she shook her head, ever so slightly, as if wishing him away. He took another few steps. She was only twenty feet away. He could see her a little clearer now. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her lips moved soundlessly, but Drew could make out what she said. No. Over and over again she repeated the word, though no sound parted those pale lips. She was pale too, like she herself had seen a ghost.

He took another step and she stepped back, this time she shouted the word no. And this time everyone heard it. It was an ear-splitting wail that carried above the music and everyone froze. The DJ stopped the music, unsure what had happened.

Drew took another step. "Its okay," he said softly, comfotingly. "I can help," he said, though in truth he had no idea what he could do to help. He just knew he wanted to help this poor, terrified girl.

He took another step forward and she took a step back. She was no longer pale. Before his eyes she was turning blue, as if she were suffocating. "It's okay," he said again. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He took another step forward and she took another step back. "What happened?" he asked.

Her crying eyes started to bulge and her face turned purple. Suddenly, her belly began to swell. Drew stopped, confused. Her belly grew, and grew and suddenly he understood. "You're pregnant," he whispered.

She shook her head violently now.

Drew took another step forward and she looked him in the eyes and angrily shouted, "NO!" and again the entire room heard it. But this time, when she shouted her whole body seemed to convulse and then she turned to mist in front of him. But instead of the mist dissipating harmlessly it swirled in a ball and shot forward, blasted into him like an arctic gust and then disappeared. It knocked him backward and he fell hard on his rear. She was gone.

It was then he noticed the silence. He looked around and everyone was staring.

"I think I saw something on the video," said Ron in an excited whisper.

"Freak!" shouted a boy, and just like that everyone began to talk. A teacher hurried over.

"What's going on over here?" asked the teacher.

Drew stood up, very aware of all the eyes on him. He saw the group of girls that a few minutes earlier giggled at him. They now stared at him, a distrustful look in their eyes.

"That's enough Ron," said the teacher. "I don't know what you guys are up to but put that camera away now!"

Ron started to protest but she rode over him. "Now I said!" Then she turned to the DJ and made a circular motion with her finger and the music came back on.

"What happened Drew?" asked the teacher.

Drew didn't know her name. He had seen her in the halls before, but that was all. He ignored her and headed for the door.

“I’m talking to you young man!” shouted the teacher, taking a step to follow.

Jen jumped in front of her and said, “I’m really sorry Ms. Raines. He wasn’t feeling well. We were just leaving!” She didn’t wait for a response, but darted after Drew, who had already opened the door.

“Drew! Wait up!” shouted Jen.

“Yeah!” called Ron. “Wait up!”

Chapter 5

Jen chased Drew out the door in time to see him sprint toward the football field. Ron came bursting through the doors behind her.

“Where’s he think he’s going?” he asked.

Jen stared after him. “He probably wants to be alone,” she said.

Ron smirked. “Fat chance of that with you around,” he said.

She shot him a glare that he ignored, then, she said, “You’re right. I’m going after him. You stay here though.”

“No prob!” said Ron. “The ladies ’ll be lining up for a dance with me by now!”

She headed after Drew as Ron went back inside. She couldn’t see him anymore, but there wasn’t much else except the football field in the direction Drew was headed, so that’s where she went.

She found him in the top row of the bleachers by himself, head in his hands. She was afraid he was crying, so she stopped at the bottom step and called up to him. “You like the back row, don’t you?”

He looked up, but in the dark she couldn't see whether he was crying or not.

"I guess," was all he said.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Free country," he said.

She came up and sat down beside him. She could see his face now and he wasn't crying, and for that she was thankful. This was awkward enough. "You feel like talking?"

He shrugged. "Not much to say. Just another night for the freak show kid who talks to the dead."

"You're not a freak show," she said.

"Tell that to the rest of the school. I think I've just guaranteed myself freak status 'til I graduate."

"I don't think you're a freak," she said.

"Well, that's something," he said bitterly.

"Listen, what you saw back there, can you tell me about it?" she asked.

"Why?" he said, giving her a sidelong glare. "Not freaky enough already?"

She huffed, but didn't get snarky with him. Instead she said with a tone of concern that surprised him, "I want to know if I can help you."

He thought about it and then replied, "You can't help me. I can't help me. No one can help me, and no one can help that poor girl." He finished and put his head in his hands again.

Jen reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't be so sure Drew. I think you may have already helped that girl. Tell me what you saw."

Drew sat up and sighed. "Fine," he said and proceeded to tell her everything.

When he finished she said, "Wow, pregnant huh. That little tidbit was never in the legend. I guess it makes sense though, you know, why a girl would kill herself after being dumped when she was pregnant. Right?"

"I suppose," said Drew though he really didn't care why. "I wish I didn't know though. What can I do about it?"

"You can tell people," offered Jen.

"Yeah right. Like who would listen?" he said sarcastically.

"I would," she said. "And Ron too, and my dad. In fact, if we captured what I think we captured on video, there are a whole lot of people who would listen."

"No," said Drew vehemently. "I don't want any part of that. Isn't it enough I'm a freak at school? Now you want to make me into a freak for the world to see?"

"Drew, did it ever occur to you that that girl wanted to tell you what happened? I mean, after all these years and no one ever knew the truth about it. I would if I was her."

"So what?" he said angrily. "Why me? Why should I tell anyone, and what is that going to change anyway?"

Jen said in a quiet plea, "Because you can. She couldn't tell me. She couldn't tell Ron. But she could tell you. If you don't tell her story, who will? Maybe if you tell people what you saw, what happened to her, she can cross over, be at peace. You ever think of that?"

That checked Drew's anger. "You think?" he asked, a touch of hope in his voice.

"Drew, what you have, what you can do," she reasoned, "What you can see is a gift, not a curse. I think you can see what you see for a purpose and that purpose is to help others. But even if it is a curse wouldn't it be better to use that ability for good? If you can't help seeing what you see, you might as well try to do something positive with it, otherwise, you may just end up being the freak you think you are."

Drew didn't respond, he just sat there, deep in thought.

"So," she began, "You think you can do that? Try and see your ability as a gift and use it for good?"

Drew sighed, resigned. "I guess so. What have I got to lose, right?"

"That's the spirit! So tell me what you saw on the bus the other day?" she asked, which caught him by surprise.

He shot her a look. He wondered how she could be so clever. "You really want to know?" She nodded and he said, "Fine, but this stays between us, got it?" She nodded again and he told her.

When he was through she said, "Soul suckers? I'm not sure what they are, but I can ask my dad if you like?"

"I don't know; maybe," he said. Part of him still didn't want to get further into this uncanny ability than he already was, but a part of him really did want to help people.

"How do you expect to help people if you don't understand what you see?" she asked, a skillful cut to the heart of the matter for him.

And that decided him. "Okay, you can ask your dad if he knows anything, but don't tell him its me, okay? Just tell him you read about them somewhere and were curious, all right?"

"Sure," she said.

They sat awhile and finally Drew said, "Listen, I can't go back inside. I'm just gonna wait out here until my grandma comes to pick me up, but you should go back in, okay?"

She stared at him so long, he started to feel uncomfortable. Finally she said, "If that's what you want?"

He caught a note of irritation or anger in her tone, but for the life of him, he couldn't understand why. Instead of asking, he said, "I just want to be alone for awhile, okay?"

Her face softened and she patted him on the knee and said, "Okay. I'll call you tomorrow?" All signs of irritation were gone.

"Sure," he said. "I'd like that."

She practically beamed her smile was so big, and then she left. Girls. Go figure, he thought.

Jen called him the next morning. "Listen Drew, we have to talk about these soul suckers you see," she said, a sense of urgency in her tone. "Can you come over?"

"I've got to do a few chores before I can leave," replied Drew. "Probably take me a couple hours. That okay?"

"Yes," she replied, "but hurry. You're gonna want to hear this.

Drew never did his chores so quickly. When he arrived at Jen's house, she was alone.

"Ron went to the store with dad," explained Jen. "You hungry?"

He nodded and she grabbed a bag of chips and two cans of Coke and they sat down in the living room.

“So,” she started, her excitement palpable. “I asked my dad about these soul suckers you’ve been seeing.”

“You didn’t tell him *I* see them, did you?” he asked.

“No, don’t worry. He thinks I’m just being curious,” she replied. “Anyway, he says they could be a couple of different things, none of them good.”

“Really?” he said uneasily. “Like what?”

“Well, based on the little description I have, some people think they could be vampires that suck the life force out of people, not blood. Others call them shadow people, because all they can really see is the shadow or silhouette of something vaguely human, but not because they aren’t solid. They supposedly live on two different planes of existence, sort of like a dimensional crossover. In their dimension they have details that you could use to distinguish them from one another, like we have facial and hair differences that we use to tell each other apart. Same thing.”

Drew nodded, morbidly fascinated.

“Others believe that they are evil spirits that can only manifest when there is pain or suffering or worry and anxiety. That pain or anxiety draws them, and they feed off of it. That sounds kind of like what you saw, right?” she asked.

Drew ran his hand through his hair and thought about what the soul suckers looked like. “I guess so. I mean, maybe. They did seem to be attached, and they seemed to pulsate or throb and, well, I guess it looks like sucking. I know I called them soul suckers, but I honestly don’t know what they were sucking on, if anything.”

“Well, regardless of what exactly they are or what they are doing, none of the theories out there equate their presence as a good sign,” she continued. “It usually means the person they are attached to is in trouble, either directly from the soul suckers, or from some outside situation. And the soul suckers can only worsen the situation. Many cultures believe that these types of creatures only bring harm, eventually draining the person of any positive energy. Some say it leads to depression or

even disease. In the end, death is common. From what my dad said, anyway," she added rather sheepishly.

"So, how do you get rid of them?" asked Drew. "How do you fight something you can't see?"

"Excellent question!" she beamed. "I'm glad you asked. First off, *you* can see them, so *you* can fight them. Well, *maybe* you can fight them, I don't really know. But if you can see them there is a chance, right? Plus, I think you have already figured out how to fight them, or at least get rid of them. Remember the bus?"

Drew nodded. "I blew the horn and they disappeared. Or, well, they kind of folded in on themselves. It was weird, but they left."

"Exactly!" she said. "So I picked up two air horns from the hardware store. They use them as signaling devices for boats. Small, but loud, see," she said, pulling one out and blasting a loud honk on one for emphasis.

Drew covered his ears until she finished. "So we're just going to carry these around and blow on them when we see them?"

"No silly," she said with a smile. "Well, yes, but we aren't going to just wander around aimlessly. We're going to the bus driver, Wanda Myrna's house. Remember she said she lives on Brown Ave? That's right around the corner. I propose we go see her."

"She's not going to like us blowing horns for no apparent reason," stated Drew.

"Silly," she said again. "We're not going to blow the horns unless we need to. Besides, I don't want to just frighten them away. I'm betting Wanda's going through something else right now and these...soul suckers are just a symptom. I don't want to treat the symptom. I want to cure the cause."

"Seems awfully crazy to me," said Drew skeptically. "I mean, first off you don't even know which house she lives in and even if you did, you going to just walk in and ask what's wrong?"

Jen sat back a minute, her enthusiasm visibly dampened. "Well, I've got to admit you're right on there. I don't know what to do, or how to help." Then she smiled at him, one of those cat

that ate the canary smiles he had started to recognize about her. "But that's why I've got you. You can see them, and I'm betting that if these soul suckers are there, maybe there is something else paranormal there too. Something you can see as well."

"I don't know," waffled Drew. "I mean, what if I don't see anything? Or what if I do, but don't know what it is, or means, or whatever? How am I supposed to help her then?"

Jen gave him a cross look, as though he were a misbehaving child. "You said you were willing to try and embrace your gift, right? You may not know what you see, or how to help, but there are no classes you can take to learn. You're just going to have to figure it out as you go. So no more buts, we're going and we're going now. Ready?"

Her gaze was part hopeful and part demanding. In the end, he couldn't say no while he looked into her big brown eyes. He wondered why that was, while they walked over to Brown Avenue, and not for the last time.

They cut through her back yard and the neighbor Mrs. Kelly's too, and crossed Walker Street onto Brown Avenue. It wasn't a long street, only ten houses. It wasn't hard to find Wanda's house either. Parked out front of one was a large yellow school bus.

"That's got to be it," said Jen confidently.

It was a huge old colonial style house with a wrap around porch. It was wonderfully restored too, the siding painted brown with orange and green trim. It had three floors; the upper level gables and eaves made it look almost like a miniature castle.

There was a semi-circle drive on the front and a two-car driveway on the side of the house. The front steps ended at a door with three mailboxes attached to the wall.

"It must be apartments or something," guessed Jen as she stared up at the behemoth house. "She probably rents out a unit."

Drew stared up, but his gaze wasn't drawn to the architecture like Jen's. His gaze was fixed on a second floor window near the back, partly shaded by a tree. Or rather just outside the window. He watched, amazed, as the shadow

lengthened slowly and darkened to an unnatural density. When it reached about four feet in height it detached from the real shadow and floated across the windowpane. Then the top of the shadow fixed onto the crack of the sill and it began to slip through until the entire thing disappeared on the inside.

Jen saw his mouth agape and immediately suspected something was amiss. "What is it Drew?"

"It's a soul sucker," he stammered.

"Where?" she asked.

Her excitement was a polar opposite to his sudden dread. "It just slipped through a crack in the window pane," he explained and pointed. "That window right there."

"I knew we'd find something," she said. "Come on, let's go." Before he could stop her she was up the steps and at the door. She twisted the knob and pushed open the door a crack and peered in. Then she turned and waved him forward. "Come on Drew, what are you waiting for?"

He didn't want to go. The soul suckers scared him. There was a definite feeling he got about them, something bad for sure, though he couldn't put a finger on it. But he didn't want to look like a coward either so he followed her as she stepped inside.

"What are you doing?" he whispered nervously. "We can't just walk into people's houses! My grandmother is going to kill me!"

"Then you better be quiet and hope we don't get caught," she whispered back. "Hmm," she said as she took in their surroundings.

They were in a large mudroom, partly lit by a window next to the front door, but it looked too big to Drew. There was a door to their immediate left with a dead bolt and the letter A stenciled on it. To the right of this door a set of stairs ran up the wall and ended at another door with the letter C on it. Beneath the stairs was a normal looking closet door, no locks, but against the far wall across the room was a third door with the letter B.

"See, the house is separated into apartments," said Jen, a confirmation of the obvious.

Drew looked around. He felt the odd sensation he had been here before, but he knew this was the first time he had ever

stepped foot in the house. There was an old bike in the corner and some boxes stacked along the right hand wall. The room felt old, from the well-worn hardwood floor to the deep, smooth polished dark banister on the staircase. But there were newer things too, things that looked out of place. Like the apartment doors, they were new, but the closet door looked really old with its old pine boards and crystal doorknob. And the right hand wall looked new too, along with the molding and trim, whereas the left hand side still had original molding and the paint was off-color in parts, like things were hung or propped there for many years before succumbing to the present.

“Which door should we try?” she asked.

“None,” replied Drew. “We should leave before we get into trouble.”

She turned and offered him a wry look. “Scared?”

“Of getting in trouble, yes,” he snapped.

Just then they heard a car pull into the drive and shut off.

“Now we’ve done it,” groaned Drew.

“Relax,” said Jen as she peered through the window. “We haven’t done anything but step in the front room. Ooh,” she said as she stared out the window. “Miss Myrna’s home.”

“What do we do?” panicked Drew.

“Nothing silly, sheesh,” she said exasperated. She pulled open the door and stepped to the front porch as Miss Myrna was coming up the walk, a grocery bag in hand. “Hi Miss Myrna!” she called happily.

Wanda Myrna pulled up short, startled. Drew stepped out behind Jen and Wanda harrumphed.

“Well, what in the dickens brings you two out here, and on a Saturday no less?” she asked tartly. “Don’t tell me you’re fixing to blow those horns at me?” she said, pointing to the two air horns they held.

Drew stuttered, but Jen smoothly replied, “No Miss Myrna, we won’t unless you want us too. We just thought we’d come by and say hello.”

“Well if that ain’t the dumbest thing I’ve heard in a coon’s age I’ll be blessed,” she said. “And I’ve heard some dumb things

over the years driving that bus. Tell the truth. What are you doing snoopin' around?"

Drew fidgeted under her reproachful gaze, but Jen, to her credit, didn't flinch. "You're right Miss Myrna, that isn't the real reason we came. We wanted to ask you a few questions if it isn't too much trouble."

She took the steps up beside them and said, "Well, you've got me. Ask away."

Drew couldn't believe Jen's boldness when she asked, "Do you mind if we come in. It might be more comfortable."

Wanda gave them an impatient look and said, "What makes you think I have time for a couple of gadabouts running free and lookin' for trouble? Now hurry up and ask or you'll be asking that door," she said pointing to the front door. "My ice cream is melting."

In typical Jen fashion, she plowed ahead, undeterred, and cut right to the heart of the matter. "Well, I guess I'll just say it then. We think you're being haunted and want to help."

She watched Wanda closely for her response and Drew found himself mesmerized as well. Wanda's initial reaction was a look of shock, quickly covered over by a blank stare that would do well at a poker table. Then she laughed, a short, nervous bark you hear from someone who thinks her leg is being pulled.

"Now that is a doozy," said Wanda. "I think I'll just get my ice cream in the freezer and finish the rest of my chores. You two run along now."

With that dismissal she stepped through the door and was about to shut it when Jen put her foot in the way.

"Miss Myrna, I know it's a crazy question, but we really think something is going on and, well, you might be in danger."

She opened up the door, an angry look in her eye and was about to give Jen a verbal lashing when her gaze fell on Drew. "What's the matter with your friend?" she asked.

They both looked at Drew. He couldn't see it, but his face had lost all its color and he was staring over Wanda's shoulder, up toward the second floor. They both turned to look up at the empty second floor landing and the closed door, and turned back to him.

Jen, always quick on the uptake, asked, "What is it Drew? What do you see?"

What Drew saw was an older gentleman who leaned on the second floor railing and stared down at them, a frown on his face. He looked like a police officer, but the uniform was old. The man was tall and had a thick mustache that ran to his jaw but didn't cover the chin. His dark eyes were penetrating and large hands gripped the railing as he appeared to be waiting on Drew to say or do something. He was very intimidating.

"You look like you've seen a ghost child," said Wanda, concerned. "You okay?"

The world started tilting on Drew and he thought he might pass out. The man turned, opened the door and disappeared into the upstairs apartment. The door closed with a bang that made both Wanda and Jen jump. They looked back up at the door and again back at Drew.

"Who was that?" asked Jen.

Drew could only shake his head. He still hadn't found his voice. He had only just started to breath again.

"That wasn't nobody," said Wanda.

"Well nobody didn't just close that door," stated Jen crossly.

"You watch your tone with me child," warned Wanda.

"Sorry," said Jen apologetically.

"Besides, it had to be nobody, because nobody's lived up there for two months," explained Wanda. Even still, she looked curiously up at the door again before she turned back to Drew and Jen. "You sure you're okay child?" she asked again, but this time she didn't wait for a response. Her patience had run out. "Then I've got to be getting going."

"Drew, tell her what you saw. Tell us what you saw," urged Jen.

"It was an older man," began Drew finding his tongue. "He looked like a police officer, but not any uniform I've ever seen."

Wanda stopped and stared at Drew.

He went on. "He had dark hair and a mustache that ran like this," he said running his fingers around his mouth. "He looked angry."

Wanda's mouth fell open and she had a funny look on her face like she'd just swallowed a bug. Her voice was a whisper. "You saw him?"

Jen was triumphant. "I knew it!"

Wanda gave Jen a cross look, but turned again to Drew.

Drew shrugged uncomfortably. "I didn't mean to. He was just there. He's scary."

Making matters worse Drew started to shake uncontrollably. Wanda's face softened and she said, "Come now child, he's gone now. Here, come inside," she offered and unlocked the door with the A on it. Swinging the door open she handed her bags to Jen and put her arm around Drew and ushered him inside. Jen followed quiet, yet she brimmed with excitement.

Wanda brought them through a living room and into a kitchen and sat Drew down at the table. "Put that ice cream away dear and go fish a cloth out of the hall closet," she ordered. Jen was quick to comply. When she returned Wanda took the cloth and soaked it in cold water and then placed it on Drew's forehead. He was very pale and still shivered.

"What's gotten into you son?" she asked, all concern.

"I, I don't know," he shivered. "I don't," but he couldn't finish. He couldn't find words for the terror he felt.

"Okay then, well just relax now. Drew, right?" she asked. "Well Drew, you need to relax. Whatever you saw is gone now and can't hurt you, okay?"

Drew nodded in response.

"Well, just take some deep breaths," she ordered. Then to Jen, "Get a glass from that cupboard," she pointed, "and get your friend some water."

While Drew sipped the water Wanda and Jen sat down at the table too, Wanda stared at Drew, curious, while Jen's stare was all impatience. Finally Wanda said, "So, you've seen Jasper then."

Jen asked, "Who's Jasper?"

Wanda chuckled mirthlessly. "He's Jasper the not-so-friendly ghost. Oh, you're all probably too young to know about Casper the ghost. Casper was a cartoon for kids back in my day," she explained. "He was a friendly ghost though, always helping out. Jasper," she paused to collect herself. "Jasper isn't rightly friendly though. He just goes on makin' noise and fussin' about like he owns the place. Probably thinks he still does."

"What do you mean?" asked Jen, confused.

"Jasper, honey, was the original owner of this house. Built it in the 1800's when he was Sherriff Jasper Wyatt. Why he keeps on the way he does is beyond me," she said somewhat flustered.

"So you've seen him too?" asked Jen.

"Not exactly," replied Wanda. "I've more heard him than anything. When I rented this apartment the owner told me he was the descendant of Mr. Wyatt and that rumors had him haunting the place." She huffed as if at a bad joke. "I thought it was a joke," she went on. "I even told him I thought he was pulling my leg, but he said not to worry. Jasper only occasionally made an appearance. Sometimes walking about at night, sometimes closing doors, sometimes talking. Nothing bad mind you, is what he told me. For two years I could honestly say that Jasper never intruded. That's not to say I never heard anything odd. Just the opposite. Sometimes I'd hear someone walkin' about upstairs when Mr. Julius was supposed to be out. And every now and again I'd hear a door slam, again, when no one was supposed to be here. But I just chalked these things up to an old house makin' noise, that's all. That was until..."

She trailed off suddenly aware of whom she was talking to.

"Now look at me, tellin' you children about a ghost, and right when your friend is near death from fear. I'm sorry children, forget I said anything."

"No way," said Jen. "Drew, do you think that was Jasper?"

Drew fidgeted. "How am I to know?"

Wanda got up and went to a closet. She opened the door, leaned in and pulled out a portrait. When she turned it around Drew turned pale.

"That's him," he whispered. "That's the man I saw on the stairs."

"You're sure?" asked Jen.

Drew nodded and Wanda put the picture away.

"That settles that," said Wanda and sat back down. "Now you've figured it out," she said with mock sincerity. "I'm being haunted and now you can go about your lives and leave me be."

"You said until," repeated Jen, "But stopped before you finished. Until what? What happened to make you think something unusual was going on?"

Wanda stared at Jen, one of those looks that took the measure of a person. Then she said, "Well, you've figured this much out, I might as well tell you the rest. About four months ago things started getting...loud," she said. "Jasper wasn't just hanging around, opening doors and the like. He started stomping around, slamming doors. Things were being tossed around too, mostly upstairs. In Mr. Julius' apartment when Mr. Julius still lived there. He was a sweet old man, but he couldn't take it. He got spooked pretty bad and up and moved out two months back. Since then there's been an infernal racket goin' on up there and there ain't no one livin' up there anymore so it has got to be Jasper, right?"

"What about the other tenants?" asked Jen. "Have they seen anything? Heard anything?"

"All that's left is Mr. Shwartz in apartment B," said Wanda. "And he don't like to talk so much. I gather he's a maintenance guy up at the college, but I ain't rightly certain what he does. He really isn't a talker."

"Well," said Jen, "We'd like to help you if you like."

Wanda scoffed. "How are you two half-pints goin' to help me?"

"Let us perform an investigation and,"

Wanda cut her off. "Not a chance I'm letting you two run around here looking for ghosts."

"Not us then, but my dad," countered Jen. "He does this for a lot of people and when he's finished he usually knows how to help."

"I don't think so child," said Wanda.

“He’s really good at it,” argued Jen. “And not just good at finding ghosts but figuring out what’s wrong. Why they’ve gotten all upset and what to do to make ‘em happy again. Isn’t that what you want?” asked Jen. “Jasper to calm down?”

Wanda looked at her sideways, but something in her seemed to waver. Jen pounced. “Listen Miss Myrna. I’ll have my dad call you and talk to you and if after you’ve heard from him and you still don’t want an investigation, we’ll leave you alone, no problem. Talking to him can’t hurt nothing, right?”

Wanda shrugged then huffed, suddenly tired. “I guess a phone call couldn’t hurt. That Jasper is really goin’ on and on lately. I’ve been thinking about leaving myself. Fine child, here’s my number,” she scrawled her number on a paper and handed it to her. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to get my dinner started.”

She stood up and Drew and Jen followed her to the door. Outside Wanda waved goodbye. Jen called back as the door closed, “You won’t be disappointed Miss Myrna. I promise!”

Chapter 6

As they sat at the Harden's kitchen table that evening, Drew and Jen watched Mr. Harden as he talked on the phone. Jen fidgeted with the salt and pepper shakers. She slid them around and around each other, unable to contain her excitement. Drew sat like a man waiting for a death sentence, head bowed. He nervously knuckled his fingers on his legs.

"Yes, okay then Wanda," said Mr. Harden. "We'll see you next Saturday evening at four o'clock sharp."

Jen pumped her fist. "Yes!"

Mr. Harden paused, then, said, "Yes, that will be great if you can get me the keys to the other units. And do what you can about Mr. Schwartz, but if he doesn't let us in to his unit, I don't think that will affect our investigation too much. It sounds like the activity is all over so we should hopefully get some answers for you regardless. But please let him know we will be there, if even he doesn't let us in, okay? I don't want any surprises or incidents. Okay. Okay. Thanks, bye!"

Mr. Harden hung up the phone.

"Looks like I'll be heading over there next Saturday to investigate," he told the two kids.

Jen said, "That's awesome! I can't wait to check out that upstairs apartment."

"Now hold on a second Jen," said Mr. Harden in a cautionary tone. "I don't know if it's a good idea bringing you with me."

"Aw, come on dad!" pleaded Jen. "You've always said I'd make a great investigator, and you've been promising me you'd take me on a local one for a while. Why not this one? I found her," she added, as though that should count.

Mr. Harden thumbed his chin and then rubbed his head, like he always did when he considered something. "You did find her, though exactly how is a bit of a mystery to me," he said confused, but his gaze flitted to Drew who studiously examined his sneakers. "And it is local."

"And," said Jen on the edge of her seat.

"And it should be a straight forward investigation. I guess it's alright," he finished with a smile.

Jen leaped in the air. "All right!" she shouted and then caught Drew's gloomy stare. "Come on Drew, aren't you excited? We get to investigate Miss Myrna's house! It's gonna be awesome!" She slapped him on the back and he winced.

"Now hold it right there Jen," interjected Mr. Harden. "I didn't say anything about Drew coming. I don't think his grandmother would approve of him staying out half the night chasing ghosts."

Drew looked up at Mr. Harden, relief in his eyes.

"Besides," continued Jen's dad. "I don't think Drew has any interest in going anyway, right Drew?"

Drew said, "Right." just as Jen said, "Of course he does."

Drew and Jen looked at each other, Drew with a look of dismay while Jen looked irritated.

"I thought we talked about this Drew," said Jen. "You know, about getting *better* at finding ghosts and things?"

Drew couldn't meet her steady challenging gaze. "I guess so," he said, dejected.

Mr. Harden chimed in. "Even so," he said, "His grandmother absolutely must give him permission to come. That's final, and she must tell me herself. No taking your word

on this, no offence Drew. Its just that what I do isn't always something that other people approve of and the last thing I want is to be accused of getting her only grandson involved in what some think is a quack science."

"No problem dad," said Jen confidently before she turned to Drew. "Your grandmother will let you come, won't she Drew?"

Drew looked at Jen and then Mr. Harden and settled on his shoes. "Maybe," he whispered. "I guess I'll ask."

Mr. Harden's gaze hardened as he stared at Drew. "Is there something bothering you Drew?" he asked, his concern obvious. "You don't seem like yourself."

Drew shrugged. "I guess I just don't feel good right now," he lied. The truth was he was afraid of going back into that house to look for Jasper the not-so-friendly ghost. He was scary, but Jen didn't understand, couldn't understand. Neither could Mr. Harden. They hadn't seen Jasper. They couldn't see Jasper. And they wouldn't see him either, he knew. But Drew knew he *would* see Jasper. Worse yet was Drew knew Jasper would see *him*. And that terrified him.

The week went by without incident. Drew mechanically went from class to class in school, and kept to himself whenever possible. Jen was always there though. He was glad for her presence, her friendship. The other kids at school didn't really bother him, though they did keep their distance. It seemed like no one really knew what happened the night of the dance, but they knew it was weird and they knew Drew was somehow connected. The video Ron captured was a hot topic on the paranormal websites, but Ron didn't let anyone at school see the video.

Drew had seen the video and in it you could barely hear the first 'No' before the music stopped. At that point Ron zoomed in over Drew's shoulder, taking him out of the frame. His voice though came through clear after the music stopped and the camera captured a strange mist as it formed in frame. When Drew said the words 'your pregnant' the mist swirled, the disembodied 'No!' came through loud and clear and the mist

blasted forward and left out of frame. Ron's camera work wasn't quick enough to see it hit Drew, but he panned back and over to see Drew on his back in the middle of the gym floor and looking dazed. That was the extent of the video clip and the chat rooms and blogs lit up about whether it was real and what it all might mean.

Friday came and Jen cornered Drew after school. "Well? What did your grandmother say?"

Drew shrugged. "I haven't asked her yet," he said sheepishly.

"I knew it!" she scolded. "I knew you wouldn't ask her. That's why I called her at lunch today."

"You called her?" said Drew dismayed. "What did you tell her?"

"Relax Drew, I didn't *tell* her anything," she said in an effort to calm him down. "What I did say was that my dad was taking me on a boring investigation around the corner and that I wanted you to come keep me company while we sat on our hands all night waiting for a ghost to appear."

"Why would you say that?" he asked confused. "I thought you were excited about it?"

"Silly," she scolded. "Of course I'm excited about it. But parents – and grandparents – always think the worst if you're excited about doing something. But if you're bored and acting like you don't want to go, like it was a chore or something, they have a whole different idea. Reverse psychology silly," she said with a wink.

"So what did she say?" asked Drew, amazed once again by Jen's shrewdness.

"She said she would have to call my dad and make sure you wouldn't be in the way, but that she didn't see a problem with it."

"She said that?" said Drew, shocked.

"I think she likes me," said Jen with a nervous smile.

Drew didn't understand why his grandmother liking her would make her nervous.

“Anyway,” she went on, “I think she thinks you need to make more friends and is willing to let you hang out half the night hoping you and I, well,” she trailed off.

Jen’s face turned red for a second and she looked away. Then she went on, “She thinks we should be friends and she said she would call my dad today. She probably already has, so pack a bag tomorrow and don’t forget the air horn. I’ll have everything else we need to investigate.”

Jen left, leaving Drew to stare open-mouthed at this crazy girl who somehow always seemed to get him to do things he didn’t want to do. And then he smiled, because for some reason, he liked that.

Chapter 7

Drew's grandmother pulled her classic 1951 Ford truck into the Harden's driveway, put it in neutral and set the parking brake. She turned to Drew. "Drew honey, you don't look too excited. What's the matter?"

Drew shrugged. "Nothing I guess."

She let out a long sigh. "I think you'll have a fun time tonight, don't you?" she asked. Drew shrugged again and she went on. "Ron seems like a nice boy. I've met him once at the cleaners. Had to take in a pair of pants for him. Skinny, but nice. And his sister Jen seems like a really nice girl too. Pretty and smart. Reminds me of your mother."

Drew squirmed at his grandmother's assessment of Jen.

"You know," she went on, "Gabe, your father, knew Mr. Harden. They were schoolmates and even played on the same baseball team as children."

A lackluster, "Yeah." was all Drew could muster.

"Well, I always did like Mr. Harden," she continued, "And I don't think he's such a crazy person as a lot of people do. I think he might just be on to something with what he's doing."

Drew looked up, a little surprised by his grandmother's point of view.

"Don't look so shocked honey," she chided. "He's not the first person to think there are ghosts, spirits of the deceased," she amended. "I happen to agree with him. I do think there are such things and all he's trying to do is figure them out and help them if he can. Not such a bad thing, in my opinion. Besides," she smiled and prodded his arm playfully. "You'll get to spend the night with his cute daughter. Now how many boys your age get to sleep over a pretty girl's house?"

Drew hunched his shoulders. He wished he could crawl inside himself and disappear. Why did she have to say something like that?

"Oh come dear," she chastised. "It's not such a bad thing and besides, you really do need to make friends. So try to be nice and above all remember your manners and try and be helpful to Mr. Harden."

"Yes Gram," he said.

"Okay dear, well have a good night and call me tomorrow afternoon and I'll come get you," she said.

Drew nodded and slipped out of the truck. He waved goodbye as she pulled away and when he turned he nearly jumped. Jen was standing behind him. She waved and smiled at his grandmother.

"Hi Drew," she said, so full of excitement her eyes sparkled. "You ready for tonight?"

"I guess so," he said, but he didn't believe it himself.

"Yeah, right," she said, always quick on the uptake. "You'll just have to go with the flow, okay?" Drew nodded and she grabbed him by the arm. "Let's go inside and you can drop your bag and then you can help us finish loading the van."

By quarter to four they had the van loaded. Drew was amazed at all the equipment Mr. Harden packed for his investigations. There were things he had no idea what they were, like an EMF detector, and a FLIR camera, and laser grids. He had other things like motion sensors and night vision cameras and digital recorders that he thought he understood, and spools and spools of cables and buckets of connectors and

attachments and all sorts of electronic parts. Ron methodically checked off a list before closing the doors of the van and declared everything packed.

“Looks like we’re ready,” said Ron to Jen. “You excited about your first real investigation?”

Jen smiled. “You bet.”

“Well, don’t be nervous,” he said, and he sounded a bit like lecturing. “I’ll be there to get you through if anything difficult occurs.”

Jen rolled her eyes. “You’ve only been on three investigations yourself Ron. Like you’re some expert or something.”

Ron shrugged off the gibe with his practiced ease. “I’ve got more experience than you do and you’ll thank me when it pays off.” Then he turned to Drew and even though his father was inside the house he lowered his voice. “So, is it true?” he whispered. “Is there really a ghost of the original owner? Jasper?”

Drew fidgeted uncomfortably, but nodded.

“Sweet!” exclaimed Ron. “It’s always better when you know who you’re looking for, you know? Good to ask direct questions by name.”

Mr. Harden came out and locked the door behind him. He called to the three. “You guys ready?”

Ron and Jen piped up with a hearty, “Yes,” but Drew remained quiet.

Mr. Harden looked him over a second and said, “You sure you want to come Drew? You look a little nervous.”

Drew shrugged, afraid to admit he was nervous and didn’t want to go near that house again, but equally afraid of being branded a chicken in front of Ron and Jen. Especially Jen.

“Well, don’t worry,” Mr. Harden said. He patted Drew on the shoulder. “These things are usually snooze-fests and we spend the night talking to air and taking pictures and video of empty rooms. It’s not like we’re going to wrestle ghosts or fight vampires or anything. Okay then, lets go! Everybody in!”

Three minutes later they climbed out at Wanda Myrna's house. Wanda came outside and shook Mr. Harden's hand in the driveway.

"Thanks for coming," she said, a little shyly. Perhaps she was embarrassed by the whole idea.

"No problem Wanda," said Mr. Harden. "Any luck with Mr. Schwartz?"

Wanda shook her head and looked exasperated. "None," she deadpanned. "He's out right now, but said he be home in a few hours and said that if anyone disturbed him he'd fix 'em good. He's really not a very nice man," she added.

"Well, its alright," said Mr. Harden. "He isn't the first person to deny access and think the whole thing is stupid. We'll steer clear of him and his apartment and he won't even know we're here. Now, if you wouldn't mind, let's go inside and you can show me some of the hot spots and tell me some more about the type of activity you've been getting."

Wanda smiled and said, "Sure thing Don." She led him up the front steps.

Ron and Jen started to follow when Mr. Harden turned. "You guys stay here and start unloading. Ron, you know what to do. Jen, listen and help your brother, okay?" He didn't wait for a response, just turned and disappeared inside.

Ron said, "Rats! I wanted to go on the walk-through."

"Don't worry Ron," said Jen. "You're not missing anything. We know where the hotspots are anyway. Don't we Drew?"

Drew mumbled, "I guess."

Ron took a long look at the house and then opened the back door of the van. He pulled out cases and laid them gently on the ground. He talked as he worked. "Probably going to need the four cameras and tripods. Lots of cable too. I should fire up the laptops too and set up the DVR system. We'll keep the FLIR for dad. Hmm, we'll probably want an EMF for each of us, as well as digital audio recorders. Can't forget about the flashlights. Let's see...We'll probably set up the laser grid somewhere so that can come out too. The seismometer is probably not necessary so that we'll leave in."

Jen helped her brother and so Drew tuned him out. He stared at the house himself. It was big and old, though the renovations made it look newer. The lengthening shadows seemed to cast it in an eerie light, and made it look somehow sinister. Or maybe that was just Drew's imagination running wild. He looked for soul suckers too, but didn't see any.

About a half an hour went by and Ron declared everything ready for setup inside. Drew looked over and saw he had cameras attached to tripods and spools of cable at the ready and he and Jen sat on the edge of the van door and waited. They didn't have to wait long. Mr. Harden exited with Wanda and they both smiled.

"Don't worry about a thing Wanda," said Mr. Harden. "I'll give you a call tomorrow and let you know how things went. Sometime next week I'll get back in touch and we can go over the evidence we collect and hopefully have some answers for you."

"Thanks Don," said Wanda, noticeably relieved. "I'll be at my friend Janice's house and you have the number if you need me for anything. Thanks again," she added, seriously. "I really appreciate you coming over and doing this. I hope it helps. I haven't had a decent night's sleep in weeks." She turned and smiled at Jen and Drew. "I suppose I should thank you two as well, busybody's and all. Well, good luck," she said and climbed in her car and left.

Mr. Harden looked around with approval. "Good work Ron. Let's you and I head in and I'll show you where I want all this stuff. You two stay put for now," he told Jen and Drew.

They disappeared inside and came back a few minutes later. Ron and his father gathered up the equipment and hauled it inside in several loads. Then they ran the cables and plugged everything into the DVR system in the van. In about thirty minutes they finished with a check and adjustment of the camera angles and tested the video and audio. The sun had almost set.

"Well, let's do this in teams, okay," said Mr. Harden. "Ron and I will go in first. You two stay out here and watch the monitors. We'll communicate via walkie and you let us know if you see anything. After, I'll come out and Ron and Drew can stay

with the monitors and you and I, Jen, can go in together and investigate.”

“Aw,” complained Jen. “I wanted to be first in.”

“No complaining Jen,” warned her father. “You’re new and you’ll just have to wait your turn.”

Jen grumbled under her breath but settled into the chair inside the van to watch the monitors as her father and brother went inside. Drew sat on an empty camera case next to her.

“You think they’ll see anything?” asked Jen.

“I dunno,” replied Drew. His gut told him no. Most of the stuff he saw, others couldn’t anyway. Cameras too, if the cemetery and school gym experiences were any indication, usually didn’t capture what he could see, though sometimes they caught shadows and mists.

“I don’t think so either,” said Jen. “I think its you who is going to see stuff. I’ll get my dad to send you and I in together later. Then we’ll really see what’s going on.”

She was so certain Drew could only nod in agreement. She had that way about her, a sort of confidence that Drew really admired, along with a fearlessness he couldn’t hope to match.

They watched the monitors for nearly ninety minutes before Mr. Harden and Ron came out. Ron was all business, though Mr. Harden seemed to be in a generally good mood. Perhaps he was happy to be spending quality time with his children. He switched out some batteries and went back inside, this time he took Jen with him. Despite her earlier sentiment, she practically bubbled with anticipation to start investigating without Drew.

After they went in Ron said, “Well, that was pretty interesting, I’ll say.”

“What?” asked Drew.

“Well, we started with a general EMF sweep and got a few hits in both Wanda’s unit and the upstairs vacant apartment. Nothing substantial, but still interesting. We did an EVP session upstairs too. Might have caught something there, you never know. And we did hear some noises and something that sounded like footsteps and caught that on tape so that’s-”

Ron stopped talking as a car pulled up and parked. Out stepped a tall, gangly looking man in blue pants and a blue shirt with an Ohio Maintenance lettering stitched on the breast. He had salt and pepper hair and thick, black-rimmed glasses perched on a long nose above tight lips and a bony chin.

He stared at the two boys from twenty feet away and then said, "Well you must be those ghost hunting whack jobs!" He scoffed and said, "I told Wanda to keep you out of my sight and out of my way. I'm telling you too, stay out of my way or else." He let the threat hang there before he scoffed again and went inside. Once the door closed they heard him scream, "Boo!" and then cackle like a mad man, before the house went quiet once more.

"He's a real winner," commented Ron. "Probably drinks floor cleaner and sniffs the fumes to get high."

Drew thought so too. "Yeah, not very nice, is he?"

"Don't worry about him," said Ron. "We run into his type quite a bit. Short sighted, narrow-minded fools mostly. He's probably more afraid of the truth than anything. They usually are."

An hour later Jen and her father came out. Jen looked disappointed. Her father said, "Don't worry Jen. Not everyone has an experience their first time. Heck, lots of people never have an experience."

"That doesn't help," said a dejected Jen.

"We still may have caught something in the EVP session. Besides, we aren't done yet. I'll take you back in a little later. There's still plenty of investigating to do." Mr. Harden turned to Drew. "You want to give it a try Drew?"

Drew was about to say no when Jen pushed him from behind. "Of course he does," she said.

Mr. Harden blissfully ignored Drew's hesitation and said, "Come on then. Grab that Audio recorder, and a flash light and let's go."

So Drew did as he was told and in they went. The door closed quietly and Mr. Harden clicked on his flashlight. It illuminated the foyer Jen and he had trespassed in last week. Drew clicked on his own flashlight and played the beam around

the darkened room. The door to Wanda's apartment was open. So was the door to the upstairs apartment. Drew looked up fearfully, but didn't see Jasper. The house was quiet for the most part, though they could hear some faint noises coming through Mr. Schwartz's closed door. It sounded a little like he was cooking or doing the dishes, the clink of glasses and the like.

Mr. Harden said in a quiet voice, "Come this way Drew." He entered Wanda's apartment and closed the door. "Let's sit down for a few minutes and just listen." After they got settled in he said, "I like to start each entry with a few moments of quiet, just try to get a feel for the room or house. Listen to the normal sounds and then start investigating. I find it helpful to know what's normal and what isn't."

Drew nodded and listened. Mr. Schwartz was still moving around, but those sounds were fairly hard to hear. Inside Wanda's apartment you could hear the old style radiator as it popped every few minutes and the clock on her kitchen wall in the other room ticked loudly. Other than that, it was real quiet. They sat like that for several long minutes and Drew was startled when Mr. Harden broke the silence.

"Can you give us a sign of your presence?" he asked, loud and to no one.

After a few moments he asked more questions, each with a pause after it as though waiting for a response.

"Is your name Jasper?"

"Why are you still here?"

"Is there something you need to tell us?"

"Can we help you do anything?"

Mr. Harden went quiet again and then said, "Okay Drew, let's head upstairs."

They stood to go when the sound of footsteps carried, loud and clear from above. It sounded like someone walked with booted feet on a hard wood floor in the apartment right above them.

"You hear that?" whispered Mr. Harden as he pointed up at the ceiling.

Drew heard it all right and started to shake, though thankfully it was dark and Mr. Harden couldn't see him.

“Let’s get up there!” urged Mr. Harden as he led the way.

Drew stayed rooted for a split second, not wanting to go upstairs, but the thought of staying there by himself drove him after Mr. Harden. They entered the apartment and Mr. Harden immediately went left down a hall toward where the sound must have come. Cautiously he entered a living room and called out.

“Is there anyone here?” he asked.

Drew was almost in Mr. Harden’s hip pocket.

“Was that you Jasper, we heard walking around?” asked Mr. Harden.

The room was quiet. Mr. Harden turned to Drew and whispered, “See? Look at the floor.”

Drew did and was surprised to find it carpeted. He momentarily forgot his fear and said, “It sounded like boots on wood though?”

Drew could hear Mr. Harden’s smile. “That’s exactly right Drew, good ear. And that makes it almost certainly paranormal. And it was loud enough that I’m sure one of our recorders caught it.”

Mr. Harden poked around in the air with a hand-held black box with lights on it. The lights went crazy and there was a digital readout as well with numbers that changed constantly. He caught Drew’s stare and said, “This is an EMF and a temperature gauge. EMF stands for Electro Magnetic Field and the lights go off when it fluctuates. Most theories state that ghostly activity is accompanied by fluctuations in the magnetic fields. Ghosts draw on the energy around them to manifest, and some believe even the heat in the air can be drawn on. See, look the EMF is going crazy and the temperature is dropping.”

Mr. Harden was excited, but Drew was scared. If Jasper really was trying to manifest, he didn’t want to be anywhere near him when he did.

“I think I need some air,” whispered Drew.

Mr. Harden flashed his light on Drew and then said, “I’m sorry son, I forget sometimes that this sort of thing can be scary. Let’s get you outside, come on.”

The air outside was cool and refreshing and Drew breathed a sigh of relief.

Jen bounced out of the truck and over. "That was quick," she said. "See anything?"

Her question was directed at them both, but her look was fixed on Drew. Her father answered.

"Nope. Though we did get some EMF spikes and temperature fluctuations right after recording footsteps."

"Really?" piped Ron. "You heard them too?"

Drew nodded. His fear faded fast. "Yes, it sounded liked boots on wood, but when we went upstairs the floor was carpeted. Really weird."

"I wish I heard something," complained Jen.

"Come on then," said Mr. Harden. "Let's you and I head back in while the activity is jumping."

Jen enthusiastically agreed. She grabbed her flashlight and a recorder and said, "I'm ready."

About an hour later they both emerged and Jen bubbled again with excitement. "I can't believe it," she said. "I actually heard the footsteps and we heard a door slam shut too inside Wanda's apartment while we were upstairs. I bet we caught some good stuff."

"I'm sure you did," said Ron.

"Yes, I'm sure of it," said Mr. Harden. "Listen guys, what do you say we take a break and have a snack. I'm hungry."

"I couldn't eat right now," said Jen. "I'm too amped up. I want to go back in."

Ron said, "I'm hungry for some more ghost action. What about you Drew?"

Drew was about to shake his head when Jen said, "Great idea Ron. Let's the three of us go in while dad takes a turn watching the monitors"

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Mr. Harden. "I don't like the idea of you guys in there by yourself."

"Aw, come on dad!" said Ron and Jen together.

"I just don't know if I like it," he continued.

"I don't see what the big deal is," argued Jen. "You've got cameras all over the place. It's not like we'd even be out of your sight. And we're just a few steps away if something were to happen."

"I'm not sure," repeated Mr. Harden, but his tone said he was cracking.

"Let us take the FLIR in dad and do a quick thermal sweep?" prodded Ron. "Thirty minutes max."

"Well..."

"Thanks dad!" said Jen. She jumped up and kissed his cheek. "You're the best dad ever!"

"I guess so," relented Mr. Harden. "But thirty minutes max and Ron, you're the only one I want holding that FLIR okay? That's expensive and these two don't know how to operate it."

"No prob dad!" said Ron, and snatched up the camera. "Let's do it!" he said to Drew and Jen.

Jen grabbed Drew by the arm and hauled him after Ron and into the house.

They started in the upstairs apartment. Ron led the way. He scanned the rooms slowly with the thermal imaging camera. Drew and Jen were right behind him. They watched the small, colorful screen interpret heat signatures as it went.

"See how hot the heater is?" said Ron pointing to the white-hot glow on the screen in the rough shape of the radiator the camera was pointed at. "And see how everything else is blue and green. That's the cold stuff. See, we're red and orange and sometimes white," he said, passing his hand in front of the camera to illustrate. "So what we're looking for is any heat anomalies. Might mean a ghost is manifesting."

"Wow," said Drew, impressed with the instrument. It helped distract him from his fears too, as he focused on the screen and its ever-changing colorful shapes.

They went through the entire upstairs apartment without seeing anything. Then they headed downstairs to Wanda's apartment and conducted another sweep. Unfortunately they didn't see anything abnormal.

"Well, I guess we should head out," said Ron. Leading the way out of Wanda's apartment he pulled up short in the foyer and said, "Whoa, what is that?"

Drew and Jen could see a hunched shape on the screen, white and red. It looked like something crouched in front of Mr.

Schwartz's door. They heard a rustle and the words, "Damn rats," whispered through the dark.

Drew's heart leaped into his throat.

Jen screeched, "It's Jasper!"

The crouched shape stood up and it looked just like a man.

Ron whispered, "Whoa."

Out of the darkness came a voice, "What are you doing? I told you to stay away from me!"

It was Mr. Schwartz and he flicked up a flashlight that blinded the three teens. Then he opened his apartment door, stepped inside, and slammed it shut.

The three stood in shocked silence for a few seconds and then Ron clicked on his own flashlight.

"That guy gives me the creeps," he whispered.

"Me too," whispered Jen. "More than Jasper ever could."

"You haven't seen Jasper," whispered Drew.

"What do you suppose he was doing?" asked Ron.

"Hmm," Jen said, thinking. "I wonder."

"Yeah, I thought he was an animal or something at first," said Ron.

"Me too," said Drew.

"He was looking for something," said Jen. "But what?"

"You think?" asked Ron.

Drew looked at the screen Ron still had trained on the apartment door. Below and to the right there was a small heat signature. "Rats," he whispered.

"What do you mean rats?" asked Jen. "You forget something?"

"The screen," whispered Drew. He pointed at the small heat signature. "Looks small, like a rat."

"He's right!" said Ron in an excited whisper. "It looks like a rat! Shine your light on it Jen."

Jen's flashlight lit up the area. There were two stacks of boxes and in between them stood a small white mouse, its beady eyes glowed red in the light.

"It's not exactly a rat though," she commented. "It looks like a mouse, but why isn't it running?"

"You probably have it mesmerized by your light," suggested Drew.

She shined the light away and looked at the FLIR screen again. There stood the small heat signature, stone still. She brought the light back to it and stepped cautiously forward.

"I wouldn't touch it if I were you," warned Drew. "Those things have rabies."

"Hush," whispered Jen. "It's just a little mouse. But look, its not afraid of me. It's just standing there staring..."

She leaned forward slowly, reached out her hand, and gently closed her fingers around the body of the mouse. She lifted it up and said, "See?"

"Cool," said Ron.

"That's weird," said Jen. "It isn't even squirming." She held it up with one hand and shined the light on it. Its mouth hung open and it looked like it had drool on its chin.

"Gross," said Ron. "Its mouth is all wet."

"Maybe it's sick?" suggested Drew.

"You might be right," agreed Jen. "I'll take it home and see if I can't help it."

"Even grosser," said Ron. "Why take a rat home?"

"It's not a rat stupid," said Jen. "It's a mouse. And not the normal kind you find around here. See, its white, like a lab mouse. I'm taking it," said Jen and then she stuffed it in her pocket. "Don't tell dad," she said.

At that moment they all heard what sounded like a muffled voice. They froze and listened, ears perked up, but it didn't recur.

"What was that?" asked Drew.

"That sounded like it was right next to us," said Ron, wide eyed.

Jen said, "It was right next to us, and it was a voice, but I couldn't make out what it was saying. I have my digital voice recorder on, let's see if it caught it."

She quickly replayed the last minute and sure enough they could hear a muffled voice.

"Definitely a voice," said Ron. "Sounded to me like, 'The kids are nice' and then the end part said something like 'watch out'."

"Me too," agreed Jen. "I guess old Jasper likes us and wants us to watch out for Mr. Schwartz."

"I'm not so sure," said Drew. "I thought the last word was mice, not nice. Though why the kids would be mice doesn't make any sense. Watching out for Mr. Schwartz makes perfect sense though."

"Maybe you're right," said Jen. "I say we take a break. Mr. Schwartz really gives me the creeps. We can take the recording and clean it up at home and see if we can't make out what Jasper was really saying."

Outside Mr. Harden asked them how it went and they told him about the scare Mr. Schwartz gave them, and let him listen to the EVP, but said nothing about the mouse.

"What do you say we go back in Ron?" offered Mr. Harden. "We can do some more EVP work and then later I'll take Jen in and then Drew if he's up to it, and after we can call it a night, okay?"

Ron agreed and off the two went. That left Drew and Jen to watch the monitors. Jen pulled the mouse out again and really studied it in the light of the van.

"Something's definitely wrong with it," she said. "Mice don't just sit there. Look," she said and put it down. "It's not even trying to escape. A normal mouse would at least start sniffing around, even a tame mouse would start looking for food."

"Big deal," said Drew, thoroughly uninterested in the mouse.

"Yeah, maybe not," said Jen. Then, thoughtfully, "But maybe..."

They each took their turns with Mr. Harden, but the rest of the night was uneventful. They packed up and went home and were fast asleep in no time. Ron slept in his own bed, but Jen slept on the couch in the living room while Drew slept on the floor on an air mattress and sleeping bag.

Jen's last words before sleep overtook her were, "Maybe not, but maybe so."

Chapter 8

They slept until early afternoon the next day. After a bowl of cereal Jen brought Drew into the basement lab where all her father's equipment was set up for evidence review. Ron was already there.

"Hey sleepy heads!" he teased. "While you were counting sheep I was cleaning up that EVP. It's still not perfect, but here, take a listen."

Ron pushed a few buttons and they watched a screen that measured sound in spikes on a graph. It reminded Drew of those screens you see in hospitals that monitored heartbeats.

He could hear them all discussing the mouse and right after Jen said 'Don't tell dad' they all heard the voice. It was eerie, hearing a voice that wasn't there and the voice itself was creepy. It was low and menacing and mostly garbled.

Ron said, "It sounds like its saying, 'The kids are nice, get the watch out.'"

"Wow," said Jen. "That's really creepy. It doesn't make any sense though."

"I know, right," agreed Ron. "We aren't mice and what watch could he be talking about?"

Drew had an uneasy feeling they hadn't heard it correctly. "The nice thing seems off to me," he said. "I never got the feeling Jasper likes kids, us or any one else. As for watches, that makes no sense at all. It has to be something else. Can you clean it up any more?"

"I've got a few more tricks I can try," said Ron. "But it'll take a while. Plus, I've got to go help Dad today at the store and then I have to review the rest of this evidence, so it'll probably be a few days before I can get something better to you."

"Keep on it," said Jen encouragingly. "I want to go up to City Hall and do a little research on the house. See if I can find something that might give us a clue as to what is happening. Want to come Drew?" she asked, somehow excited about research.

Drew shrugged. "I guess," he replied, though he really didn't think staring at old records was either exciting or would turn up anything interesting.

They walked down West State Street and took the right onto North Court Street. As they were taking the left onto West Washington Street, two police cruisers flew by, their sirens screaming. They watched them go with interest. Athens was a quiet college town and nothing ever really happened, especially on a quiet Sunday afternoon. The two police cruisers took a sharp right onto North College Street and out of sight.

Out of sight, out of mind, the two continued the half block to their destination, City Hall, on the left. As they were climbing the stairs, a fire engine and an ambulance screamed by, turned on North College and they could hear its brakes squeal.

Jen took a look from the top step and said, "I think they stopped right around the corner."

"Want to check it out?" said an excited Drew. Anything would have been preferable to sitting in an office looking at old papers. "Might be a fire," he added hopefully

Jen thought for a second and said, "I guess we can check it out. A fire, huh."

And so they walked around the corner after the emergency vehicles and found a bizarre scene outside Kantner

Hall, part of Ohio University. A bus blocked both lanes and it looked like it smashed into a car coming the other way.

They ran forward just in time to watch the police as they kept everyone away from a young man who stood in the middle of the street. People talked and the snatches of conversation helped fill them in as to what went on.

"He just wandered into the street and stopped," said one woman to her friend.

"Someone said he was trying to commit suicide by jumping in front of the bus," said another person.

"I think he's sick," said a third. "Look, he's all pale and glassy eyed and foaming at the mouth. Maybe he's got rabies."

Another man countered, "Looks like he's on drugs to me. Damn college kids."

Two police officers tried to talk to the young man, who looked in his late teens or early twenties. He had black hair that was tousled and his clothes looked rumpled like he slept in them. And he definitely looked glassy eyed and his mouth was open and his chin covered with white spittle. He wasn't responding to the officers' questions and the EMT's came over to do a physical examination. They poked and prodded him, talked to him, even tried to shake him, but he just stood there and drooled like an idiot.

"Wow," said Jen. "He must be on something."

Finally the EMT's put him on a stretcher. He never tried to fight them, but oddly didn't do anything for himself. They sat him down first by pushing his shoulders and then they swung his legs up and then they pushed him into a prone position. After they strapped him in they loaded him into the ambulance and left for the hospital.

Other emergency crews attended to the bus passengers and the lone driver of the smashed car. No one was seriously hurt though and in a few more minutes the police had the bus moved and a tow truck loaded the wrecked car. People moved off.

"Weird," said Drew. "He was really out of it, wasn't he?"

“Yeah,” said Jen thoughtfully. “I wonder why?” She let the thought hang for a moment. She pointed, “Hey, isn’t that Mr. Schwartz?”

Drew followed her finger and spotted an Ohio Maintenance van parked at the corner. In it sat Mr. Schwartz who appeared to be watching the commotion with interest.

“Yeah,” said Drew, “That’s the creep. I’d know him anywhere. Looks like he’s enjoying the scene too. Weirdo.”

Mr. Schwartz looked over at them suddenly, and sneered. Then he put the vehicle in gear and drove off.

Jen said, “Yeah, weird. He gives me the creeps even out here in the daylight.” She watched his van leave and then said, “Well come on, let’s go. Those records won’t research themselves.”

Off they went to the city hall records room. Jen was friends with Daniella, a member of the weekend cleaning crew, who let them in. They spent several boring hours as they poured through old records concerning the house and Jasper Wyatt. All they learned was that Jasper Wyatt left with no surviving children or wife, the house was sold at auction as part of a bankruptcy sale and eventually was turned into apartments now run by a real estate trust. As for Jasper Wyatt the Sherriff, his term was unremarkable. Twenty-eight years as Sherriff and hardly anything happened under his watch. Not surprising considering Athens was such a small town back then.

On City Hall’s steps Jen said, “Darn it. I would have thought we would have found something juicy.”

“Why?” asked Drew, wondering how anything juicy would ever turn up in a dusty old City Hall records room?

“Because silly,” scolded Jen. “With the activity kicking up recently in Jasper Wyatt’s old house and Jasper Wyatt being *the* activity, well, it makes sense it should have something to do with him. Or at least it *did* make sense. It doesn’t anymore, but darn it, I thought we might have found something juicy.”

Back at Jen’s house they ate dinner and afterwards sat around the table and talked about the investigation at Wanda’s

house. The local news came on the television, and led with the story of the 'Kantner Hall Kid' as they called him.

"Whoa, we were there today," said Jen. "He was really acting weird, that kid."

"Shh," said Ron. "I want to hear this."

They gathered round to watch the TV as a female reporter stood outside Kantner Hall and spoke.

"Turns out the young man's name is George Hart," she said. "A film student at Ohio University. Friends say George was acting strangely that morning at rehearsal and in the middle of a break he just stood up and walked out. Nobody thought anything at the time, but were surprised to find him at the center of the bus crash outside only minutes later."

The camera cut to another student, a male who said, "Weird. Dude, he just got up and walked out like a zombie. I asked him if he was hitting the john, but he didn't even act like he heard me. It was like his brain was shut off or something. Just really weird."

The camera cut back to the reporter who said, "Fellow students were asked about George's behavior, if any had ever seen him act like this before. They all agreed, he was always outgoing, a theater major with acting aspirations, very gregarious and that this zombie-like behavior was out of character. When asked whether or not he did drugs, his friends all vehemently denied the allegation."

The camera cut away to another student, a female, who said, "George is sweet and nice and funny, and he never did drugs. Heck, he never even has a drink at parties; he's always the designated driver. It just doesn't make sense. I hope he's okay," she finished with a worried frown.

The camera cut back to the female reporter who said, "George was taken to O'Bleness Memorial Hospital for testing. Stay tuned for updates on the zombie film student at eleven."

The news cut back to the anchor desk. Ron, turning down the TV, said, "Wow, zombie film student, huh. The news sure does like to play things up, don't they?"

Jen pursed her lips. "Yeah, but it was pretty weird how he was acting. Zombie sounds about right, the way he just stood

there and didn't speak or react to anything. I guess you could say it was like a zombie."

Ron laughed. "Yeah, and next they'll be saying he tried to eat peoples' brains. Come on Jen, he was obviously on some kind of drugs. Sure everyone's saying he's a boy scout now, but when the toxicology results come back he'll be on PCP or something crazy like that."

"I don't know," said Drew speaking up. "He didn't seem normal, but drugs? His friends seemed really surprised."

"Somebody spiked his orange juice then," shrugged Ron. "You'll see, just wait."

"Well," began Jen, "I've been trying to figure out what's wrong with that mouse we caught at Wanda's house. Talk about weird, it won't do anything on its own. Come upstairs, I want to show you something," she said cryptically and led them up to her room.

Inside her bedroom, Drew looked around at a mostly pink room. It was very girly, from the pink walls to the frilly bedspread and the shelves with little knick-knacks and dolls on chairs. There was a Justin Bieber poster on the wall and she even had a little makeup table in the corner, next to a desk she obviously used for studying. It was littered with schoolwork. Also on it sat a little cage that held the white mouse.

She walked them over and said, "See, it hasn't moved an inch. I drew that red line around it on the newspaper hours ago and it hasn't moved. There's cheese and water in there too, but it never went for it."

Ron leaned close to the cage. "Yeah, and its mouth is all watery still. It probably has rabies Jen. You better be careful it doesn't bite you."

"I don't think so," replied Jen. "Rabies makes animals crazy, not stupid. This one seems stupid to me. It just sits there, not moving for anything, but watch when I do this."

She reached into the cage and grabbed the piece of cheese. Then she moved it slowly in front of the mouse until it was right in front of its mouth. "See, nothing," she explained.

"Yeah," said Drew, "So it is stupid. Big deal." He had no inclination to study the eating habits of mice, dumb or otherwise.

“But watch when I touch the cheese to its lips,” she continued. As soon as the cheese touched its lips it opened its mouth and chewed.

“Whoa,” said Ron, “That’s nice. You trained it to eat from your hand.”

“No I didn’t stupid,” she said and pulled the cheese away. It stopped chewing immediately. “See, it doesn’t even chew what’s left in its mouth. It just sits there drooling.”

Sure enough, the mouse sat with its mouth still open, a bit of cheese fell out, but the mouse never even twitched. Jen pushed the cheese back again and the mouse chewed. She stopped and the same thing happened again.

“Now watch this,” she said and dropped the cheese and grabbed a pen from her desk. She moved the pen up to the mouse’s mouth and it chewed on the plastic tip, just like it was cheese. “See, it doesn’t care what you put there, it’s chewing on instinct only. For some reason it doesn’t differentiate between food and, and, well plastic. No mouse would chew on plastic.”

She pulled the pen away and the mouse stopped.

“Well,” said Ron laughing, “Looks like you’ve got yourself a retarded mouse as a pet.”

“I’m going to bring it to the vet and see if they can figure out what’s wrong with it,” stated Jen and closed the cage. “I’ll drop it off after school tomorrow.”

The doorbell rang and Drew said, “That’s probably my grandma.” They went downstairs and Mr. Harden stood in the living room talking with Drew’s grandmother.

“He was fine Mrs. Cromwell,” said Mr. Harden. “Very helpful and his manners were impeccable.”

“Please call me Bethany,” she said with an encouraging smile.

“I will if you call me Don,” he replied playfully.

“Deal,” she said and turned to Drew. “Well Drew honey, are you ready to go? School day tomorrow and I hope you’ve done your homework.”

Drew groaned.

“I guess that means you’ll be doing it over dinner,” she said wryly. “Grab your things and let’s get a move on.”

Drew grabbed his bag and headed for the door. He stopped and said to Mr. Harden, "Thank you sir, I had a great time."

"You're very welcome Drew," he replied with a smile. "You are welcome back any time, hear?"

Drew nodded and waived goodbye to Ron and Jen then outside.

In the car Drew's grandmother asked him, "Well, did you have a good time?"

Drew shrugged, "Yeah, it was okay."

"See any ghosts?" she asked.

He looked up at her sharply, worried she knew his secret, but her playful grin said she kidded.

"No," he mumbled.

"You get along okay with Jen?" she asked.

Again, he looked up sharply and this time she watched his reaction closely. "I guess," he said.

"I think she likes you," she said.

"What?" he was shocked his grandmother even thought like that, not to mention the actual idea of Jen liking him.

"Come on Drew," she chided. "I know you're only thirteen but you really should pay closer attention to these things."

"I, I don't know what you mean," he stuttered.

She put the truck in reverse and started backing out. "It doesn't take a genius to see she likes you. Just look Drew, she's standing there on the stoop smiling and waving."

Drew looked up and suddenly felt sick. Jen waved and smiled, a really big smile.

"Honey, you look like you swallowed a bug," teased his grandmother. "Well, don't be a bump on a log, wave back. And for heaven's sake, smile!"

Drew waved and managed a smile and was rewarded when Jen's smile beamed larger than ever.

"That's better dear," said his grandmother. She put the truck in first gear and drove away. "You're going to need a lot of help," she said.

Drew looked at his grandmother, and wondered aloud, "Help with what?"

She chuckled and said, “Never mind dear. We’ll take it slow.”

Chapter 9

Next day at school Jen waited for him at his locker.

“Hi Drew,” Jen smiled. “You get caught up on your sleep?”

“I suppose,” mumbled Drew, not really sure what to say.

Jen asked, “You feel like coming to the vet’s office with me after school? I’m dropping off the mouse at Dr. Wilde’s to get checked out. It’s really sick and I think it might need some medicine.”

“I suppose,” answered Drew.

“Well, you’re a fountain of conversation today,” teased Jen playfully. “You can meet me after school by the bike rack and we’ll go pick up the mouse and ride over, okay?”

“Sure,” nodded Drew. He collected his books, shut his locker and turned and asked Jen, “Walk together to class?”

“Of course,” she smiled.

They walked in an awkward silence. Drew was conscious of her furtive glances, as if she wanted to say something. Or maybe she was waiting for him to say something, he couldn’t tell. He was too busy staring at his feet and that’s how he was nearly knocked to the floor by another boy.

As he spun sideways the boy turned and said, "Watch where you're goin' freak!"

"You watch it!" shouted Jen.

The boy turned. It was Stan, a noted bully and a Junior. "And just what are you gonna do about it?" he threatened.

Students quickly sensed a fight. An anonymous voice shouted, "Get him Stan!"

Drew grabbed Jen by the arm and tugged. "Don't worry about it Jen," he said meekly. "Let's just go." He had to tug her harder, but she finally allowed Drew to lead her away. But not without a parting jibe.

"You better just watch it!" she warned as Drew pulled her along. They walked away to the sound of the boy laughing. "Why didn't you say something?" Jen asked Drew.

Drew shrugged. "What's to say? He just wants to mess with 'The Freak'. I walk away instead of adding to 'The Freak's' growing reputation."

"You're not a freak Drew," uttered Jen.

"Yeah, well tell that to Stan, and the rest of the school while you're at it," said Drew.

The bell rang and they hustled to class. The rest of the day was uneventful and after the final bell Drew met Jen at the bike rack. They pedaled to Jen's house and she ran upstairs to get the mouse while Drew waited outside. Jen came out a minute later empty handed.

"It's gone?" she said, confused.

Ron came walking around the corner, shovel in hand. "There you are," he said. "You should really take the bus. Get you home quicker."

"What are you doing with that shovel?" asked Jen.

"Just finished doing your dirty work sis," he quipped. "Mouse was near dead and stinking when I got home."

"Are you sure it was dead Ron?" she asked. Clearly she didn't trust his judgment.

"I just said it was *near* dead," said Ron. "Sheesh, pay attention. And you're supposed to be the smart one," he added rhetorically.

"Than why would you bury it?" she said in a near shriek.

"Take it easy," cautioned Ron. "I was just digging for some worms. Dad and I are going fishing and I wanted some live bait."

"Oh," said Jen. "Than what dirty work were you doing for me and *where* is the mouse?" she finished crossly.

"I dropped it at Dr. Wilde's, like you wanted," he said, and looked sideways at her. "You did want the mouse to live, didn't you?" he asked snidely. "When I got home I checked on it. I really thought it was going to die right in front of me and, well, I decided not to wait. Dr. Wilde said he'd know more after running some tests and to check back the end of the week."

Jen still looked skeptical. "It really looked like it was going to die right in front of you?" she asked.

Ron shrugged it away with, "Beats me. I'm no biologist or whatever. You guys want to come help with the Myrna investigation review?"

Jen looked hopefully at Drew but she must not have liked the look on his face. "No," she said. "We're going to take a ride uptown. Maybe when we get back."

"Suit your selves," said Ron who put the shovel in the garage and went inside.

"Uptown?" asked Drew.

"Silly, we don't have to go uptown," she explained. "I just said that so Ron wouldn't press us for help."

"Oh," said Drew.

"I could tell you didn't want to," added Jen shyly.

"You could tell?" asked Drew, unaware he was so easy to read.

"You're not that easy for most people to read Drew," she said. "But over the last few weeks and days I think I'm starting to get the hang of you."

Drew shrugged uncomfortably but said nothing. He was embarrassed that she was able to see how he felt.

She said, "I'm sorry Drew, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Drew looked up, shocked.

She just smiled and said, "See. Come on. Let's ride by Wanda's house. Maybe you'll see something."

Drew said, "If you want." But he didn't really want to. Jen smiled happily and climbed on her bike and led the way. Drew let out a sigh thankful she wasn't able to see he didn't want to. Of course, that didn't change the fact that he was now doing something he didn't want to.

They entered the foyer of Wanda's house and knocked on her apartment door. Wanda opened the door and greeted the kids with a smile.

"Nice to see you kids," she said warmly. "Your dad said it would be a week before he had any news for me, so what brings you two here?"

"Nothing," said Drew at the same time Jen said, "We have some follow up work to do."

Wanda gave them a sarcastic smile and warned playfully, "You two should really get on the same page if your gonna keep snooping around."

Drew looked down, embarrassed.

Jen explained, "Drew didn't know, but we were listening to some of the evidence and heard some noises we couldn't quite explain. So I wanted to come over and listen for them. See if I can figure out if they are a normal sound like the house settling, or the pipes banging, that kind of thing."

"Oh," said Wanda skeptically. "If that's all, why don't I just make you a key and you can come and go as you like."

Trying to help Drew replied, "That won't be necessary Miss Myrna."

Wanda laughed, causing Drew to blush. "That was sarcasm child. You got yourself a handful with this one," she said to Jen.

Jen blushed, but said, "Is it okay if we check out the upstairs apartment again? Just for an hour or so. You won't even know we're there."

"Well you couldn't make any more racket than Jasper," said Wanda, exasperated. "That fool ghost is all kinds o' crazy right now, bumpin' and a-bangin' and carryin' on all hours of the day and night."

Right then they heard a loud bump from upstairs and they all turned toward the door. The sound didn't repeat itself.

"That child," said Wanda, "Is not a house-settlin' or pipe-bangin' kinda noise, now is it?"

"No ma'am," whispered Jen.

"So what have you found so far?" asked Wanda.

"Oh, nothin' really," said Jen as she impatiently stared at the ceiling as if she could see through to the upstairs apartment. "That is to say, we haven't verified everything we found yet. That takes time, like my dad said, about a week."

"Well, I suppose ole Wanda'll just have to wait," she sighed. "Go on child, get on upstairs before you bounce out of your shoes," urged Wanda shooing them out. "Door's unlocked, now get you two!"

"Thanks Miss Myrna!" they both chimed as they dashed upstairs.

"Did you hear that bang?" asked Jen. "Sounded like somebody dropped something. I wonder what?"

"Or who?" added Drew half-heartedly.

Jen pulled up short as they entered the apartment's living room and turned on Drew. "You aren't excited about that noise?" she asked nearly incredulous.

Drew shrugged. He didn't know what to say, or really even how he felt. It seemed like this whole thing was more important to Jen than to him, but he didn't want it that way. He just couldn't help it. Plus he was scared.

Incisively, Jen said, "I know this isn't as important to you as it is to me," she began.

It made him blush, and he stared at his shoes.

"That's okay Drew," she said. "You never wanted this gift of yours, and you certainly never had an interest in this kind of thing before, so I shouldn't be surprised that you don't get excited."

"Its not just that," said Drew as he closed the door and followed Jen down the hallway and into the front room where they heard the bump from below. "You didn't see Jasper. He wasn't very friendly looking." That was as close as he could come to admitting he was afraid.

"You don't need to be afraid," said Jen, gently laying her hand on his arm. "Most ghosts can't even touch you, let alone hurt you. If there were demonic spirits or poltergeists I'd be a little more cautious, but Jasper is just an old Sherriff. Why would he want to hurt us?"

Drew watched Jen as she prattled and he noticed her breath began to mist. He shivered.

Jen stopped talking and looked about. Pulling a small black box out with alacrity, she pushed a few buttons. She whispered, "EVP session, Myrna house, upstairs with Drew. The temperature has dropped. The thermometer is reading thirty degrees, while the outside temperature is in the low seventies. EMF detector is spiking intermittently. Drew, what do you see?"

Drew looked around the empty room. It might have been a bedroom, or a den when people were living here. "Nothing. It's empty," he replied. He felt, rather than saw a darkness behind him, down the hallway they traversed. He turned and froze. Oozing under the apartment's exit door was a black mass. He watched it stretch and separate and rise up, vaguely human in shape, though shorter, only about four feet tall. It wavered, as if a gentle breeze disturbed its tranquility, but it was anything but tranquil. Drew could feel an evil emanating from it, almost pulsing with malevolent intent. A second shadow began to ooze from under the doorway, while a third started from a crack in the window's sill on the far wall of the living room, behind the first two. He opened his mouth to talk but only a strangled croak escaped his lips.

"What is it Drew?" asked Jen in an urgent whisper. "What's happening?"

"Shadows," was all he could mutter. Drew was mesmerized by the black shadows. This close, he thought he could make out eyes within the shadow people. They were black orbs of a deeper darkness, more dense and with a faint sheen, like oily slick spots. He felt drawn to them, those eyes. They swirled, and it looked as if something could be seen within them, if he could just get a little closer.

Jen grabbed his arm. It startled him from his thoughts. "Get back in here idiot!" scolded Jen.

Drew looked around in confusion. He was halfway down the hall though he couldn't remember taking a step. Jen dragged him back to the front room. Their breath fogged the air. Two steps from the front room Drew pulled up short.

Jen turned. "What is it? More shadows?" she asked. Her voice cracked ever so slightly with worry.

Drew shook his head. "Jasper," he said and watched a gray mist coalesce into the tall, dark form of Jasper. His mustachioed face grimaced and his dark eyes felt like they bored holes through Drew.

"Really?" said a surprised Jen. Her gaze followed Drew's though she couldn't see Jasper. "Whoa," she said startled. "Is that a gray mist?" she asked.

Drew knew the mist she saw was Jasper, but she couldn't see him like he could see him. It was like he was a real live person towering before them, menacing. As the mist dissipated and his form solidified Drew took a step back but was stopped, surprised by Jen's hand still clenched around his wrist. He turned, and saw the living room was now full of black shadows. Turning back he saw Jasper with an angry glare.

"There's no way out," whispered Drew, now truly terrified. "The hall is full of soul suckers or shadow people or whatever you want to call them, and Jasper doesn't look happy," reported Drew.

"Don't be stupid," said Jen who somehow kept her head.

Drew had a second to wonder how she did it, but then he remembered she couldn't see what he could see.

"Grab the air horn and blow silly!" she ordered.

Of course, he thought and he unslung his backpack and unzipped it. That was as far as he got before Jasper roared. Jen squeaked, and Drew knew she heard it also. Drew looked up in time to see Jasper leap towards him, arms outstretched, hands ready to grasp and throttle him. He turned to run but Jasper grasped quickly. Yet instead of feeling Jasper's hands clench around his throat, he felt the icy coldness as Jasper passed through him and when he turned toward the living room Jasper had a black shadow in each hand. He slammed one against the wall and it thumped audibly.

Jen squeaked, "What was that? What's going on?" she asked.

Drew was struck dumb as Jasper thumped another one against the wall and then threw it down the hallway. They seemed to be disoriented by Jasper's sudden onslaught. "Jasper's fighting them," gasped Drew.

"Really?" squeaked Jen again.

Drew was surprised when Jen squeezed his arm in both of hers, but couldn't tear his eyes from the fight before him. Jasper waded in among the black shadows. He grabbed them and slammed them about, accompanied each time with an audible thump that made them both jump.

"He's thrashing them good," said Drew as he watched them get thrown about, yet they didn't disperse. Instead they seemed to scatter and then reorganize, surrounded Jasper and closed in around him. Drew watched as one leapt onto his back and it appeared to attach itself to Jasper's neck. Drew couldn't tell, but he thought it was sucking by the way it pulsated. Jasper grabbed it, threw it over his shoulder and against the wall with another thump, but two more took its place. "Uh oh," said Drew.

"What? What?" squealed Jen. "What's going on?"

"There's too many of them," replied Drew. "And even though he's thrashing them about he's not really hurting them. I think they're going to overwhelm him."

He watched, horrified, as Jasper was indeed overwhelmed. There were three on him that pulsated hungrily, as three more hurled their shadow forms at him. Jasper buckled under the weight and collapsed.

"He's down, they're swarming him," commented Drew.

Jen distracted him with a pinch and he turned an accusatory glare her way only to face one from her.

"Save him! Blow the horn!" she shouted.

He opened his mouth to say something but she pinched him again and he jumped. "Ow, okay," he said and dug into his backpack and pulled out the air horn. He let a loud blast. The hallway and living room that a moment before teemed with shadow people now stood empty save for Jasper collapsed against one wall. He looked harried. Drew let out a sigh of relief.

"They're gone now aren't they," said Jen. "How's Jasper?" she asked.

Drew watched Jasper stand and straighten his ghostly form. "I think he's okay," he said.

"Thank you Jasper," said Jen.

Drew saw Jasper eye Jen and he tipped his cap to her. Then he looked sternly at Drew before he stepped through the apartment door and disappeared.

"Wow," said Drew. "That was amazing."

"What's Jasper doing?" asked Jen.

"He's gone," stated Drew.

"What do you mean he's gone? Where'd he go?" demanded Jen.

"Through the door," pointed Drew. Just then Jasper's head materialized through the door. Drew jumped back, and Jasper disappeared once more. "Whoa," he said. "He just stuck his head back through."

"Stupid," chided Jen. "He wants us to follow him. Let's go!" she said and dashed out the door.

She rushed downstairs. That left Drew a moment alone. He looked about, and nervously wondered where the shadow people had gone.

"Come on Drew!" called Jen from downstairs.

Drew ducked out and took the steps two at a time. In the lower foyer Jen spun about as she looked anxiously around.

"Where is he?" asked Jen.

"He's not here," said Drew.

"Well where did he go?" she asked.

Drew shrugged. "I dunno. Where do you suppose those shadow people went to?" he asked.

"Don't know, don't care right now Drew," replied Jen tersely. "I think Jasper wants to help us, show us something. I think he was trying to communicate with us. He'll be back," she added confidently.

Drew looked around, but Jasper wasn't anywhere. Miss Myrna's door opened and startled the two.

"What was all the racket now child?" she asked, her question directed at Jen.

"Ghosts for sure," said Jen. "We got some good audio and we think they're going to come back any minute."

Wanda looked skeptically at the two. "Well, you just keep it down now, I'm fixin' for a nap."

"We will," promised Jen as Wanda disappeared behind her closed door. "That was awesome," whispered Jen as she turned to Drew. Her breath clouded the air. "Whoa, it's getting cold again," she hissed excitedly. "What do you see?"

Drew shivered and looked around, and nearly jumped out of his skin. Across the foyer, in front of Mr. Schwartz's door stood Jasper. Or loomed rather, thought Drew. He looked less solid as he had been upstairs and to Drew it appeared as though he were a mere wisp of himself. He wavered as though a breeze were about to blow him away in a cloud of smoke.

"He's here, isn't he?" squealed Jen. "What's he doing?"

Jasper pointed to Mr. Schwartz's door and then the breeze made good on its threat as it left a mist that quickly dissipated.

"He pointed at Mr. Schwartz's door and then, then,"

"Then what?" urged Jen.

"He just disappeared," said Drew.

"We have to go in there," said Jen and took a step toward the door. The squeal of tires in the driveway stopped her. "Oh crud," she said. "Sounds like Mr. Schwartz just got home."

Drew breathed a sigh of relief. Despite his creepiness, Mr. Schwartz's arrival surely stopped Jen from doing something he knew they both would regret.

They heard the car shut off and its door opened and closed with a thud. Steps followed and the front door opened. In stepped Mr. Schwartz, black glasses perched on his nose and stared suspiciously at the two.

"What are you kids doing here?" he demanded. "Still looking for that stupid ghost? You shouldn't be hanging around."

"We were just leaving Miss Myrna's sir," said Jen sheepishly. "Come on Drew, let's go to my house," she said and hauled him through the open door and down the steps.

Mr. Schwartz leaned his wiry frame out the door and screamed, "Boo!" and slammed it with a cackle they heard from the sidewalk.

“Creepy with a capital C,” said Jen.

Back at Jen’s house they sat on the sofa and told Ron all about the incident and he listened to the EVP’s.

“Outstanding!” he exclaimed, over and over. “This is some great material. I just wish we could have caught some video of these shadow people you keep seeing. I’m really curious to know what they are and how they work.”

“Well, I’m really interested in getting a peak inside Mr. Schwartz’s apartment,” said Jen. “Jasper’s pointing us toward something and I just know it’s going to be huge!”

Jen’s enthusiasm didn’t infect Drew however. “I’m not going anywhere near that apartment,” he said. “And neither will you if you’re smart.”

Jen glared at him, an accusatory look that all but dared him to say one more thing.

He could be smart too, and kept his mouth shut.

Ron interjected, “Inside huh? I think I’ve got an idea.” He darted outside and a few minutes later returned carrying a box with some old books. “You guys wait here, I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

“Where are you going with a box of old books?” asked Jen.

“Going around the neighborhood collecting books for the high school library,” said Ron.

“The school isn’t having a book drive,” said Jen.

“Exactly,” winked Ron. “We’ll see what’s inside that apartment or my name’s not Ron Harden,” he declared. “If I’m not back in thirty minutes, well, call the police,” he said with a nervous chuckle before he hefted the box and left.

Drew and Jen waited, fidgety and watched the minutes tick by on the wall clock. After forty minutes Jen stood. “I can’t take it. Something’s gone wrong. Ron’s late. We have to go over there and get him.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Drew. “Walk up and say what have you done with Ron?”

Jen stomped her foot, but she paused. “Maybe,” she said. “I dunno, but I can’t just sit here and-,”

Just then the door opened and in stepped Ron.

"Oh lordy, thank goodness you're okay," gasped Jen as she nearly toppled her brother with a hug.

"Of course I'm okay," said Ron. "That's sweet sis. You were worried about me," he teased.

She punched him in the arm and he yelped. "That's for being late you big dope. Now what did you find out? Did he let you in even?" she asked. She brimmed with curiosity.

"Not much," shrugged Ron. "For one he's a terrible housekeeper. The place is an absolute mess. Empty animal cages that still haven't been cleaned made the place stink too. He makes his own lemonade with some funky brewing techniques. Looks like the lab at school, all beakers and tubes and stuff. It was actually kind of cool. It glows yellow. Tastes like sweaty socks though, ugh, I still have that taste in my mouth."

"Forget about the lemonade you big goof! What did you see? Why was Jasper pointing us in there?"

Ron went to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of water he guzzled. "Ah, that's better," he said and smacked his lips. "I don't know Jen," he said. "It's not like Jasper was there, telling me, 'hey, look at this' or 'hey, check that out'."

"Oh Ron!" complained Jen, "You got yourself inside and you didn't even make it count. Any chance you can get back in?"

"Ugh, who'd want to?" he said in disgust. "The place is plain dirty and he's a creep and a half."

Jen took a deep breath and then calmly said, "Okay Ron, just tell me step by step what happened. Can you do that?"

"Whatever, sure," he said.

She stared at him expectantly for a few seconds before he realized she wanted him to begin.

"Oh, okay, now. Well, I knocked and he had the chain on the door when he cracked it. Saw it was me and slammed it in my face."

"Wow," said Drew, "How'd you get him to open up?"

"I knocked again and called through the door. I told him I could pay him in chores if he donated books. That's when he cracked the door again and said, 'maybe there is something I need from you,' and opened up. Honestly, I don't know why but I

felt like running away when I saw him smiling on the other side of the doorway. Creepy with a capital K!”

“C, silly,” corrected Jen.

“Whatever,” said Ron. “Are you telling the story or am I?”

“Go on,” she urged.

“So he pulls me in and looks around the mudroom, like he’s expecting someone to be there. Nobody’s there of course so he shuts the door and just stares at me. So I’m staring back, and finally I shake the box and he says, ‘yes, of course, its books your after’ and I nod and he tells me to sit and he’d see what he could scrounge up. So I sit on a dirty couch in a dirty living room looking like it’s an abandoned pet store. He’s got a lot of books, piled here and there, mostly scientific type stuff by the looks of them, but I didn’t pay too close attention. I’m trying to hold my breath and breath through my shirt when he’s not looking. Caught me anyway and apologized for the smell and that his cleaning lady stopped coming a few weeks ago. Cackled like a fool, like he made a real funny joke. Weird guy I tell you. Any who, he grabs a couple of books and tosses them in my box and says they’ll do. They’re old science books from college and he kept asking me if I knew anything about science. Ratty old things too, all scribbled in and what-not. He said they weren’t any good to him any more. Had it all down pat. Then he starts ranting about how smart he was and all. Said the University couldn’t handle his intelligence. Nobody could. Then he cackled like a maniac and said they would though, they’d have to. Funny, but he really sounded crazy. Serious screw loose with that guy. So I thank him and move for the door when he stops me and says, ‘you said you’d do some chores for me for books,’ and I say sure, I can come by and mow the lawn some time and he says forget that, he wants me to taste his home made lemonade. I said I wasn’t thirsty, but he insists. Says he’s making it for the Summer Fair and wants my opinion. I really didn’t want to but he gave me a funny look, so finally I give in and say maybe just a taste.”

“I can’t believe you actually drank something that creep made,” scolded Jen. “It could have been rat poison.”

“Relax sis,” he smiled, “Its only lemonade. Not very good lemonade, but whatever. At that point I just wanted out.”

“So did you tell him it was bad?” she asked.

“Of course. I nearly gagged,” replied Ron. “He laughed at me, another one of his cackles and said he was working on sweetening it up. I told him he needed to work on using clean water and real lemons and maybe buy some sugar.”

“You said that?” asked Drew.

“Darn right I did. He asked and I told him,” stated Ron matter-of-factly. “Shouldn’t ask a person’s opinion if you don’t want the truth. Any way, he didn’t seem to mind. Just cackled again and said thanks and see you round, and pushed me out the door.”

“Well, that was a giant waste of time,” said Jen.

“Sorry sis,” said Ron defensively. “Next time do it yourself. I’m going to brush my teeth. Ugh, that taste!” and off Ron went upstairs.

“I don’t know what I expected, but that wasn’t it,” she said to Drew. “I shouldn’t be upset with Ron either, he did his best. I’m not sure I would have done any better.”

“He did better than I would have,” said Drew. “I never would have stepped foot in there.”

“Well I would have, and I’m going to figure a way in if it’s the last thing I do,” said Jen.

Chapter 10

The next day at school Jen met Drew at the gym doors with a smile. “Hi Drew,” she said.

He shrugged and mumbled, “Hello,” awkwardly.

She didn’t seem to notice his awkwardness. “How’d you sleep?”

“I slept okay I guess,” he lied. He hadn’t slept much at all. In fact, he tossed and turned all night and the odd thing was, he thought about Jen, not ghosts. But he couldn’t tell her that.

“Well, you look tired,” she observed in her usual perceptive way.

Drew shrugged and tried to pretend he wasn’t uncomfortable. They walked down the hall towards their lockers when another student headed the other way bumped into Drew. The bump crashed him into the lockers along the wall.

“Watch it freak!” said the boy. It was Stan.

Jen turned to face Stan – the very large Stan with sandy brown hair and pimples, and said, “You watch it yourself!”

The boy stopped, and sized up Jen. He looked to Drew and said, “I guess your girl fights all your battles.” He then

turned to Jen and said, "And what are you going to do about it squirt?"

Drew recovered and grabbed Jen's arm. "Don't worry about it Jen, its okay," he said. He didn't want to start anything, especially with such a larger older boy.

"It's not okay Drew," she said and turned her angry eyes on him. "He knocked into you on purpose and he called you a freak."

Drew turned red with embarrassment now as other students sensed a confrontation and started to gather around. "Jen, I'm okay. Let's just get to our lockers."

"Yeah," said the bully. "You better run along little girl, before you get hurt."

Jen turned her icy stare on the bully. "And just what are you going to do to me?" she challenged.

Stan seemed to grow larger as he stepped forward and loomed over Jen. "You wouldn't be the first girl I've pushed around," he menaced.

Jen looked up at him. She never flinched. It was almost comical, with the difference in height of at least a foot and he probably weighed twice what she did, but she calmly said, "I'll be the last, that's for sure."

Drew grabbed her firmly by the arm and pulled her away.

"That's right," taunted the bully. "You girls run along now. Go play with your dolls."

Jen shook loose from Drew's grasp and shoved the bully in the chest as hard as she could. He didn't budge.

Instead he laughed. "That's not how you do it," he sneered. "This is how it's done," and he shoved Jen back.

He pushed her so hard she stumbled and fell to the ground. Drew watched in shock as she landed hard and skidded. She crashed into the lockers along the wall and squealed in pain. He saw her face, her normally smart, sweet face, now all screwed up in pain, and something snapped inside of Drew. He felt his cheeks grow hot, but not from embarrassment. He was angry and he turned and looked at the bully who pointed and laughed at Jen on the ground.

Drew dropped his backpack, took two steps forward and punched the bully square in the nose. Stan stepped back and held his nose, shocked momentarily by the suddenness of his assault. He pulled his hand away and saw blood. Angry now, Stan bunched a fist up and swung at Drew.

In an instant the hall filled with shouts. Kids yelled, "Fight! Fight!" and others yelled, "Get him!"

It was mayhem, but to Drew he heard everything as if under water, muted and far away. All his focus was on Stan, who swung and missed as Drew ducked. Then Drew punched him again. And again. And again. Suddenly, the bully was down on the ground and Drew was on his chest. He pummeled away as the bully only tried to protect himself. Drew was yanked off of him, hard, and shoved against the lockers. He turned his attention to his new attacker and stopped abruptly. It was a teacher who pulled him off and had him pinned to the wall.

"That's enough!" shouted the teacher to Drew's struggles.

Suddenly, all his energy left him. Drew slumped. A cold feeling started to envelop him.

"Now what the heck do you think you're doing?" asked the teacher of Drew.

The bully sat up and sobbed. His nose bled freely and one of his eyes started to swell. Drew looked away and saw a crowd of faces painted amazed at what they just witnessed.

Jen stepped over and said to the teacher, "He started it." and pointed at Stan as he sobbed. "He pushed me down and Drew was only protecting me."

"Really?" said the incredulous teacher.

Another student stepped forward. "I saw the whole thing Mr. Peters. Stan pushed her down and he went after him. If you ask me, Stan got what he deserved."

"Well, be that as it may," said the teacher as he released Drew. "Fighting still isn't allowed. Go to the office now," he ordered Drew. "And you," he said to Stan. "You come with me to the nurse. Let's get that nose bleed stopped and an ice pack on that eye."

Drew nodded to the teacher and turned to go and stopped dead in his tracks. Watching from the edge of the crowd of

students stood a young girl in a black blouse, pink skirt and matching scarf. She smiled.

“Go on,” urged the teacher. “I’ll be stopping by the office so make sure you’re there.”

Jen took one look at Drew’s face and realized something was amiss. “What is it Drew?” she whispered, clinging to his arm.

The smiling girl turned and disappeared. She simply faded away.

Drew’s breath was foggy like he stood in the freezing cold and he shivered. “N-nothing. L-Let’s go,” he said.

As he sat on a bench outside the Principal’s Office, Drew realized his right hand had blood on it. The shivering had stopped once the girl disappeared, but now it came back, but not because he was cold. He felt like his energy had been sapped, drained completely and he felt weak and woozy.

“You don’t look so good,” said Principal Raines, a short, muscular man with a balding pate and square jaw. He was the school’s football coach too and if it weren’t for the shirt and tie Drew could picture him screaming at his team, exhorting them to victory. He stood in front of Drew and Jen and sized them up like he read an opposing team’s defense. “You want to see the nurse?”

Drew shook his head, but couldn’t find any words.

“Okay, then inside,” he ordered and opened the door to his office.

Jen and Drew went inside and took the two chairs that faced the Principal’s desk. Principal Raines closed the door behind them and took his seat, an old, leather office chair that creaked as he sat.

“So, who wants to tell me what happened?” asked Principal Raines.

Jen started. “Stan knocked into Drew on purpose and then called him a freak. I stood up for Drew, but Drew didn’t want to cause a scene. In fact, he tried to get me to leave, but then Stan shoved me and,” Jen turned her gaze to Drew for a second.

Drew saw her face light up for some reason, like she just won a prize or something. Girls, he'd never understand them.

"And Drew shoved him back and before you knew it they were fighting," she said. She still eyed Drew with that weird look. Then she turned back to Principal Raines and said, "So its all my fault sir. If I had listened to Drew and left, none of this would have happened. Punish me."

Drew's mouth fell open. "I, uh," he stammered.

Principal Raines gazed intently at Jen for a moment and then turned his coal-black, penetrating eyes on Drew and asked, "Is that true?"

Drew's mouth was dry. What was Jen thinking, trying to take the blame? But it was sort of the truth, he supposed. "It all happened so fast," he said. He didn't want to get Jen in trouble. "It may have," he added lamely.

"Well," said Principal Raines as he leaned back in his chair, fingers a steeple in front of him. "This certainly is a first for you Jen. I know this is your first year in high school, but you've already earned a sterling reputation with your teachers as being one of the brightest young girls to come through here in some time. I'd hate to think you've got a mean streak in you." He paused as Jen looked at her toes and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Then to Drew he said, "You Drew, on the other hand, have in the short time here managed quite the reputation for skipping school and all your teachers seem to agree that your heart just isn't in it. Oh, they like you well enough, but they almost all agree that you simply aren't trying and if things don't change, you'll end up being left behind. Is that what you want Drew? To repeat the eighth grade?"

Now it was Drew's turn to closely examine his shoes as he squirmed in his seat. "No," he mumbled.

"No sir," corrected Principal Raines.

"No sir," said Drew respectfully.

"That's better. Now," he said and paused, taking a deep breath. "The question is, what to do with you two." He drummed his fingers on the desk as he thought.

"I'm sorry sir," said Jen, "But really the only person you should discipline is me. I'm the reason it all happened. Drew

was only trying to protect me, but it won't happen again, I promise."

"That's very valiant of you Jen, falling on your sword like that, but I'm afraid it just isn't enough," said Principal Raines. "Fighting is fighting, and it isn't allowed, under any circumstances," he said and he leaned forward and emphasized his last words for Drew. "So, I must find a suitable punishment for Drew."

"But sir," started Jen.

Principal Raines held up his hand and silenced Jen. "You'll be punished too Jen, never fear. I'm afraid your academic record will only get you so far with me."

Jen slumped.

"Hmm," thought Principal Raines. "I think I have a solution."

Drew and Jen looked into those steely black eyes and waited.

"Drew, you will have detention for a week," he announced.

Drew shrugged. Detention wasn't that bad. He had been afraid of being suspended. His grandmother would have killed him if he got suspended. What was he thinking? She was probably going to kill him anyway for fighting.

"Not that bad?" said Principal Raines, as he raised an eyebrow as if he were surprised. Yet his tone said he wasn't surprised. Not at all. "That's why I'm giving Jen a week's worth of detention as well."

Drew looked from Principal Raines to Jen. Principal Raines studied Jen's dejected reaction. Drew thought she probably never had a detention in her life.

"I've never had detention before," she said meekly.

"Well, that's just the beginning of your punishment," he said and was rewarded by Jen's sudden look of horror.

"There's more?" she croaked.

"Yes," said Principal Raines decisively. "For you both. You see, I think I can solve two problems at once; the proverbial two birds with one stone. Drew, we need to get your grades up, and that starts with you paying attention and participating in

classwork. You are close to flunking the eighth grade. Jen, you need to learn that instigating, no matter what your reason, isn't appropriate. So since Drew seems to want to protect you, and you seem to want to help Drew, here's the deal. You will help Drew with his classwork and homework during detention for a week. At the end of the week if his teachers don't report progress, real progress, then you both will be rewarded with another week of detention. Same goal as the first week. And I promise you, I will give you both detention for the rest of the school year if I have to in order to see Drew get through the eighth grade."

Drew sat in stunned silence. Jen on the other hand contemplated her punishment with a look he began to recognize. It was the look she got whenever she tried to solve a problem.

"I'm sorry," said Drew to Jen. "I didn't mean for you to get detention for the rest of the year."

"Shut up Drew," she said dismissively. "It's only for a week. You won't be failing your classes anymore. Not if I have anything to say about it."

Principal Raines smiled at Jen. "Now that's the attitude I was hoping for young lady. Drew, you need to pay attention to Jen, and make an honest effort. Otherwise, you'll be spending a lot of after school time in detention with a very upset, and very motivated Jen who, I think, won't be too easy on you if you decide to slack."

"Yes sir," said Drew, completely demoralized.

"That's it. You both may go to your first period classes," he said in dismissal.

Chapter 11

Detention wasn't so bad after all, thought Drew as he and Jen sat together at the back of the classroom and studied his history lesson. It was Friday, the last day of their group detention and he had to admit, Jen's tutoring helped. His teachers were pleased with his work and he really liked how Jen was always able to turn the lesson into something he could relate to.

His grandmother wasn't so pleased though when she heard he fought. He remembered her reaction. It was odd. Jen had insisted she come home with him that Monday afternoon, to apologize to his grandmother. Drew was all for having Jen there when he broke the news. He thought it would soften whatever blow was sure to come.

But the news had reached his grandmother before he did and she met them at the door. "Principal Raines called me today," she said, clearly upset with him.

Drew looked at his shoes, embarrassed and momentarily lost for words. He glanced to Jen then faced his grandmother and sheepishly asked, "What did he say?"

Drew's grandmother smiled at Jen and said to him, "You know exactly what he said. Don't think because she's here I'll go easy on you young man." And to Jen she said, "Hi honey. Why don't you have a seat in the family room while Drew and I discuss his behavior."

"Well that's kind of why I'm here too," piped Jen. "I wanted to explain and apologize."

"Dear, that's nice but you aren't the one starting fights at school, Drew is. So he's the one I've got an earful for." She turned to Drew and said, "I've always taught you the bigger man is the one who walks away. Now tell me-," but Jen interrupted her.

"I'm sorry Ma'am," she stammered then took a deep, calming breath, gathered her resolve and continued. "But that's exactly what happened. A bully in the eleventh grade pushed him but he just wanted to leave it be. So I pushed the bully and he knocked me down. That's when Drew...that's when he beat up the boy. I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I started the fight. Drew was only sticking up for me."

Drew's grandmother turned her questioning glare on Jen who watched her one foot as it scuffed the floor, hands behind her back. Drew's grandmother turned to Drew and said, "Principal Raines left me a voicemail saying you got in a fight and were given a week of detention for your involvement. He didn't say anything about Jen." She looked them both up and down for a minute and then said, "Perhaps the three of us need to sit down."

She ushered them onto the couch and sat in her favorite chair opposite. "Now what am I going to do with the two of you?"

Drew shrugged. He sank into the soft sofa and secretly wished he could sink beneath the cushions and disappear.

Jen explained Principal Raines' punishment.

Drew's grandmother arched an eyebrow and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I suppose that's a good start. Well I'm happy to hear you at least tried to walk away Drew. It really does take a bigger man to walk away." She sighed and smiled and said, "But it takes a special guy to stand up for someone else,

especially when a girl is being pushed around by a boy.” To Jen she said, “I admire your moxie honey, but you really should pick your battles more wisely. I’m just glad you’re not my problem. I don’t envy your father.” She turned back to Drew and said, “Sometimes dear in life you have to fight. I think this might have been one of those times. I won’t condone it, but I think all things considered I’m going to let the Principal’s punishment suffice. IF! If that is, you really hit the books with Jen and get your schoolwork back on track. If not, well, no amount of fighting will save you from me.”

“Drew!” barked Jen testily, “Why are you sitting there with a silly grin on your face?”

Drew wiped the smile from his face. “Sorry Jen, I was just thinking of my grandmother going easy on us last week. She really likes you, you know.”

Jen’s cheeks reddened and she stared at the book for a few seconds before she said, “Of course she does.”

“She’s happy we’re studying together. She thinks you’re a good influence,” he added.

Jen stammered, “I’m glad we are too.”

“Me too,” he said. He thought how nice Jen had been over getting detention *and* having to tutor him.

Then she added testily, “Now pay attention and answer me. Who was the twelfth President of the United States?”

Drew reconsidered his last thought as he wracked his brain. “Does anyone really care?” he bemoaned.

“You should, I do, and you can bet Mr. Tanner will when he grades your history homework on Monday.

Drew guessed. “Zachary Taylor?”

“Yes! See, you really aren’t as dumb as your grades suggest. I think there’s hope for you yet.”

“Yeah, but this is the last day of detention, so you’re off the hook helping me,” stated Drew. “Then I’ll be right back where I was before, failing.”

“Maybe you are as dumb as your grades suggest,” sniped Jen. “All you have to do is keep studying. You can’t learn

anything unless you open a book or pay attention in class. Or go to class!"

"Yeah, but, but," Drew struggled for the right words. He didn't want to get all mushy. "Its just, this stuff is boring without you. I like spending time together."

Jen turned away and for a moment he thought he upset her.

"I'm sorry Jen," he said. "I don't want to upset you."

She turned back around, eyes wide and he thought maybe a little watery. Was he making her cry? A smile played on her lips and when it broke into a full smile he breathed a sigh of relief.

"I like studying with you too Drew," she croaked. "You know, I can still help you next week. And after too. We don't need detention to...spend time together. We could study at my house. Or yours."

"You like this?" said Drew incredulous.

"Yes!" she said getting offended. "But if you don't want to," she said quietly and turned away.

"No," said Drew.

Jen looked back, disappointment painted her face painfully. "You don't?" she whispered.

"No! I mean, yes." Now it was Drew's turn at awkwardness. "What I mean is yes, I want to keep studying with you. Yes. If you like. We can study at your house. It'll be easier for you."

Jen breathed a sigh of relief. She smiled and said, "I'm not sure it'll ever get easy with you Drew."

The bell rang. It signaled the end of detention. As they collected their things Jen said, "Hey, you want to come with me to the vet's? Doctor Wilde told me to check back today. I sure hope the mouse is okay."

"Sure," said Drew, not really interested, but he didn't want to say no to Jen. Or to say no to spending time with her.

They arrived at Dr. Wilde's veterinary clinic and asked the receptionist if he was available to see them. The receptionist, a plump woman with drab brown hair and tired

eyes told them to have a seat and he would be with them in a few minutes. The waiting room was occupied by two copper-colored Doberman puppies and their owner, a tall, lanky man with a long nose and short cropped, copper hair.

Jen snickered as they sat down.

“What?” asked Drew, confused as to what she found funny.

She leaned over and whispered for his ears only, “Isn’t it funny how dogs always seem to look like their owners? Or maybe it’s the other way around?” She snickered again.

Drew looked over the man and his puppies once again. “I guess they do kind of look alike,” he whispered, “but its probably just coincidence.”

Just then a short, fat, pale-looking man with three chins waddled out from the back offices. He led a white bulldog by its leash. The bulldog had one of those protective cones around its neck to keep it from biting itself.

“See,” sniggered Jen, “I told you.”

Drew couldn’t help chuckling. There was a remarkable likeness between dog and owner. “You’re crazy,” was all he could say.

As the bulldog and his owner checked out with the receptionist another man exited the back hallway. He wore a long white lab coat. He said something to the receptionist then shook the man’s hand and he walked over to Jen and Drew.

“Hello Jen,” said Dr. Wilde. “I’m glad you came, but I’m not sure I have good news for you.”

Jen and Drew stood. Jen introduced him. “This is my, uh, my friend Drew,” she stammered. “He was with me when we found the mouse.”

“Hello Drew,” said Dr. Wilde with a warm smile. He extended his hand and shook Drew’s vigorously. “I think you both need to come with me,” he said and led the way into the back. They passed through the door and into a long white hallway with a white tiled floor. “I’ve been running tests on your little friend,” commented Dr. Wilde as they walked. “It appears to be normal in some ways, yet very peculiar in others.”

“That’s why I brought him in,” agreed Jen.

They went through another door at the end of the hallway and found themselves in a large room full of cages, different sizes and shapes. Some stacked atop others and some by themselves. Almost all of them were full of animals, from cats and dogs to squirrels and birds and the chirping and barking and scratching and whining you would expect in a crowded room full of animals. Drew liked animals and his gaze naturally went from cage to cage. He wondered what might be wrong with each. Most looked perfectly happy, though a few were wrapped with bandaged limbs or tails, one bird sported a wrapped wing. Dr. Wilde's voice brought him back to the task at hand.

"Here is your little white mouse Jen," said Dr. Wilde, standing in front of a small cage on a table in the corner. The mouse stood there and stared at a piece of cheese. There were mouse droppings that looked fresh, right behind the mouse. "You see, it looks perfectly healthy," he began, "but that is only because I feed it every day."

"It eats for you?" asked an incredulous Jen.

"Just like your brother told me, only if I hold the cheese up to its mouth," he stated. "So I do. I have a soft spot for mice. Especially lab mice. They have a tough life. So I feed it by hand and hold the water up to its mouth several times a day. If I hadn't it would probably have died by now."

"I knew it was weird," said Jen proudly. "So what's wrong with it?"

"Well," said Dr. Wilde thoughtfully, "I'm not really sure. As I said, it appears healthy, yet when I ran some basic tests, things came back all screwy. I only ran the basics, but it looks like its nervous system is being attacked by something, perhaps viral, perhaps not. The long and the short of it is, I don't think it will get better unless I figure out what's wrong. I kind of believe it has ingested some sort of toxin, but unless I know what, I have very little hope of finding the cure."

"How long will that take," asked Jen, concerned.

Dr. Wilde's smile slipped and he folded his hands in front of him. "Its not a question of time so much as it is money," he said in a somber voice. "I've run the tests I can here, but any further testing I would have to send out to the state lab."

“So why don’t you send it?” asked Jen.

Dr. Wilde coughed, clearly embarrassed. “I’m afraid the testing is quite expensive Jen. Most people don’t like to spend the money on their precious dogs and cats. Some do, but most just decide to let their animals go to heaven. Despite my affinity for mice, I can’t justify spending the money on a mouse you found in someone else’s house, and I’m sure you don’t have the money to spend even if you had the inclination.”

“Oh,” said Jen, downcast. “I guess. Maybe I could try and find what it ate?”

After a pause Dr. Wilde put his hand on Jen’s shoulder and said, “That could help Jen, but don’t beat yourself up if you don’t. Listen, I’m going to keep feeding him and monitoring him and if anything changes I’ll let you know, okay?”

“I guess so,” said Jen.

Dr. Wilde gazed at her for a long moment, patted her shoulder and said, “Good then. Well, I’ve got some Dobermans I need to give shots so you two run along now. You can call me as often as you like and feel free to come visit if you get the urge.” With a final pat on the back he ushered Jen and Drew out.

In the lobby sat an old woman, her hair done up in a tight gray bun on the back of her head. She was dressed primly in a neat pale blue dress with a little lace on the bodice and sleeves. Drew thought she could have stepped out of the black and white era of television. She held a small travel tote on her lap and Drew could see a black cat through the holes.

Jen stopped and smiled, “Hello Mrs. Kelly. How are you?”

Mrs. Kelly smiled wanly. “I’m okay dear,” she said. “I wish I could say the same about Midnight though. He doesn’t seem to be himself. He’s lost his appetite and he’s been acting funny.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine Mrs. Kelly,” said Jen. “He’s a tough old tomcat and Dr. Wilde is the best there is.”

Mrs. Kelly smiled warmly at Jen and looked pointedly at Drew.

“Oh, this is my friend Drew,” introduced Jen.

“Very nice to meet such a handsome young man,” said Mrs. Kelly who winked at Jen and extended her hand to Drew.

Drew shook her hand, but could feel his face heat. Handsome?

Jen blushed as well, but recovered quickly. "Well, we should go. It was nice to see you Mrs. Kelly. Let me know how Midnight turns out and if you need anything I'm just next door."

"I will dear, thanks."

They left in awkward silence. The normally talkative Jen was silent. Drew wasn't sure what to say. It was just a mouse, wasn't it? Not even her pet mouse, so why should Jen be upset, right?

Perhaps she read his thoughts. She said, "I know, it's just a mouse, but I don't like animals to suffer. Plus, I can't shake the feeling that I need that mouse to survive. I don't know. You must think I'm being a silly girl, huh?"

Drew shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I don't want anything bad to happen to it either, but it is just a stray mouse you found, right?"

"Maybe so," she said.

Just then an Athens patrol car pulled alongside the two and flashed its lights. The two stopped as the side window rolled down. An older man leaned over from the driver's side. He had white hair and plump, clean-shaven face. "Hello Drew," he said with a smile.

"Hello Officer Mallory," replied Drew with a nervous smile. "I didn't cut class today," he added defensively.

"I know Drew," said Officer Mallory. "You haven't cut class in three weeks, a personal best," he chided.

Drew had the decency to look embarrassed.

"Where are you kids headed? Need a lift?" he asked.

Jen said, "My house and that would be awesome!"

Drew was surprised at Jen's excitement. Drew's only experience in a patrol car was in the back seat being brought to school after being caught cutting class.

Once again she read his thoughts and said, "What? Some of us might enjoy riding in a police car."

Officer Mallory said, "Hop in kids," and punched the unlock button.

Drew shrugged, unable to come up with an excuse to walk. Jen opened the front passenger door and climbed in. That left Drew to sit in the back.

As Officer Mallory pulled away he said, "I'm glad to see you haven't shown up on my list lately Drew. I hope you've finally decided that school is important."

"I guess so," mumbled Drew.

"He has," chimed Jen proudly. "And I'm tutoring him too so he'll pass the eighth grade as well."

"All good news," said Officer Mallory. Then to Jen he asked, "So where do you live young lady?"

"Wallace Street sir," she replied. "Across from the graveyard. Can we ride with the sirens on?" she asked hopefully.

Officer Mallory chuckled good-naturedly. "No sweetheart, that wouldn't be proper."

Jen looked dejected.

"But you can listen to the radio," he said and he flicked a switch and turned up the volume.

Static crackled over the speakers followed by several beeps and a female voice. "Dispatch to all units, we have a 10-56 at Siegfried Hall, Coss Street. Anyone nearby?"

Officer Mallory picked up his radio and pressed the talk button. "This is unit 51, Roger that dispatch. I'm nearby, over."

"Unit 51, proceed with caution, possible 10-96," replied the dispatch. "You want back-up?"

"10-4 dispatch. I'll check it out. Request backup," he said and put his radio down. To the kids he said, "Just in case."

Jen asked, "What's a 10-56?"

Officer Mallory smiled and said, "Well, you get to ride with the sirens little lady," and he hit a switch. Lights flashed and sirens blared, though Officer Mallory didn't speed up. "A 10-56 is a possible drunken pedestrian. Don't get too many of those around here," he said. "Leastways not during the afternoon."

"So what's a 10-96 then?" asked Jen, curious as ever.

"A girl with a good memory and inquisitive to boot," smiled Officer Mallory. Jen blushed, but looked expectantly at Officer Mallory. "Got a little lady detective on my hands, I see. A

10-96 is a possible Mental patient. Haven't had one of those since the asylum closed years ago."

"Oh, so that's why you asked for backup," stated Jen.

"Clever girl," said Officer Mallory. "We're almost there so you kids stay in the car, got it?" he said sternly.

"Yes sir," they both replied.

As they rounded the corner onto Coss Street they saw a crowd of people that milled about on the lawn outside Siegfried Hall, an Ohio University building. Officer Mallory pulled up and put his vehicle in park. "No getting out, understood?" he warned again.

They both nodded nervously. Drew knew it wasn't everyday you got to ride along on a police call, especially one as mysterious as a drunken mental case. Jen was barely contained excitement. She rolled her window down, but Drew had no such ability in the back seat.

Officer Mallory got out and sauntered the thirty feet over to the crowd of around twenty people, mostly students and two adults who might be faculty members. They parted to let him through and one of the adults approached him. Drew and Jen heard everything.

"What seems to be the problem?" asked Officer Mallory.

"Thank goodness you're here Officer," said a man who appeared in his forties, black hair, black slacks and a white polo shirt. "Something's wrong with Kathryn," he pointed to a young woman who stood a few paces away. "She's not responding to anything. I think she's had a stroke or something."

Officer Mallory looked at the young lady from where he stood. Drew thought she was pretty, slim and well dressed, but she stared off into space, her arms dangled limply by her side.

Officer Mallory walked up to her and said, "Miss Kathryn? Miss Kathryn, I'm Officer Mallory with the Athens Police Department. Are you okay?"

She stood there, mouth slightly open, eyes unblinking. Officer Mallory put his hand gently on her shoulder but she didn't even flinch. "Miss Kathryn, if you're okay, please answer me."

She stood there silent as a pole.

“See,” said the man. “I think it’s a stroke,” he added almost hopefully.

Officer Mallory turned to the man and said, “How long has she been like this?”

The man thought for a second and said, “I got here ten minutes ago and the students said she was out her for about a half-hour.”

“Well, if she’s having a stroke she’s the first girl to just stand there like a post,” explained Officer Mallory who grabbed his shoulder radio and pushed the talk button. “Unit 51 to dispatch.”

“Dispatch,” squawked his radio. “Go ahead Unit 51.”

“I’m at Siegfred Hall. Requesting ambulance for possible 10-96. Subject appears catatonic. No visible trauma. Over.”

“Roger Unit 51, bus en route. Back up en route.”

“Over and out,” said Officer Mallory and turned his attention to the crowd as a second police cruiser pulled up and two men exited. Officer Mallory conferred with the two officers quietly and they immediately interviewed the gathered crowd as they took statements and wrote notes.

An ambulance arrived a few minutes later and the EMT’s examined the young woman. One of the paramedics said to Officer Mallory, “I think we got another zombie on our hands,” and chuckled as though he made a joke.

Officer Mallory stared him into silence and then walked over to his car. He opened the back door for Drew and Jen let herself out the front. “You two are going to have to walk from here I’m afraid,” said Officer Mallory. “This is going to take a while.”

“No problem Officer,” said Jen with a smile. “So its another of them Zombie Students, huh?” she inquired.

Officer Mallory frowned at her. “That’s a media word little miss, and we don’t much care for it,” he cautioned. “She’s obviously not herself and the why is no joke. If, and that’s a big if, but if she is suffering the same fate as that young man the other day, well, for her sake I hope we figure it out. They don’t think that boy is going to survive and the doctors don’t have a clue what’s wrong. Not something to take lightly, understood?”

Jen looked down and kicked her right foot idly. "I'm sorry Officer Mallory. I didn't mean nothing by it."

"I know sweetheart. Just remember, these people are someone's child, brother, sister, cousin, friend. They don't need to be turned into zombies for our entertainment."

"Yes sir," said Jen.

"Well, you kids run along, okay," ordered Officer Mallory.

Drew was all too ready to comply, but Jen wanted to stay and watch. They settled on a rock wall across the street and watched.

"I wonder what's the reason," said Drew. "Don't seem normal."

"Nothing's normal about it," said Jen as she stared hard at the girl as the paramedics tried to treat her. "That boy and now this girl. Something's fishy," she added.

Drew agreed, but didn't know what to say. As they sat and watched her get poked and prodded by the EMT's and then loaded into the ambulance, Jen spied an Ohio Maintenance van parked on the street just beyond the gathered crowd.

"Is that Mr. Schwartz?" she pointed.

Drew looked and squinted. It was kind of far but he thought it might be. He didn't have time to get a closer look as the van pulled a U-turn and headed the other direction.

"I couldn't tell," said Drew.

"Well if it was, he sure is creepy, sitting around watching these poor students," commented Jen.

Drew shrugged. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

Jen gave him a cross look and said, "Come on. They're done here. Let's head to my house. We've got homework."

Drew grunted once, but followed. Homework with Jen wasn't all that bad.

Chapter 12

They reached Jen's house at the same time her father and brother arrived.

"Hey kids," said Mr. Harden. "How was your last day of detention?" He then looked at his watch and added, "Late though? Stop off to celebrate?"

Ron chuckled, but said nothing. Drew thought there was something more to it as Ron pointedly avoided Jen's glare, but for the life of him he had no idea what it all meant.

"No, we were on the scene of the latest Ohio University Zombie student," explained Jen. "Though we shouldn't call them zombies," she added with a sheepish glance at Drew.

Mr. Harden asked, "Where was this and why were you there?"

Drew thought they might be in trouble but Jen answered, "Officer Mallory picked us up on our walk back from the vet's and was giving us a ride here when the call came in. We got to ride with the sirens on too. So cool!"

"Well, leave the police work to the police, I say," said Mr. Harden. "And the ghost work to the ghost hunters, right Ron?" he finished, and elbowed his son playfully.

Ron smiled, but didn't say anything.

"So Ron," went on Mr. Harden, "Have you finished?"

Ron gave his father a confused look. "Finished what?" he asked.

"The Myrna case review?" he added.

"Oh, yeah, I think so," stammered Ron.

"You think so?" asked his father. "You said you'd be done by today."

"Yeah, I guess I am then," said Ron, though he didn't sound convincing.

"Well, what do you say the four of us go down and check out your findings?" said Mr. Harden as he led the way.

Jen and Drew followed Mr. Harden but Ron just stood where he was. Jen stopped at the basement door and called back to him. "Ron! What are you waiting for you doofus! Let's go!"

"Oh, yeah, right," said Ron as he shuffled off after them.

"Jeesh, snap out of it already," sniped Jen playfully. To Drew she whispered, "Probably daydreaming about all the girls he's going to dance with at the prom next month."

"You know it!" Ron added playfully.

Downstairs Mr. Harden said, "Okay Ron, show us what you found."

Ron sat in front of a keyboard with three monitors on the desk in front of them. He clicked a few buttons and the monitors lit up.

"So we'll start with the video," began Ron in what Drew considered must be his most business-like tone, probably learned from his father. "Not much happened on video through the night. But we did catch several EVP's on the DVR's audio track. We'll start with the footsteps in the upstairs front room. As you can see in the video there is no one there, but clearly you can hear..."

Ron pushed a button and everyone leaned forward as the silence was suddenly broken by the distinct clomp of booted feet walk across a hard wood floor. After six steps silence resumed.

Drew said, "Whoa, that is so cool. Was that when we were downstairs Mr. Harden?"

“Yes,” answered Ron. “That was the clearest audio, though we caught it on Dad’s hand-held and the upstairs video in the back room, but those were faint. And obviously you can see on the video that the room in question is carpeted so... paranormal all the way.”

“What else have you got?” asked Ron’s father.

“Well, I got an anomaly on the FLIR,” he said. “I’m not really sure what it is though.”

“Did you notice it while it was happening?” he asked.

“No, I only picked up on it while reviewing,” stated Ron. “We were out in the mudroom and we saw Mr. Schwartz and well, here, let me show you and you can tell me what you think.”

Ron pushed a button and the FLIR video with its whites and reds and yellows flashed up on the monitor. Ron pointed to a deep red blob on the monitor and said, “See, here is where we first see Mr. Schwartz bending over and our surprise is clear on the audio, but look what happens next. Mr. Schwartz stands up and we all stopped watching the FLIR because he turned his flashlight on us, but I kept it pointed at him and well, look,” said Ron and pushed a button.

The audio began with Jen screaming ‘It’s Jasper!’ and then the red blob stood up, looking just like a man. They could hear Mr. Schwartz snarl at them, ‘What are you doing? I told you to stay away from me!’ before the red blob that was Mr. Schwartz on the FLIR spun and the blue of the door opened behind him. Mr. Schwartz’s red figure stepped through the door, yet something strange happened as Mr. Schwartz moved behind the door. Two heat signatures appeared, both about half the height of Mr. Schwartz. They stood inside the apartment, perhaps ten feet from the door.

Drew and Jen gasped, and Mr. Harden said, “Oh my.”

Ron said, “We didn’t see anything when it happened, but there are definitely two heat signatures coming from inside the apartment, and, well...”

Ron trailed off but Mr. Harden spoke up. “I don’t know for sure what you caught Ron but its definitely as warm or warmer than Mr. Schwartz’s body. Back it up and freeze the frame,” he ordered.

They all leaned in to get a closer look at the two heat signatures.

“They look like children, by their size,” said Jen.

“Yeah,” agreed Ron.

“Were the lights on inside the apartment?” asked Mr. Harden. “It didn’t get super bright when the door opened, but there does appear to be some ambient light from off-screen right. Maybe a hall light?”

“I don’t recall it being too bright either,” said Ron.

“I remember seeing a couch and cluttered looking coffee table,” said Jen. “And I remember seeing a table in the back with lots of bottles on it, but I don’t remember seeing any kids.”

“Soul suckers,” whispered Drew and immediately regretted it.

Mr. Harden turned on Drew, “Is that what you call them?”

Drew didn’t respond. He didn’t even look at Mr. Harden. Jen saved him. “That’s what we decided we’d call shadow people Dad. Remember how I was just asking about them and here we catch some evidence. Weird, huh?”

“Yeah, weird,” agreed Mr. Harden. “Some coincidence.”

But his tone said nothing was further from the truth. Thankfully he didn’t pursue the topic.

“So what do you think it is Dad?” asked Ron.

“Hmm,” said Mr. Harden, and he scratched his head rubbed his chin. “I don’t really know. Sometimes heat signatures can reflect, and you get funny readings. It doesn’t appear like that here, but...Maybe I’ll go over it a few times and find something but I’ll probably send it out to OHGH and let them have at it.”

“What’s OHGH?” asked Drew.

“Ohio Ghost Hunters,” said Mr. Harden. “They have some pretty sophisticated equipment and a lot more experience debunking than I do. I’ll let them take a look and tell me what they think it might be.”

“Oh,” said Drew.

“But,” added Mr. Harden, “I believe what we have here is really compelling evidence of the paranormal. Good catch guys. What else have you got Ron?”

"Well that's all the video we caught. The rest is EVP stuff. I tossed out a few bumps and things that I couldn't say for sure were paranormal but I did catch the sound of a door slamming in the upstairs back room. It sounded just like the upstairs apartment door closing, but the video clearly shows the door remains closed."

Ron pushed another button and the video popped up of the door that never opened or closed yet the sound of it slamming was quite clear.

"Wow," said Drew and Jen together.

Mr. Harden agreed, "Very nice."

"And lastly we have the EVP talking," explained Ron as he pushed another button. "This one was right next to us and it came through clearest on the hand held recorder so no video."

The video screen lit up light a heart-rate monitor graph, a line jumped up and down with noise instead of the beat of a heart.

"I know we kind of argued a bit about whether the voice said mice or nice," said Ron, "And I honestly thought you had mice on the brain because we just found that mouse."

"What mouse?" asked Mr. Harden. "You never told me about a mouse."

"Uh, yeah," said Jen sheepishly. "I took it home and then brought it to the vet because it was acting funny."

"Oh," was all her father said.

"You're not mad?" she asked, surprised.

"I'm used to you bringing home wild animals honey. Remember the bird with the broken wing? The squirrel? If I had a nickel for every stray that came through your hands I'd be a rich man."

"Any way," interjected Ron. "I cleaned it up as best I could and I have to agree, the voice says 'mice', not 'nice'. Hear, take a listen."

There was a garbled voice and then it cleared and everyone could plainly hear it say, '...the kids are mice', then some more garbled words before it cleared again and they heard, 'get the witch out'.

“Wow,” said Mr. Harden. “This is great evidence, though I’m not sure if it means intelligent haunt or residual.”

“What’s the difference?” asked Drew.

“Well, an intelligent haunt is one where the spirit or entity knows it is dead and also knows we are here and is trying to make contact in some way. Sometimes it has a message, sometimes it can be out for a little fun at our expense, a sort of ghost prankster.”

“Oh,” said Drew.

“And the residual haunts are those that act out the same scenario, over and over, sometimes at a specific time and place. Sort of like watching a scene from a movie on repeat. It just keeps happening, but it doesn’t know what’s happening and doesn’t know we can see.”

Drew understood now some of the experiences he had lately.

Jen asked, “So the voice said get the witch out, right?”

Everyone nodded.

“Why would an intelligent haunting say to get the witch out?” she asked. “There’s no such thing as witches.”

“Don’t be so sure honey,” cautioned Mr. Harden. “If you believe this is the ghost of Jasper Wyatt talking. Witches were something still feared even as late as the middle nineteen hundreds, even though they had no more magic than you or I. But for Jasper, a witch might be the only way to describe something he sees.”

“Oh,” said Jen.

“The real question is, is it intelligent or residual?” asked Mr. Harden.

“I think it’s intelligent,” said Jen assuredly.

“Well, possibly,” said Mr. Harden, “But there’s no way to be sure. It might not even be Jasper we are hearing. There was no direct contact made confirming it was Jasper so without that we cannot be sure.”

“So what’s it all mean?” asked Drew. He was certain himself that the haunting was intelligent, but he couldn’t say so without revealing his secret to Mr. Harden. “Let’s say it is intelligent. What are we supposed to do?”

“Well,” said Mr. Harden. “What can we do? Go witch hunting? That won’t go over too well, going into Wanda’s own house and accusing her of being a witch.”

“So we do nothing?” asked Jen downcast.

“Not nothing,” replied Mr. Harden. “We bring our evidence to Wanda and let her know that we don’t believe Jasper means any harm. If it’s Jasper at all, that is. If she wants to, she can set up her own recorders and try to capture more evidence. Perhaps she’ll be able to learn more about who and what and why they are experiencing what they are experiencing.”

“So that’s all?” asked Drew. “There’s nothing we can do to help?”

Mr. Harden studied Drew for a moment. “Well Drew, these things are often very ambiguous by nature. It is difficult to determine exactly what is happening when the science behind it is more conjecture than fact. Unfortunately, these investigations usually end the same way, with nothing definitive provided, and often more questions than answers. As an investigator you hope to capture evidence of the paranormal and in this case we captured some excellent evidence. Better than I’ve seen in a long time. In that way it was a success. But trying to interpret the evidence can lead to a slippery slope of ‘what ifs’ and ‘how comes’ and those can drive a person crazy. We have to remain objective and hope that through the process we provide those clients with some piece of mind about what is happening.”

“Oh,” said Drew and Jen together.

“Not what you were hoping for, I see,” said Mr. Harden kindly. “Well, we are always available for follow up investigations if things get worse, but usually these things have a way of resolving themselves. Mostly it is us learning to live with ghosts in harmony.”

“So if it gets worse we can go back?” asked Drew.

“I promise we will,” said Mr. Harden. “But let’s not think like that. Like I said, these things have a way of working themselves out. You’ll see.”

Drew hoped he wouldn’t see. What he’d seen so far scared him the most. If things get worse...

Chapter 13

Mr. Harden delivered the evidence to Wanda alone. The next week for Drew was uneventful. He and Jen continued to study together and his schoolwork improved. His teachers were happy and his Grandmother was happy and, well, he had to admit, he was happy.

It was Friday during gym class and they played softball outside. Jen watched from the dugout while Coach Cotter pitched to Drew. Drew hadn't played ball in over a year, but he realized how much he loved the game. He waited for his pitch and put a good swing on the ball. The satisfying pop of the bat hitting the ball thrilled Drew as he watched his line drive split the gap in left-centerfield and he sprinted to first.

Coach Cotter yelled, "Nice hit Drew! That's your third hit today! Why aren't you on the baseball team?"

Drew rounded first and sprinted for second base. He was in for an easy stand up double. His teammates cheered and clapped from the dugout, Jen the loudest. Drew shrugged off Coach Cotter's question.

Coach Cotter didn't leave off however. "Come on Drew, tell me you can hit a baseball the same as a softball?"

Drew shrugged. "It's been a while, but maybe so."

"Jeff!" barked Coach Cotter to another student. "Go get the bucket of balls in the equipment closet. We're going to see just how rusty Drew is."

Jeff trotted off and returned a minute later with a white pail full of baseballs. He gave them to Coach Cotter and said, "I think the raccoon is back. Something was banging around in the back of the closet."

"Darn raccoon," said Coach Cotter. "I told them the eave was rotted and that raccoon made himself a home in there. Thanks Jeff."

Drew returned to the plate and stepped into the batter's box. He was nervous. Everyone watched him and he didn't like it when everyone watched him. Too often lately they watched him for all the wrong reasons. He waited for the pitch and swung. And missed.

Coach Cotter said, "Relax Drew. Watch the ball hit the bat."

The next pitch Drew hit, but it was only a sharp ground ball to third.

"Good contact Drew, but it looks like you're a little uncomfortable," commented Coach Cotter. "What's wrong?"

Drew shrugged. "I think I'd rather hit from the other side," he said.

Coach Cotter's mouth dropped open. "You switch hit?" he asked, surprised.

"Well, I like to hit lefty better than righty," said Drew. "It feels better." He didn't understand why, he just knew it did. His father taught him to hit both ways. He was saddened by the thought, but then a sudden surge of pride filled him.

"Well get over there and take a hack and we'll see," said Coach Cotter.

Drew dug in from the left side of the plate, waited for his pitch and put a good swing on the ball. It sailed into right field, high and far. His teammates cheered. Jen whooped and Drew set off toward first base.

"Hold on Drew," said Coach Cotter. "Let's take a few swings. Batting practice, no running."

Drew returned to the plate and hit almost every pitch thrown. By the end of the bucket of balls Coach Cotter insisted Drew join the baseball team.

"Where have you been hiding that swing!" he called. "I'm not taking no for an answer Drew. You're coming out for the team if I have to hog tie you young man!"

Drew shrugged off the praise awkwardly, and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Okay Drew, you're through," said the coach. "Take a seat and let's get back to the softball game."

"Can I get a drink?" asked Drew.

"Sure thing," said the coach.

Drew trotted off into the gym and over to the water fountain. As he drank he heard several bangs that emanated from the equipment closet.

"Raccoon, huh?" he thought out loud, and wiped water from his chin. He went over to the door and opened it quietly. It was dark inside, and he fumbled along the wall as he looked for the light switch. He could hear a rustle, like something wrestled with a net, a swish type of noise with the occasional grunt. The little hairs on his arm started to stand up as he imagined what it might be. It sounded too large to be a raccoon. He tripped over what might have been a hockey stick and fell. He groped his way to his feet and something tickled his face. He frantically swiped at his face, worried a spider had fallen on him and fell backward, tripped up again by another stray piece of equipment. He regained his feet and the same tickle sensation hit his face. This time his swipe hit something more substantial than a cobweb. A second later he was hit in the face again, but now he recognized what it was that hit him. He groped again and was rewarded when he clutched the cord from an overhead light. He pulled on the cord and the lights came on. He nearly dropped of a heart attack. He stood face to face with Shelly Dee, dressed in her pink poodle skirt, black blouse and pink scarf. She had a sorrowful look in her eyes.

Drew's mouth went dry and he took a step back, but for some reason couldn't tear himself away. He watched as Shelly suddenly appeared to argue or plead with someone who wasn't

there. She then threw her head back and clutched at her throat. Drew didn't know what to do. She appeared to be choking. Suddenly she leaned way back and spun around and backed toward him. He moved quickly back out of the closet but held the door open. He watched dumbstruck as she moved past him. He realized after she passed him that she wasn't moving herself. Her heels kicked on the floor and she was at nearly a forty-five degree angle leaning backward. Then it hit him. She was drug by unseen hands. She fought and pulled at her throat as her heels drummed wildly.

He watched as she was dragged along the wall and then beneath the bleachers. He followed, his skin pebbled on his arms and neck. Beneath the bleachers light filtered in through the cracks and he could see Shelly as she struggled. The hair on the back of his neck strained upward, his breath caught in his throat. She stopped and her face caught a stray beam of light and he thought she turned blue. Suddenly she went straight up in the air. Her feet dangled off the ground. She kicked frantically and her eyes bulged.

Drew's vision began to dim, darkness closed in. He couldn't seem to breath. He stumbled backwards and turned for the light from outside the bleachers. As he neared the opening he saw her again. She blocked his way, though her expression begged for help, no longer blue and bug eyed. He fell forward at her feet and darkness over took him.

When Drew awoke Coach Cotter was shaking him.

"What happened? Are you all right?" he asked, concerned.

He didn't know what to say. "I, I don't know," he mumbled.

"You must have fainted," said Coach Cotter. "I'm sorry. I must have pushed you to hard before lunch. Can you sit up?"

Drew pushed himself to a sitting position and looked around. Shelly Dee was nowhere in sight.

"You're pale. Do you need a drink? Can you stand Drew?" asked the coach. "Let me help you," he said as he hauled Drew to his feet.

Drew steadied himself and said, "I'm okay coach."

“Yeah, maybe,” he replied. “Let’s let the nurse be the judge. Can you make it to the nurse or do you need help?”

Drew took a few deep breaths and said, “I can make it on my own.”

Coach Cotter studied him for a long moment and said, “I can go with you. Or I can send a student with you. How about that?”

“No,” said Drew, not wanting to draw attention to himself. “Really, I’m fine. I don’t even need to go to the nurse.”

“Nonsense,” replied Coach Cotter. “You’re going if I have to drag you.”

“Fine,” said Drew. “I’ll go by myself. I’m fine,” he added to Coach Cotter’s dubious look.

“I’ll be checking with the nurse later so no funny business, got it?” warned Coach Cotter.

Drew smiled wanly. His reputation for skipping class was well known. “I’ll go,” he promised.

As he headed to the door Coach Cotter called after him. “Hey Drew, I meant what I said outside. You’ve got a sweet swing and I want you on my team. No ifs ands or buts.”

Drew nodded, and hoped that would pass for cooperation. He exited the gym. The bell rang which signaled an end to class as he walked to the nurse’s office, right next to the principal’s office. A sign on the door said the nurse would be back in fifteen minutes so he sat on the long wooden bench outside. The hall was full of students walking to their classes. None of them paid him any attention. It didn’t surprise him. It was nothing new really, seeing Drew sitting outside the principal’s office.

The school was laid out in a U-shape, with the office in the middle. Windows lined the hallway on the inside and looked out onto a courtyard, the lunchroom on the right, the gymnasium on the left. He watched idly as students milled around outside, either on a study hall break or eating lunch.

A second bell rang, which signaled a start to the next class. The few students still in the halls hurried now, not wanting a reprimand for being late.

One student caught his eye though. Not for her hurry, but the opposite. She stood still partway down the hall and stared at him. He knew her. He knew that poodle skirt anywhere. Shelly Dee.

A cold enveloped him and his ragged breath fogged the air. He thought he might pass out again.

“What do you want?” he asked.

She didn’t respond. She only stood there and stared.

“Well, I can’t help you anyway,” he said ruefully. “No one would believe me anyway.”

She took four deliberate steps toward him and his heart jumped into his throat. She stopped though, and turned to face a glass display case. It was full of school trophies and awards and pictures. He had walked by the case a thousand times. She looked at Drew again and then back to the case.

Drew stood and walked forward, drawn to her now with a feeling of dread that made his skin crawl. What was he doing? He stopped several feet away, afraid to get too close. She looked at him again, and the look in her eyes was like something he could imagine a drowning person might have given him if he were holding out his hand. ‘Help me, please!’ it pleaded.

She raised her arm and pointed at a picture. Drew looked, and read the article headline. *Blue Ribbon at State Fair goes to Athen’s High student.* He looked back at Shelly and she smiled wanly. She cast her eyes to the floor and then she simply disappeared.

“Whoa,” whispered Drew as he looked at the picture beneath the headline. There stood a gangly teenager with a pointy nose and black glasses and slicked back hair. He held a blue ribbon with huge smile on his face, flanked by faculty or maybe his parents, all of whom smiled proudly at the camera.

He jumped when a hand touched his arm. It was Jen.

“What happened to you?” she asked, concerned.

“Nothing,” replied Drew, not really sure how to describe the events under the bleachers or here in the hall.

“Well Coach Cotter told me to come down to the nurse’s office and make sure you were okay,” she said with one of her patented knowing looks. “So something must have happened.”

He shrugged.

"You saw something, didn't you," she guessed.

He looked at his feet and stuck his hands in his pockets. How did she do that, he wondered.

"I knew it!" she squealed excitedly. "Drew, you have to tell me."

He thought again about what he saw. It made his skin crawl and his stomach turn.

"Are you okay?" Jen asked suddenly concerned.

"She was murdered," he mumbled. He was still in a sort of shock as he tried to process it all.

"Who?" asked Jen, "Where?"

"Shelly Dee," he said. "Under the bleachers."

"Oh my gosh," exclaimed Jen after Drew described what he saw. "So you didn't see who did it though?" she asked.

"No," said Drew. "At first I thought, I don't know what I thought, but when I saw she was being dragged I knew I had to follow her. I thought I would somehow be able to help her, but, but."

"I know Drew," said Jen and patted his arm. "Let's sit," she said and ushered him onto the bench and sat next to him. Close. "It can't be easy to see something like that."

"I wish I didn't have to see it," bemoaned Drew. "What's the use of seeing it if I can't even stop it."

"You wouldn't be able to stop it silly," said Jen softly. "She's been dead a long time Drew. Nothing will change that."

"So what's the use then," he repeated.

"You can tell people," offered Jen. "Shelly Dee has been haunting the gym since she was murdered. It must be important to tell people that she didn't commit suicide."

"No one will believe me anyway," said Drew. "I have no proof, and people would just call me crazy if I started telling them I saw her being murdered."

"Well," thought Jen, "There has to be something you can do. We can do," she added, and patted his leg.

He was acutely aware her hand stopped patting and came to rest on his thigh, just above his knee. He looked at her and

then looked quickly at his feet. He could feel his cheeks as they flushed crimson.

She took her hand away, and folded it with her other on her lap. They sat in awkward silence for a moment.

"I saw her again," he whispered.

"Who? Shelly?" she asked, not following him.

"Yes," he said. "Right over there," he pointed. "Right before you came."

"What did she do?" she asked in her excited tone he was becoming familiar with.

He stood up and walked over to the trophy case. "She pointed at this," he said.

Jen peered at the article and read the headline aloud. "Blue Ribbon at State Fair goes to Athen's High student." She leaned forward and studied the photo. "He looks sort of familiar," she said.

They were interrupted by a student, Stephanie, who ran frantically up the hallway and stopped abruptly when she saw them. "Oh my gosh, Jen," said the girl. "I can't believe you're here. We have to get the nurse, now!"

"Why? What's wrong Stephanie?" asked Jen.

"I don't know," she said. She panted from exertion. "Mrs. O'Hare sent me. It's your brother. Something's wrong."

"What do you mean something's wrong?" asked Jen now worried.

Drew felt a surge of anxiety for Jen.

"He's, he's not talking," she said. "He's standing outside the lunch room, but, but, oh just get the nurse and come on!"

"She's not here now," Drew pointed to the sign.

"I'm not waiting for the nurse," said Jen. "Can you stay Stephanie?" Stephanie nodded and she took off at a run for the cafeteria, Drew right on her heels.

In less than a minute they were in the cafeteria, a large room with row upon row of tables, windows to the left, and the food lines to the right. Normally everyone would be sitting and eating, but now the trays of food and bags of lunch were left unattended at all the tables. Students lined the windows as they

stared outside. More students were gathered outside and Jen and Drew rushed forward.

“Let me through!” shouted Jen as she fought through the crowd.

Outside she pushed her way to the front. She stopped at the edge of a small circle within the crowd of students. They all gawked and talked at once. Mrs. O’Hare stood in there with Ron, her hand on his shoulder.

“Ron,” said Mrs. O’Hare. “This isn’t funny. If you can hear me, say something.”

Jen rushed forward and grabbed her brother by the arm. She turned him to face her. Drew could see the empty glaze of his stare. Spittle drooled from the corner of his slightly open mouth. He’d seen that look before.

A student behind him said, “Zombie,” and the word echoed, like a wave, as it cascaded over the sea of students.

Jen hugged her vacant eyed brother and sobbed, “Oh Ron.”

Chapter 14

Ron was taken to O'Bleness Memorial Hospital. Drew spent most of the weekend with Jen at the hospital. They sat by Ron's sick bed for as long as his grandmother would let him, which was surprisingly a lot. Monday came though and Drew had to go back to school. Jen was excused though and Drew thought it might have been for the best. Ron The Zombie was the talk of the student body, and none of it was good. Drew nearly got in a fight with a boy who said Ron deserved what he got for being a ghost hunter's son. Like one had anything to do with the other. A teacher was there to break it up before punches were thrown, but Drew still got sent to the principal's office. While he sat on the bench in the hallway, Shelly Dee made another appearance. She didn't say or do anything except to point again at the sign.

"I don't know what you want from me," hissed Drew, while students passed by, oblivious to her. "Jen's the smart one, and she's not here," he lamented before she gave him a sympathetic frown and disappeared.

Drew struggled with his schoolwork, unable to focus his attention. He couldn't help thinking about Ron and of course

that led his thoughts to Jen. After school he rode his bike to the hospital and found Jen at her brother's bedside.

Ron lay on his back, a sheet pulled up to his waist and his arms folded on his chest. He had a far-away look in his eyes and a little drool leaked from his slack mouth.

"How is he?" asked Drew tentatively.

Jen turned her red-rimmed eyes to Drew and shrugged. "Doctors don't know what's wrong. Same symptoms as the other, the college kids. No response to stimuli and no apparent cause. They think its some kind of virus or foreign substance ingested that attacks the nervous system. They've run all the tests and so far the results are inconclusive."

"Foreign substance?" he asked. "Like he ate paint chips or something?"

"Silly," said Jen, and briefly Drew thought she recovered a little of her good humor toward him. "That's the doctors' nice way of saying he was poisoned."

"Poisoned? But who would want to poison your brother?" he asked.

"No one, but maybe anyone," she said. "It could be a random thing. Maybe someone put something in a box of cookies, or the water or, or," she ran out of steam and sighed heavily. "I don't know Drew. I wish I did."

Drew sat down next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. She looked into his eyes and smiled, a pale shadow of her usually brilliant happiness.

"How's school?" she asked.

Drew shrugged. "You don't really want to know," he said sheepishly.

"You get in a fight?" she asked.

Despite everything she dealt with she still possessed that uncanny ability to know exactly what happened with him.

"Almost," he said, embarrassed.

"Don't listen to them Drew," she cautioned.

"What do you mean?" he countered.

"I know the whole school must be gossiping about Ron right now," she said astutely. "You can't let it get to you. They don't know any better. Remember just a few days ago it was you

and I calling that poor girl a zombie and Officer Mallory corrected us. Well, they haven't been corrected yet and, well, I guess they'll just keep talking because that's what teenagers do."

"How did you know?" he asked, somewhat awed with her insight.

"Like I said, it's what teenagers do," she added ruefully.

They sat for a few minutes in silence. Drew realized it was the first time all day he felt at ease, and he immediately felt guilty about Ron.

"So what's Shelly Dee been up to?" asked Jen.

Drew looked up sharply and wondered yet again how she did it. "She pointed at that picture again," he stated glumly. "Like I'm supposed to do something about it."

"Drew," she scolded mildly. "You are supposed to do something about it."

Drew slapped his thighs in frustration. "Easy for you to say. You're so much better at these things than I am."

"Drew," she said, and softened her tone. "You know as much as I do about these things and you see more, so if anything, you are much more capable of figuring things out on your own."

"I don't even know where to start," he pouted.

"Why don't you start by trying to figure out who that boy in the picture was or is and then finding the connection between him and Shelly Dee?" she offered.

He suddenly felt silly. Of course! There must be a connection. "Okay," he said sheepishly. "That's a good idea."

"And you would have figured it out soon enough anyway," she said.

"So when are you coming back to school?" he asked.

"Wednesday, I think," she said. "I don't know that there's anything I can do here anyway. I want to give things a few days to calm down at school before I go back. Kids can be so mean."

The next day Drew went to school early and headed directly for the glass case. He took a good long look at the picture and thought the boy with the thick black-rimmed glasses looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't say how. The article named him Alfred N. Schwartz, and he was apparently a prodigy

of sorts in the sciences. But that was all. Looking through the entire case gained no insight. The article was the lone mention of Alfred.

After school Drew went to see Jen at the hospital and found her in her familiar chair. He sat down and told her what he discovered.

"Basically nothing," he finished. "A name, that's all."

"Well, that's a good start," she said trying to sound optimistic.

"Yeah, but fat lot of good it does me," he moaned. "It's not like I can look him up in the encyclopedia and find out about his school days."

"Maybe you can," offered Jen. "The school library has a yearbook section. Every yearbook ever made is kept for posterity's sake. They don't even loan them out for fear of losing them."

"Yeah, so now I have to look through every yearbook?" he asked skeptically.

"No silly, the article has a date on it, doesn't it?" she chided. "So you have a year to target and that should tell you what grade he was in. Then you simply look at the other relevant years."

"Good idea," he smiled. "I say that to you a lot you know," he said and blushed.

"And I never get tired of it," she added with a smile herself. Now it was her turn to blush.

Mr. Harden entered, and interrupted their conversation.

"Hi honey," he said to Jen. "Hi Drew. How is school?"

"Okay I guess," he mumbled.

"Jen, you got a call from Dr. Wilde's office," said her father. "Something to do with the mouse you brought in. He wants you to come in as soon as you can."

"Ugh," she said. "I really don't feel like dealing with a dead mouse right now."

"Well Jen," reproached her father. "You have a responsibility here. You brought him the mouse and he did you a favor by taking it and examining it. The least you can do is go see him."

"I know," she said, downcast. "I will. I guess I'll stop after school tomorrow."

"I'll go with you," offered Drew.

"That'll be nice," smiled Jen. "And I'll go with you to the school library and check out those yearbooks with you."

Drew smiled. "That'll be nice."

"We'll go at lunch," she added. "I don't think I could sit in the lunchroom with everyone staring anyway."

"How do you know they'll be staring," asked Drew.

"Cause that's what teenagers do, silly," said Jen.

Lunch couldn't come fast enough for Drew. He paced the hall outside the library's entrance until Jen rounded the corner at the end of the corridor. He smiled as soon as he saw her, but his smile faded. Almost every student that walked by turned to stare. Many exchanged hushed words with one another as they passed. Drew caught the words, zombie and sister and he began to get angry. He could see her face set stoically. She hugged her books tightly to her chest and stepped purposefully and with her chin up, if not defiantly, than at least to Drew she looked proud.

Jen walked up and said, "Hi Drew. Don't let them get to you, okay? Remember, that's what they do."

Drew nodded, but couldn't entirely suppress his urge to punch somebody in the nose. Anybody. He settled for glaring about. Students that made eye contact with him hurried past, without another word.

Jen pushed past him and into the library and he had no choice so he followed. As the door swung shut, the respectful silence settled over him, calming him. They spoke briefly to the librarian and were ushered into a section in the back with a long table and six empty chairs. Books, of course, lined the walls.

"Have a seat," said Mrs. Jenkins, the librarian. "You said 1962 is the year you are interested in?"

"Yes ma'am," said Jen. "We might need to look at others, but that's where we need to start."

She returned in a few minutes and laid gingerly on the table a leather-bound book, its outer binder now protected by a clear plastic outer wrapping. The Athens High Bull Dog

prominently embossed in green and gold on the rich leather cover, the year 1962 in the lower right corner in gold leaf lettering with green trim. Drew thought it was a well-made book, compared to the current quality of yearbooks they offered now.

“This is a genuine leather binding children,” cautioned the librarian. “Back when people cared about how books should be bound. No food or drink anywhere near it, understood? Be careful.”

“We will Mrs. Jenkins,” promised Jen.

Mrs. Jenkins studied the two for a moment, as though considering if she really could trust them to be careful. Something decided her in their favor as she nodded and left the room.

They sat side by side, the yearbook placed between them. Jen opened the book and they both leaned forward. Drew was keenly aware of his shoulder touching Jen’s, and felt his cheeks flush.

He coughed to hide his discomfort and said, “So, where do we begin?”

Jen cleared her own throat and replied in a breathy whisper, “Schwartz silly.” She took another breath. “Let’s look for Alfred Schwartz,” and her voice regained more of its natural pitch. She flipped through the pages. “Davis, Hopper, Mallory, Peterson, Sanders, okay, here we go,” she said and stopped and laid a finger on a picture. “Alfred N. Schwartz,” she read aloud. The picture was of a slim, pale young man with thin black hair, and prominent nose supporting black horn-rimmed glasses.

“He’s not even smiling,” commented Drew.

“No,” replied Jen, “He looks rather annoyed to me.”

Drew nodded. “But what’s the connection?” he asked.

“Let’s see what his bio says,” said Jen and she began to read aloud. “Favorite pastime – in the lab. Always found with – Science teachers in the lab. Favorite person – Francis Crick, Linus Pauling, Emil Fischer, Charles Sherrington, Albert Einstein.”

Drew interrupted. "I recognize Einstein, but the rest of those names I'm not sure. They must be scientists or something."

"You're probably right. Francis Crick won the Nobel Prize," said Jen. "I saw that on television."

"What else does it say?" asked Drew.

Jen continued reading aloud. "Most Cherished Memory – winning Blue Ribbon at the Science Fair. Life's Aspiration – Winning the Nobel Prize in Science. Favorite Quote – *'Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.'*"

Drew said, "Wow. Has he got a thing for science or what?"

"And that quote," said Jen, "I don't know who said it, but its kind of creepy, don't you think? Like he's expecting violent opposition or something."

"Is there anything else?" asked Drew.

"Yes," said Jen continuing to read. "Pet Peave – frivolous girls. Jeesh, what a jerk. Nickname – Newman. Favorite Food – None. That's it." she finished.

They stared at the page for a few seconds before Jen smacked the book with her palm.

"That's it!" she screamed.

It startled Drew. "What?" he asked.

"Didn't you say he looked vaguely familiar?" she questioned.

"Yeah, I guess so, but I don't know," he answered.

"Well I do," she said. "It's Mr. Schwartz! Oh my gosh Drew, don't you get it? His nickname is Newman. Newman Schwartz the weirdo living with Miss Myrna. Oh my gosh Drew do you know what this means?"

Drew shook his head. "Mr. Schwartz won't win the Nobel Prize as a janitor?"

"Newman Schwartz killed Shelly Dee!" she squealed.

"How do you figure that?" asked Drew skeptically. "There's no proof he even knew her. Heck, everything you just read said he was in love with his science teacher!"

“Good point,” said Jen, her mood tempered. “There’s got to be something in here that links them.”

“How about checking Shelly Dee’s bio?” asked Drew.

Jen turned a beaming smile on Drew that made him blush. “You’re brilliant!” she said and he squirmed in his seat. She flipped through until she found Shelly Dee’s photo, slim pretty girl with black hair and eyes and a bright, optimistic smile.

Jen began to read aloud: “Favorite pastime – spending time with A.N.S.; Always found with – A.N.S.; Favorite person – A.N.S.; Most Cherished Memory – 1/1/62 with A.N.S.; Life Aspirations – Marry A.N.S.; Pet Peave – Anything that keeps me from A.N.S.; Favorite Quote – ‘*Love is the triumph of imagination over intelligence.*’ by H.L. Mencken”; Nickname – Dee Dee.; favorite food – Ice Cream at Sonny’s with A.N.S.”

“Alfred Newman Schwartz,” stated Drew. “There’s your connection.”

“Shelly Dee is clearly head over heels for Mr. Schwartz. Alfred. I mean Newman,” said Jen. “But talk about your star crossed lovers. The high school Newman wants nothing but science in his life, but Shelly Dee. She can’t get enough of him. Everything is Newman, Newman, Newman. She must have really loved him.”

Drew shrugged. “So what now? We can’t go around telling people Mr. Schwartz killed Shelly Dee. We have no proof.”

“No, we can’t,” agreed Jen. “We have to find proof.”

“I don’t know how,” said Drew. “What’s the likelihood Mr. Schwartz has saved something for all these years that proves he killed Shelly Dee?”

“That’s brilliant!” squealed Jen again and in her excitement gave Drew a great big hug.

Caught off guard he later regretted that he left his arms to hang limply while she squeezed him tight.

Jen didn’t notice, or if she did she didn’t let on. She said, “If there’s proof, it’s in his apartment.”

Drew groaned. “I don’t see how brilliant that is.”

“We have to get into his apartment and find the proof we need and then we’ll go to the police,” vowed Jen.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Drew. “Breaking the law isn’t what I had in mind when you said I should be helping Shelly Dee.”

Jen curbed her enthusiasm as she thought for a few seconds. “Well, we might technically be breaking the law by forcing entry, but what if we have a key?” she asked.

“Miss Myrna still has the Master Key to the apartments, doesn’t she,” groaned Drew.

“I hope so,” said Jen. “Plus, we won’t be stealing anything of value. Only evidence implicating him in a murder. We’ll be heroes.”

Drew groaned again. He didn’t want to be a hero. He only wanted to be normal. He looked again at the photo of Shelly Dee. How optimistic those eyes were compared to the sad ones he knew. “When do we do it?” sighed Drew.

“As soon as possible,” replied Jen. “Right after school.”

Chapter 15

Drew and Jen stood outside of Wanda's house and stared at the empty structure. It loomed menacingly to Drew, like it dared them to enter. Somewhere inside lurked Jasper. Drew could almost feel him watch. He looked anxiously about. He knew all too well that soul suckers might also lurk inside.

"Wanda's not home yet," said Drew. "We can come back later."

"She won't be home for at least an hour Drew," she said, "She's dropping kids off all over town. Come on."

Jen went up the steps and turned the knob. The outside door was unlocked.

"Let's just see if he left his door open," she offered.

Drew followed her, against his better judgment. Inside she went immediately to Mr. Schwartz's door and twisted the knob. Locked. She went to Wanda's door and twisted. Same result.

"Come on," she said. "I have an idea."

She didn't explain. Instead, she stepped outside, Drew in tow. She walked around the house, and checked every window as she went. All were shut and locked until they reached the rear

of the house. There yawned an open window on the first floor, a screen the only obstacle. She was just tall enough to grab the sill and with both hands Jen pulled herself up and peered inside, her toes dangled inches off the ground.

"It's Mr. Schwartz's apartment," she said. "Give me ten fingers."

Drew obeyed and laced his fingers together. Jen grabbed his shoulders and smiled. "Thanks," she said and then using his interlocked fingers as a step she hoisted herself up.

Her stomach pressed against his face and he turned his head. Her smell was clean and lightly scented. Some kind of flowers he thought, and his cheeks flushed.

She pushed on the screen and it squealed as it lifted. "It's open now. Steady now, I'm going in," and suddenly he no longer held her foot. Her legs kicked once and she disappeared through the window. A second later her face popped out. "Go around, I'll let you in the front," she instructed.

Drew complied. He nervously looked around as he circled the house, worried someone watched. Or something. He slipped inside the front door and Jen stood just inside Mr. Schwartz's apartment, her hand on the doorknob.

"Come on," she whispered. "We don't have all day."

Drew wondered how this girl continued to get him to do things he would never consider on his own as he stepped inside. As he brushed by her, he caught her flowery scent and liked it.

She closed the door behind him and said, "Okay, where to start?"

They stood in his living room, sparsely decorated at best. A rumpled sofa separated the living and dining rooms. A large bookshelf stood against one wall. A wooden coffee table with old Chinese food containers and a half-drunk glass of water spoke of last night's dinner. A small television rested on a table. There was a smell too; a slightly musty scent that said it had been a long time since the room was aired out. The apartment layout was open, with the kitchen and dining room at the far end. The dining room table looked like a lab room, beakers and vials and books spread out, neatly and precisely arranged.

“Not what I expected,” said Jen. “Though I don’t know what I should have expected to find in a murderer’s apartment. Maybe a chainsaw,” she joked.

Drew didn’t laugh. “I don’t like this,” he said.

“Relax,” she said and patted his arm. “Let’s search quickly and we’ll be gone before anyone ever knew we were here. I’ll start in his bedroom. You check the living room,” she ordered and disappeared down a hall.

Drew stepped over to the bookshelf. It was full of large, scientific books. Physiology, chemistry, biology, and others he knew nothing about. He pulled a few out, leafed through them, and replaced them. Not really knowing why he flipped through them, he thought perhaps because that’s what people did in the movies. Yet nothing surfaced. No incriminating evidence fell from within the pages. No secret passageway was triggered by the removal of a book. He moved to the television stand and opened the lone drawer. Nothing inside except a television guide and a remote control.

He moved into the kitchen and stood before the table. Whatever Mr. Schwartz was doing, it looked complicated. Several science books sat open, yet one book drew his attention. It was a journal and a pen rested atop the last page. He took a closer look saw Mr. Schwartz logged the results from his experiments here. The last entry read, *‘compound z now odorless and tasteless.’*

Jen returned with an exasperated sigh. “Nothing in the bedroom,” she reported. “Just a bed and a dresser and a closet with a few shirts and things hanging. One box that looked promising but only held a bunch of ribbons and plaques and awards, all for scientific achievements.”

“Why does a maintenance man have a lab in his apartment and science awards in his closet?” asked Drew.

“Good question,” said Jen, “Though I’m not sure it really matters. You find anything? What are you looking at?”

“Nothing so far,” replied Drew. “This is some sort of scientific journal Mr. Schwartz was keeping,” he stabbed the book with his finger.

Jen moved over for a closer look. “Probably his secret lemonade recipe,” she quipped, and Drew remembered Ron’s description of the terrible lemonade Mr. Schwartz made him taste. She scanned the log. She leafed through the pages, and worked backward into the journal a few pages before she suddenly gasped.

“What is it?” asked Drew.

“Oh Drew, look,” she pointed. “Mr. Schwarz has been making this compound z thingy, but it isn’t lemonade. See here, he describes the effects of compound z on a person. She read aloud: *‘Subject D, male, approximately sixteen years of age, no immediate reaction to one hundred cc’s other than distaste. Several days for neural block to set. Subject D exhibited anticipated catatonia. Hospitalized with the others. Satisfactory results—ready for mass-distro.’*”

“I don’t understand any of that,” said Drew in confusion. He studied a rack that held half a dozen vials. He picked up one containing a yellowish liquid. A screw top kept it from spilling as Drew shook it and held it close for inspection.

“Look Drew, farther back, it documents three other subjects, A, B, and C, all ending with catatonia, all going to the hospital,” she explained. Continuing her scan through the journal she added, “And here it talks about a dog and a cat, and mice, lots of mice.”

“So, what’s it got to do with Shelly Dee?” he asked. “We should leave before someone comes,” he added nervously. “I thought I heard a car pull up.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” she said, her nose still buried in the journal. “This has nothing to do with Shelly Dee. Don’t you get it?” she asked.

Drew’s uneasiness grew. He felt eyes upon him. He looked around. He felt like someone, or something, watched, hidden. As she bent over the journal a light mist escaped her parted lips. He shivered, and the skin on his arms pebbled. Something moved in the corner of his eye. Movement down the hall, like something stepped from the bedroom. The breath caught in his throat. The hall was cast in deep shadow. If something were there, he couldn’t see.

He felt his eyes played tricks on him, catching movement from the corners of his vision. Yet every time he turned to look straight on, there was never anything there.

That was, until he turned back to the living room. Or what should have been the living room. The room he entered had changed. What a second ago was Mr. Schwartz's rumpled living room, somehow transformed into a formal dining room. Drew knew he looked at a vision of the room from long ago, but it seemed so real, down to the smallest detail. A long, dark table polished to a high shine dominated the room. Eight ladder-back chairs of matching wood surrounded the table. There was an old painting on the wall on the left. It looked like some kind of family portrait. Drew recognized Jasper, but there were four more people in the painting. He moved closer. In the portrait Jasper stood rigidly on the left, his arm around a petite older woman with dark hair and kind eyes that Drew assumed was his wife. Sitting before them were a younger couple. The man sat, back straight. He wore a suit, one hand resting on the knee of his wife who sat to his right, the other tucked into his vest pocket. The younger woman was beautiful. She had dark hair that fell in waves over her shoulders. Her smile never touched her dark eyes however. Drew felt despite her beauty there was something very wrong about her. She reminded him of a crazy woman he'd seen in the park one day. They shared the same off-canter way of casting their gaze. She wore a pale green dress and held a swaddled baby in her stiff arms.

There was something about the painting that bothered Drew. It all looked vaguely familiar. Had he seen this woman before? And the man, his suit maybe, or the way he held his hand in his pocket with his two little fingers tucked in and his three other fingers cradling a-

"Oh my god," said Drew. "That watch!"

"What watch?" said Jen. "Haven't you been listening?" she asked.

Drew couldn't pull his eyes from the picture on the wall.

"What are you staring at?" asked Jen, who realized belatedly that Drew was in the midst of another phenomenon.

She couldn't see it though, but Drew could. "It's the woman and the man from the cemetery," said Drew.

"Where?" asked Jen? She stared at the blank wall.

"In the painting on the wall here," explained Drew.

And then she could see it. "Oh my gosh. I see it Drew," she gawked. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything," said Drew. "At least I don't think so," he added. "It's Jasper's family, the couple from the cemetery," said Drew. "You remember, right? This is the house. We're back." He looked over to the apartment door, but there was no door, simply a doorway. Outside he could see the dark polished banister of the stairway running up the right, the old grandfather clock leaning against the wall.

"We are back," she said. "What happened to Mr. Schwartz's apartment."

Drew shrugged. The room, the vision of the room, he didn't know what exactly to call it. Was he standing in the room in the past, some forty years ago? Or was the vision a simple trick of the mind that saw backward through time to reveal how things looked? Would the table feel solid or would he put his hand through it? He reached for the table and felt its firmness for a split second before the entire vision shattered like his touch were a rock thrown through glass.

Jen yelped as the fragments of a room that no longer existed flew apart and disappeared. She reached for Drew, hugged him tight and buried her head in his chest.

For Drew, the room spun lazily, and appeared to tilt and whirl, but he thought that was simply dizziness on his part. The more he held Jen, the less things appeared off-kilter, and eventually his world settled back into Mr. Schwartz's apartment.

Through blurred vision Drew saw the black mass seep through under the front door and rise, to form a human-like shape about three feet in height. Another followed it. His breath misted heavily now and the temperature dropped. Even Jen felt something.

"Brr, its cold in here," she said with a shiver, and lifted her head. She pushed herself to arms length with an awkward, "Sorry," and then separated herself from Drew and turned away.

"We need to leave," said Drew. A maze of emotions raged through him. He didn't like that Jen pulled away, but didn't know what to say. It was awkward and embarrassing and exciting for him too, yet his fear of the soul suckers overwhelmed his other wayward thoughts. "Now."

But they were too late. The apartment door opened. They both froze.

In stepped Mr. Schwartz who after a startled moment shrieked, "What are you kids doing? Get away from there!" He threw a bag onto the sofa and started toward them, a crazed look in his eyes. "I'll teach you nosey kids a lesson!"

Drew and Jen skirted the table. They kept it between them and Mr. Schwartz. Drew could see two more soul suckers in the hallway. They, like the two in the living room, stood there, watched and waited, he thought. They appeared impatient to Drew, their shadowy forms leaned forward and swayed side to side, their gyrating increased in rapidity with every moment. "Soul suckers," hissed Drew.

"Where?" hissed Jen. "Never mind," she added quickly. "I think we have more immediate concerns."

Mr. Schwartz looked at his journal and then at them. "So, we've been doing a little reading, have we?" he chuckled, a dry, mirthless sound like the rustle of dead leaves.

He lunged to his right and Drew and Jen scrambled to their right as they tried to keep the table between them and Mr. Schwartz, but Mr. Schwartz changed direction with surprising agility. Drew and Jen darted back to their left, around the table as Mr. Schwartz closed in. Drew scrambled around and ran for the door, Jen right behind. Drew reached the door and opened it just as Jen squealed.

"Gotcha!" yelled Mr. Schwarz triumphantly.

Drew spun around in the open doorway, inches from freedom. Yet he was rooted to the ground as if his feet were lead. Jen struggled in the iron grip of Mr. Schwartz who glared at her malevolently. On either side stood two soul suckers. They leaned close to Jen, mere inches from her. Her breath came out in white plumes as she gasped and squirmed.

Mr. Schwartz said, "And just where do you think you're going?"

Drew said nothing.

Jen screamed at him as she struggled. "Run you idiot! Get help! Ow! Let go, you're hurting me!"

But he couldn't run. He couldn't leave Jen in this man's evil clutches. And Mr. Schwartz knew it.

"He's not going anywhere," cooed Mr. Schwartz. "Are you boy? Close the door and sit down or I hurt the girl."

Drew sighed and started to close the door. He stopped midway when he saw a white mist coalesce. It was Jasper and he looked angry. Then things got really crazy.

Jen stomped on Mr. Schwartz's foot with all her might. It wasn't enough by itself, but Jasper hammered his fist down onto Mr. Schwartz's arm that held Jen. Though only Drew could see him, Mr. Schwartz surely felt him. Drew thought Jen might have felt something too, as she looked confused as Mr. Schwartz yelped and clutched his forearm in pain. He let her go and she wasted no time. She sprinted out the door. Drew didn't waste a moment either as he darted after her. He slammed the apartment door behind him. They dashed through the outside door and into the afternoon sun and ran as fast as they could down the center of the street. They didn't stop until they were inside Jen's house. Jen locked the door behind them and they immediately pulled all the blinds and ran upstairs to Jen's room.

Jen threw herself on her bed out of breath. Drew collapsed on the floor and leaned against the bed. They both gasped for air.

"Wow," said Jen. "That was crazy. What happened back there?"

"I don't know, but crazy only scratches the surface," said Drew. "Did you see the room?" he asked.

"Not at first," replied Jen, "But then it was just there and I could see everything. But what happened? It looked like it exploded?"

"You saw that too?" asked Drew. "I have no idea what or how it happened," shrugged Drew. "The whole thing is crazy. This whole thing is crazy. And what does Mr. Schwartz have to

do with those people in the cemetery? Or with Shelly Dee's murder?"

"Silly," she chided. "Forget about Shelly Dee for a moment. Don't you see? Mr. Schwartz is the one responsible for the zombies. That's what his experiments were all about."

Drew understood now. "All those entries in the journal were about his zombie juice. Compound Z," he slapped his forehead. "Z for Zombie."

"We have to go to the police," she said emphatically. "They've got to get Mr. Schwartz to tell them what he gave those kids. What he gave my brother. He's got to have the antidote. And if he doesn't, at least we can tell the doctors what it was and they can try to make one themselves."

"Will they believe us?" he asked.

"They have to," she said. "Oh gosh Drew, they have to. For Ron's sake!"

Thirty minutes later they were in the back seat of Officer Mallory's patrol car as it idled out front of Mr. Schwartz's house. They told Officer Mallory everything that happened. They left out the paranormal of course, and convinced him to at least go talk to Mr. Schwartz. Officer Mallory rang the outside bell. A few moments went by and then the door opened. Out stepped Mr. Schwartz. He smiled at Officer Mallory. They heard everything through the open car window.

"Mr. Schwartz?" asked Officer Mallory.

"Yes officer, that's me," he answered calmly and with a smile. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I'm sorry to bother you Mr. Schwartz, but I'm afraid I've got a few questions for you. You see, a few teenagers came to me with a story about you running some kind of lab in your house. Sounds like a whopper, I know, but they're convinced that it has something to do with the rash of sick children. You familiar with the story?"

"Yes, I believe I am. It's all over the news," said Mr. Schwartz. "Terrible. Just terrible. So some children said I'm responsible?" he asked, like nothing could be further from the truth.

“Well sir, yes,” said Officer Mallory. “They went on to say you attacked them.”

“My goodness!” exclaimed Mr. Schwartz. “I assure you officer that there is a logical explanation for everything.”

“Well, be that as it may, I normally wouldn’t ask, yet there’s a real concern over those sick children and I can’t really afford to dismiss a lead, however preposterous,” said Officer Mallory. “Mind if I take a look at your lab?” he asked.

“Impossible,” said Mr. Schwartz.

Jen got excited. “Officer Mallory has got him now. Mr. Schwartz doesn’t want to let him in.”

Officer Mallory took a small, nearly imperceptible step back and rested his hand on his revolver. Drew held his breath.

Officer Mallory said, “Why not?”

“Because no such lab exists,” said Mr. Schwartz smugly. “You are welcome to come inside and see for yourself if you like.”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” said Officer Mallory.

“Right this way,” said Mr. Schwartz with a smile.

Officer Mallory disappeared inside. Drew and Jen squirmed as the minutes stretched on. After what seemed like an eternity Officer Mallory came out, Mr. Schwartz on his heels.

“I’m really sorry to bother you Mr. Schwartz. And I’ll see to it the children leave you be,” he said.

“Thank you very much officer, and please, if there’s anything I can do to help, don’t hesitate to ask,” said Mr. Schwartz.

Officer Mallory climbed in his patrol car and drove off.

“I can’t believe you didn’t arrest him,” said Jen.

“On what charges?” he asked.

“Zombifying the town!” screeched Jen who lost her cool.

“Now hold it right there young lady,” said Officer Mallory sternly. “I checked out his apartment. No lab. Nothing anywhere that even resembled a lab. He let me check his bedroom and closets, everything. Not a single piece of evidence to corroborate your story. Plus,” he added angrily. “He said he came home and you two were inside his apartment. Climbed

through the window and he thought you were trying to rob him. Says he was only going to hold you until the police came.”

“It’s not true,” wailed Jen. “He’s lying!”

“You never did say how you got inside his apartment, asked Officer Mallory. “You want to tell me?”

Jen and Drew both had the good sense to look embarrassed.

“I thought so,” said Officer Mallory. “Listen Jen, I know your brother is sick too, but making stories up won’t help him.”

“But I’m not,” she pleaded. “You have to believe me!”

“No buts young lady. I want you to stay away from Mr. Schwartz, understood,” he ordered as he pulled up outside of Jen’s house.

Jen fumed. Drew thought he’d never seen someone so angry. He thought she was about to do something she’d regret too, but somehow she mastered her emotions.

She waited for Officer Mallory to come around and open her door. She stepped out and marched into her house without saying a word. Drew slid across the seat and stepped out.

Officer Mallory said, “Drew, I know she’s upset, and talking to her right now is probably not going to gain me anything, but there’s something that doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. Tell me, why exactly did you two break into Mr. Schwartz’s apartment in the first place?”

Drew shrugged, uncomfortable, and unsure what, if anything, he should tell him. “You wouldn’t believe me,” he mumbled.

“I’ve been a cop a long time,” said Officer Mallory. “You develop instincts over the years Drew, even in a sleepy little town like Athens. And those instincts are telling me that you two kids are keeping something from me.”

Drew looked away.

“Ah,” said Officer Mallory. “Would it help if I told you my instincts are also telling me that something is wrong with Mr. Schwartz?”

Drew looked back, hope welled inside, yet he still had no idea what to say.

“Why do you think that is?” pressed Officer Mallory.

“He’s a murderer,” mumbled Drew.

Officer Mallory stepped back, clearly not expecting that.

“He killed Shelly Dee and we were looking for proof,” explained Drew.

Officer Mallory stared long and hard at Drew. “You’re talking about that old ghost story from school, aren’t you?”

Drew nodded, head down as he idly kicked dirt with one foot.

“Hmm,” said Officer Mallory. “I’m not quite sure what to say Drew. I guess I should ask you how you came to believe that, but I don’t think I’m going to get an honest answer. Instead, I’m going to ask you to leave the police work to the police and in the future, if you have a concern please call me and let me know instead of taking matters into your own hands. Tonight, you might have been seriously hurt. What if he really was a murderer, and you go and accuse him and you aren’t able to escape. Might be you’d be murdered too. Ever think about that?”

Drew looked abashed. “No sir,” he said.

Officer Mallory gave him another long, searching glare and then sighed. “Okay Drew, you want a lift home or are you going inside here?”

“I’ll stay sir, thanks,” he replied.

Officer Mallory shut the door and circled around to the driver’s side. He stopped, one foot inside the cruiser and said, “Remember Drew. Call me if you have the urge to confront Mr. Schwartz again.”

Drew waited as Officer Mallory climbed in and sped off. Had he tried to tell Drew something? He wondered. Then he went in after Jen.

As soon as the door closed behind him Jen nearly shrieked, “I can’t believe it! Officer Mallory doesn’t believe a word we said and somehow Mr. Schwartz got rid of his lab in less than thirty minutes!” She paced as she fumed. “I know he’s responsible, but if the police don’t want to do anything, we’ll just have to do it our selves.” She smacked her fist in her palm. “We need a plan,” she said. “Something that will get us the proof we need. Any ideas?”

Drew fidgeted with something in his pants pocket. He hadn't realized what it was until now, but he wasn't sure he wanted to show Jen in her current state of mind.

"What is it Drew?" she asked, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You've got something good, don't you."

He shook his head, wondered once again how she could read him so easily.

"Yes," she smiled like the Cheshire cat. "I am getting really good at reading you Drew. Fess up, what is it?"

Drew pulled the vial of yellow liquid out of his pocket and held it out in his palm.

Jen's mouth fell open. "Compound Z! I can't believe you stole a sample!" she said, near crazy with excitement. "Why didn't you say something to Officer Mallory? He would have had to believe us!"

Drew slipped it back into his pocket. "I didn't realize I took it until a few seconds ago," said Drew. "I'm not sure Officer Mallory would have done anything more than he did anyway. It's just a tube of yellow liquid. Not exactly proof of anything."

"No, I suppose not," reasoned Jen.

The door opened and in stepped her father. A preoccupied Mr. Harden said, "Well, your brother's condition remains the same, unfortunately. Doctors still have no idea what is wrong. They still think it's some kind of foreign substance, or poison, but they are mystified as to what and how it's working."

Jen came over and hugged her father. Drew reached into his pocket for the vial and was about to pull it out and give it to Mr. Harden when Jen shot him a nasty glare and waived her hand at him. Stupefied, he slipped the vial back into his pocket and waited.

Jen said to her father, "Something will happen soon, dad. They'll figure it out, I'm sure of it."

"I wish I had your confidence sweetie," said Mr. Harden with a sigh. "I'm hopeful, but..." his voice trailed off.

"Did you open the shop today?" she asked.

"No dear. I'm afraid I'm just not up to work these days," he replied bleakly.

“Daddy,” she grabbed his hand. “You should open the store, if only for the distraction. Weren’t you just lecturing me about responsibility?”

Her father smiled. “Yes, I was. And you’re right. I should open the store. I will tomorrow. And speaking of responsibility, I got another call from Dr. Wilde today. You haven’t gone to see him yet about that mouse, have you?”

She looked abashed. “No, I’m sorry. We got caught up in something else. We’ll go now, right Drew?” she said.

One foot out the door Jen called to her father. “Hey dad, what’s mass-distro mean?”

“Huh?” he said in confusion. “Mass what?”

“Mass-distro. If something were ready for mass-distro, what would that mean?” she asked.

“Oh,” he said knowingly. “Probably ready for mass distribution. Distro is short-hand in business lingo for distribution. Sounds like a product is ready for massive distribution in the market. Where’d you hear that?”

“Oh,” shrugged Jen. “On television I guess. I just wanted to know.”

Outside, Jen groaned. “We’ve got to work fast Drew,” she said. “Mr. Schwartz is planning on poisoning a whole lot of people. Maybe even the whole town.”

Chapter 16

Drew and Jen sat in a crowded waiting room, yet it was eerily quiet. Drew looked from animal to animal, and grew increasingly uneasy with each pet he examined. There were two dogs who sat slack-jawed and drooled. Three cats rested on the laps of their worried owners, all sat, open-mouthed, stared and drooled also. Cats didn't drool. One owner talked to his cat. He teased for some sort of response, yet the cat simply sat and stared.

Dr. Wilde came out and greeted them with a smile. "I'm so glad you came Jen," he said. "Hello, Drew. Nice to see you again."

Drew smiled awkwardly as Jen said, "Sorry we took so long sir. We were kinda busy. So has the poor mouse died?"

"That's okay Jen," said Dr. Wilde. "As a matter of fact, no. Actually, I have good news. Come with me," he said and ushered them into the back. He brought them into his office. A small cage sat on his desk. A white mouse scampered about.

"It's, it's, it's normal!" exclaimed Jen, confused, yet happy.

"Yes," said Dr. Wilde. "Perfectly healthy and normal as you say."

“So how did you cure it?” she asked as she opened the cage and scooped up the little white ball of fur.

“Well, I’d like to say I worked my medical magic on it,” he demurred, “But the truth is, I was lucky. And the strangest part is the medical science behind it eludes me.”

“I don’t understand,” said Jen. “You didn’t give it any medicine? And it just got better?”

“Not exactly,” said Dr. Wilde. He sat down and continued. “I was sitting here the other morning having a bagel and some orange juice, like I always do. And I had your little mouse friend out of his cage. I took him out every morning and examined him. He really is a uniquely interesting case. I had never seen an animal act like it before. And what was really starting to trouble me is that I have been inundated these last days with similar cases. Cats and dogs are coming in exhibiting the same strange symptoms. Its reached epidemic proportions and I’ve contacted the State Department of Health to get involved. Really, I needed their resources.”

“So the State cured it?” she asked.

“No,” smiled Dr. Wilde. “Like I said, I got lucky. I spilled my orange juice all over the place and as I was trying to save some important papers I noticed the mouse standing in a puddle of the orange juice, lapping it up. Now, this wasn’t surprising to me because the mouse had always ate and drank when presented food. Some basic instinct to feed remained intact and that’s how I’d been keeping it alive. Hand feeding it food and water.”

“I don’t get it,” said Drew.

“Frankly, neither do I,” commented Dr. Wilde. “But within minutes the mouse began to rouse itself. It started to shiver and shake, and then it just started wandering around. Really quite remarkable you see. There were only two possibilities for why the mouse suddenly returned to its normal self. One: whatever ailed it had finally run its course. Like a virus, once the immune system contains and eliminates it, symptoms disappear. A distinct possibility, yet I couldn’t be sure it was a virus. That was one theory, but my other theory was that it was a kind of toxin. If so, then an antidote would have to be administered to

counteract it. The only thing administered was orange juice, and crazy as it sounds I believe that is the antidote.”

“Orange juice,” said Jen amazed.

“Well, I couldn’t be certain with the mouse as my only case study,” continued Dr. Wilde. “But I had another cat left in my care with the same symptoms. And since it was only orange juice, I decided to test it on the feline. Imagine my surprise when after only a few minutes the cat snapped out of its stupor and began hissing at me like it always did.”

“So orange juice is the cure?” said Jen. “Go figure.”

“Yes, go figure,” agreed Dr. Wilde.

“So what made the animals sick?” asked Drew.

“That, Drew, is an excellent question,” said Dr. Wilde. “My hypothesis is that a toxin was ingested that attacked the nervous system. I don’t want to get too technical, so basically think of it as some kind of dam that clogged up the brain, blocking it from thinking and doing all the things it normally does. Except eat of course, and those other involuntary bodily functions like breathing. The orange juice somehow dissolved the blockage and returned the brain to its normal function.”

“Wow,” said Drew and Jen together. “That’s pretty amazing.”

“Yes,” agreed Dr. Wilde. “And I’ve been able to help the other sick animals too. I’ve the last half-dozen coming in today for their,” he chuckled, “orange juice therapy. The real issue is what caused it in the first place. There is a toxin out there that these animals are getting into that we have to find and remove, else more will become affected. And I have no idea what the long-term effects of this toxin might be. And of course, if it can happen to animals, why not humans?” posited Dr. Wilde. “That’s another reason I got the State involved.”

Jen startled everyone when she slapped the table hard.

“What is it?” asked Dr. Wilde.

“It is happening to humans,” declared Jen. “The zombie students! My brother! It’s all over the news Dr. Wilde.”

“Well I’ll be,” said Dr. Wilde. “I didn’t put two and two together until you said it Jen, but I’ll bet you’re right.”

“Do you think orange juice will work on them?” asked Jen. “On my brother?”

“Well, I can’t be certain,” cautioned Dr. Wilde. “I am only a veterinarian. But it is only orange juice. It can’t hurt to try. Still, I’d love to know how those kids and these animals are ingesting this toxin. And of course, what that toxin is would be valuable to know. Really a remarkable thing. I’ve never seen or heard of anything like it.”

“I know what it is and how they are ingesting it,” stated Jen seriously.

Dr. Wilde looked surprised. “You know? You two have been poisoning people?” said an incredulous Dr. Wilde.

“No!” exclaimed Drew and Jen in unison. “We know who is though, but we don’t have any proof.”

“Well I suggest you go straight to the police,” said Dr. Wilde. “This is a very serious matter.”

“We will,” said Jen. “Right after I go to the hospital and give my brother some orange juice.”

Dr. Wilde smiled. “I hope it works honey. I really do.”

Drew never pedaled so fast as they biked to the hospital. She stopped in the coffee shop in the lobby and bought a pint of orange juice and they raced upstairs to her brother’s room.

Her father sat in the chair next to the bed. He held Ron’s limp hand pressed between his two palms, his head bowed over them as if in prayer. He looked up and smiled dismally.

“Hi honey,” he sighed. “How was Dr. Wilde’s?”

“Amazing!” she said, unable to control her excitement. “The mouse has cured Ron!”

Her father looked at her perplexed.

“I mean the mouse is cured and so is Ron!” she squealed with delight. “It’s all in the OJ!” she added, shaking her pint of orange juice in front of him.

Her father frowned. “Are you okay Jen? Is she okay?” he asked Drew.

Drew nodded, and smiled, unable to contain his own excitement.

Mr. Harden said sternly, "Jen, I don't think this is funny at all. Your brother is, is, well he's seriously ill and we don't even know what's wrong with him. I don't think you should be making jokes about it, understood?"

Jen shook her head, undeterred. "You don't understand daddy," she continued. "Orange juice cured the mouse and it will cure Ron too!"

Her father stood and faced her. "Jen, honey," he said softly. "I know this is hard on you, but please stop with the orange juice."

Jen recognized something in his tone or bearing, Drew wasn't sure what, but it made her pause. She looked...hurt.

"Daddy," she sobbed. "I am serious. Why won't anyone believe me?"

Drew said, "Mr. Harden, I was there. Dr. Wilde gave the animals orange juice and it cured them.

Mr. Harden turned to Drew. "I'm afraid I have no idea what either of you are talking about. What was wrong with the animals?"

"They were suffering the same symptoms as Ron and those other college kids," explained Drew. "Dr. Wilde accidently spilled his orange juice and the mouse lapped it up. Soon after the mouse was cured."

"I'm afraid that's a nice story," said Mr. Harden, "But Ron isn't a mouse."

"Yes," continued Drew. He glanced at Jen who looked at him hopefully. "And the cats and dogs that were suffering the same way, all were cured by simple orange juice."

"And so you think orange juice will cure Ron," said Mr. Harden. "While I see the leap in logic, I'm not sure you're right."

Jen chimed in again. "Daddy, its only OJ. It can't hurt him. But what if it really can cure him?"

Her father pulled Jen in for a hug. He rubbed her head, sighed heavily and said, "Oh honey, I know its only OJ, but if it doesn't work, you'll be devastated. I don't want you to be hurt like that."

“Oh daddy,” she said, and pushed herself to arms length. “I’m already devastated. If we don’t try I don’t think I’d ever forgive myself.”

Mr. Harden sat down and gently grasped Ron’s hand again. He sat like that for so long Drew thought he simply tried to ignore them. Suddenly he turned and said, “Well, it is only orange juice. And I suppose if I didn’t let you give it to him now, you’d only sneak back later and do it. Give me the OJ.”

“You know I would,” smiled Jen.

She handed him the pint and she and Drew watched with baited breath as Mr. Harden opened it and propped up Ron on some pillows. He gently poured some into his mouth. At first Ron started to gag, but then that eating reflex or memory, or whatever it was that remained, took over and Ron gulped the juice. Mr. Harden gently tipped the pint up until the entire contents were gone. He then threw the empty pint in the small garbage pail in the corner.

And then they waited. Jen shuffled from foot to foot. Drew tapped his foot and wiped his sweaty palms repeatedly on his pant legs. The minutes dragged on.

Finally, after fifteen minutes Mr. Harden said, “How long was it supposed to take?”

Gloomily Jen said, “Dr. Wilde said minutes, but not how many.”

“We’ll wait a little longer,” said Mr. Harden and patted Jen’s arm.

Something in his tone made Drew think he wasn’t sure it would change things, that he was only doing it to humor his daughter. Or maybe help ease her disappointment. Drew was shocked as the minutes continued to tick by. They sat in this uneasy silence for nearly an hour.

Finally Mr. Harden whispered softly, “I’m sorry honey. I know you meant well. I really hoped it would work too.”

Jen shook her head. Tears welled in her eyes. As they rolled down her cheeks Drew thought his own heart was going to burst through his chest. He couldn’t stand seeing her hurt. Not like this. She fell into her father’s embrace and they both sobbed. Drew turned away, and settled his gaze on Ron’s limp

form. If he didn't know better, he would say Ron only slept. His chest rose and fell in regular intervals. His color was good too, cheeks flush and healthy. His eyes were moving beneath their lids like he dreamt. It was all very disconcerting. He found a seat and put his head in his hands. He wasn't going to cry, but he felt helpless.

"Why's everyone so sad?" asked Ron. "And where the hell am I?"

It was like having a bucket of cold water thrown over you. No, thought Drew, it was like jumping into a giant vat of ice water. No, he thought once more, this was what it must be like to jump into the Arctic Ocean naked.

Jen and Mr. Harden must have felt the same shock. They stared open-mouthed at Ron, who looked back at them, his quirky smile a mixture of confusion and happiness.

Jen was the first to react. She threw herself on Ron and hugged him. "Oh Ron, you're okay!"

"Oof," groaned Ron. "Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Ron," said Mr. Harden. "You've been in the hospital for the last few days, unconscious and unresponsive."

"Really," said Ron looking around. "I guess I am. What happened?"

"You were zombified," said Jen.

"Jen," Mr. Harden lectured, "That's not nice."

"Cool," said Ron. "Did I eat any brains?"

Jen and Drew laughed out loud and even Mr. Harden cracked a smile.

"No," said Mr. Harden who hugged Ron. "But if it made you smarter I might have wished for it. Thank goodness you're okay." He pulled himself away from his son and said, "I'm going to get the doctors in here. I want to make sure you're okay."

After Mr. Harden left Ron said, "So what happened? I've been in here for days? The last thing I remember was going to school. How was I zombified?"

Jen said, "Mr. Schwartz has been turning animals and kids into zombies. Remember the lemonade you drank? Well, that's

something he calls Compound Z and he's been testing it on people for a while now."

"I knew that guy was a weirdo, but I never would have thought," said Ron. "You tell the cops?" he asked.

"We tried, but they didn't believe us," said Drew.

"They will soon enough," said Jen emphatically. "We're going to get proof."

"How?" asked Ron and Drew together.

"Tomorrow," explained Jen, "We're going to follow Mr. Schwartz and when the time is right we'll confront him. Get him to say something on tape," she said and brandished her digital recorder.

"We have school tomorrow," said Drew.

"Go if you want Drew," said Jen matter-of-factly, "But I'm going to catch him, if it's the last thing I do."

Drew shrugged and said, "Okay," and was surprised at how easy it was to agree to cut school simply because Jen wanted him to. Or maybe it was the chance to spend the entire day with her. He was also briefly surprised he wasn't scared. However, that feeling didn't last.

Chapter 17

At seven the next morning Drew met Jen at her house. "So what's your plan?" he asked.

"We hide out in the bushes and wait until Mr. Schwartz leaves," she explained. "Then we follow him."

"Why not just confront him here?" asked Drew.

"Cause, silly," she chided. "He's dangerous. Remember the last time? I plan on doing it in a very public place if I can. Less likely he'll try to hurt us."

They pedaled their bikes over to Mr. Schwartz's house. Mr. Schwartz's work van was gone. Instead they were greeted by Miss Myrna as she climbed into her bus.

"Mornin' children," she called. "Need a lift to school?"

"No thanks ma'am," replied Jen.

"You know, the school is the other direction," she said knowingly.

Drew didn't know what to say. He was a terrible liar. Jen, however, was quick on her feet.

"Of course," said Jen who then borrowed her brother's line. "We wanted to talk to Mr. Schwartz. He said he had some books he wanted to donate to the school library."

“Well, that doesn’t sound like Mr. Schwartz,” remarked Wanda, “but even so, you’ve missed him. He’s off to work already.”

“Oh drat,” said Jen. “We were supposed to meet him this morning and get the books. Maybe we misunderstood and he meant us to meet him at work?”

“Maybe so,” said Wanda. “Check over at the Ohio Maintenance office over on Riverside Drive. He might check in there, or at least they might point you in his direction.” She paused and then added, “Children, I wouldn’t normally say something like this, mainly because I don’t condone talking bad about people and all, but, well, I don’t rightly think Mr. Schwartz is a nice person. I have my reasons. You just remember that ole Miss Myrna thinks you should keep a wide berth of that man, understood?”

“Thanks Miss Myrna! And we will,” said Jen.

Miss Myrna climbed into her bus and closed the door with a smile and a wave.

When they arrived at the Ohio Maintenance office they were greeted by a middle-aged woman with long black hair tied up in a bun perched on the top of her head. A pen polked out from the bun and completed the hairstyle.

“Old Newman?” she drawled. “He’s off already. Not rightly sure which building he’d be at. He works between three different ones. You might try Voigt Hall on College Street.” She checked her watch and then added, “You might try the Court Street Diner. He always has his breakfast there. It’s early enough, you might still catch him.”

“Thanks!” chirped Jen cheerfully.

They pedaled over to the Court Street Diner and leaned their bikes against the back of the building. They rounded the front and peered in through a window.

Jen said, “There he is, in the corner booth by himself, reading the newspaper.” She took a deep breath and said, “Ready? Let’s go.”

Drew grabbed her arm. He had a sudden inspiration. “Wait a second,” he said.

“Afraid?” she teased.

“Yes,” he said, “But that’s not all. I think I’ve got a better idea.”

A businessman walked up to the door and Drew called out to him. “Excuse me sir,” he said. “There’s a tow truck trying to find the owner of a Maintenance Ohio van, parked illegally.”

“Sorry son,” smiled the man. “Not mine.”

“Well, could you ask inside?” countered Drew. “I’m going to check the cinema. I’d hate to see it towed.”

“Sure thing son,” said the man with a smile. “That’s awfully nice of you,” he said and entered the diner.

“Quick,” said Drew as he dragged Jen around to the side of the building. They squatted down in the bushes and waited. In only a few seconds Mr. Schwartz hurried out of the diner and around the back. He walked right past their hiding place.

“Let’s go,” hissed Drew and darted for the front door.

Jen followed him inside the diner and once the door closed hissed, “What are you doing?”

Drew whispered, “Keep an eye out,” and walked over and sat down in Mr. Schwartz’s seat. Before him stood an almost empty coffee mug and a glass of water. Drew pulled out the stolen vial of Compound Z and unscrewed the cap. He hovered it over the water for a moment and then decided on the coffee mug. He emptied most of the vial’s contents into the mug and screwed the cap on tight. He slipped out of the booth and grabbed a waitress with a coffee urn as she walked by. “More coffee for my uncle please,” he asked politely. She smiled sourly and poured and said, “Uncle, huh. I feel bad for you,” and then she sauntered off.

Drew waived Jen over and said, “Let’s wait over here,” and pulled her to the rear of the diner, next to the restrooms. They could see the door and Mr. Schwartz’s booth but there was a fake tree on the corner that offered a screen of sorts. Not much of a hiding place, but enough, thought Drew.

In less than a minute Mr. Schwartz returned just as a waitress dropped his plate of food on his table. He walked up to the businessman who sat at the counter and sneered angrily, “No

tow truck anywhere. Thanks for wasting my time. You're lucky my food didn't get cold."

The businessman looked up at him over his newspaper and said, "Well, how's that for a thank you. Leastways you'd think you'd rather be safe than sorry. Next time I'll be sure to keep my mouth shut and you can take your chances." He looked away and said to himself, but loud enough for everyone to hear, "Rather have warm eggs and no car, humph!" and then studiously ignored Mr. Schwartz's angry glare.

Finally, Mr. Schwartz turned away and sat down. He picked his fork up and ate. Jen and Drew watched him eat. The first time he sipped his coffee Drew held his breath, but Mr. Schwartz didn't taste his own Compound Z. They continued to watch until the waitress cleared his empty plate and refilled his coffee again.

Drew took a deep breath and said, "Ready?"

"For what?" asked Jen nervously.

"To confront him," said Drew. "Get your recorder ready, okay."

"What are you going to say?" asked Jen. She pulled the recorder out and pushed play and then slipped it back into her pocket.

"I don't know," said Drew and without further ado walked around the corner, down the aisle and slipped into the booth opposite Mr. Schwartz. Jen stood for an awkward moment and then slid in next to Drew.

Mr. Schwartz eyed them warily at first. Then something changed. Drew could see it in his face. It softened and his lips very nearly quirked into a smile, like he knew something they didn't.

"So you two snoops think you have me, do you?" he asked.

Drew expected their presence might unnerve the man, perhaps send him into a fit of rage. Give them something to hang him with. But this calmness, this bold demeanor was unlooked for, and unnerved Drew. Jen squirmed in her seat next to him. Drew changed his direction.

"I know you killed Shelly Dee," he said. His voice wavered slightly.

Mr. Schwartz sat up straight. His eyes widened and his face went pale.

It was Drew's turn to smile. "You dragged her beneath the bleachers and hung her there until she died, the night of the Spring Social."

Mr. Schwartz was not to be had so easily though. He quickly regained his composure and said, "You talk like you saw the whole thing, but why would I kill Shelly Dee? We were in love."

"Love?" Drew spat the word out as though it were poison. "You never loved her, but she adored you. One look at her yearbook bio and everyone could see she loved you. But you? I don't think so. You loved the lab."

Mr. Schwartz leaned back casually. "Even so, there is nothing to prove what you say," he replied smugly.

"You found out she was pregnant," said Drew.

Mr. Schwartz's look of surprise was priceless. "How could you know that?" he whispered. "She told no one, she promised."

Drew smiled, and tried to use that Cheshire grin he'd seen Jen use so effectively. "I can't tell you yet," said Drew. "Not until after I talk to the police."

Mr. Schwartz's eyes narrowed. After a long study of Drew he said, "You have nothing. If you did you would have gone already. What you want is a confession. You probably have a tape recorder on this very moment."

Jen squirmed and Mr. Schwartz smiled. "So the young lady has it then. Very well." He then raised his voice. "I sincerely regret Shelly Dee's untimely death. That she would take her own life was terrible to me, her boyfriend. I was devastated and all these years later you accuse me of the unthinkable? How dare you?"

Drew hesitated. What was he to do?

Mr. Schwartz looked up as the door opened. "Ah, look who it is. Officer Mallory. He usually comes in for his breakfast. I suppose I'll have to bother him." Mr. Schwartz threw his hand in the air and waved. "Officer Mallory!" he called.

Officer Mallory looked over and frowned. He then stepped over. "Morning Mr. Schwartz," he said and tipped his

hat. "Morning kids," he said to Jen and Drew and stared with disapproval. "Didn't expect you three to be having breakfast together. I thought I told you two to steer clear of Mr. Schwartz."

"Alas dear officer," said Mr. Schwartz. "It appears the brashness of youth has brought them before me today to accuse me of murder. Drew the floor is yours," he finished, and arrogantly waved his arm.

Officer Mallory frowned at Drew.

Drew paused, unsure. He had no proof, other than his own witness to the ghost of Shelly Dee, yet that would hardly stand up in court. But he still had one pitch left to hit. His father used that expression and it saddened him momentarily. Yet the thought of his father gave him courage. "We know you are the one responsible for turning those students into zombies," declared Drew. He was surprised at how calm he was, how steady he held his voice. His heart was hammering in his chest.

Officer Mallory said, "I thought I told you Drew, not to confront Mr. Schwartz with these crazy allegations? I think its time we had a chat with your grandmother."

"But I have proof!" said Drew.

Mr. Schwartz scoffed. "I'd love to see this proof. No more than an idle boy's imagination running wild."

"Is it?" asked Drew as he withdrew the vial from his pocket. He shook it so the little liquid in the bottom swished around.

If Drew thought the sight of the vial would unnerve Mr. Schwartz, he was sadly mistaken. Mr. Schwartz didn't rise to the bait. He leaned back and calmly said, "That's a pretty little thing you have there. May I ask what it is?"

Drew said, "It's your Compound Z. We read about it in your journal. We read about how you tested it on animals first and then on those college kids."

Mr. Schwartz huffed. "Really children, you'll have to explain what you mean. I have no idea what you're talking about." He turned to Officer Mallory and asked, "Really Officer Mallory, how long must I endure this farce?"

"That's enough Drew," said Officer Mallory sternly. "Let's go, the both of you," he ordered.

Jen stood meekly, but Drew leaned forward. "Aren't you even a little curious what happened to the rest of this vial?" he said, and shook the vial again. "It's almost empty." He didn't wait for a response. Instead he stood up and said, "Well, I'll tell you. You just drank your own Compound Z."

Mr. Schwartz's eyes narrowed. Drew could see the man considered this new possibility.

Mr. Schwartz said, "Impossible."

"Is it?" challenged Drew. "I asked that man," he said pointing to the gentleman at the counter who now watched with interest, "to mention a tow truck wanting to tow your van. While you were out I sat in your seat and poured Compound Z into your coffee cup. I then asked that waitress," he pointed to the waitress who also watched this scene play out, "To refill your coffee."

The waitress nodded and smiled. "Yes sir," she said with a smirk. "And I wouldn't have filled it otherwise."

Drew said, "So you see, in a matter of hours, maybe a day or two at most, I'm not really sure, you will become like those others. A zombie. But if you confess, tell the authorities what is in your Compound Z, maybe they can make an antidote."

Drew stepped back a pace from the table and looked around. The entire restaurant stared at them, curious to what went on. He could hear whispers, and the word zombie was repeated several times. Of course everyone in town was familiar with the story.

Mr. Schwartz stared at Drew, icily at first and then a change slowly overtook his countenance. Anger, Drew thought. Mr. Schwartz's cheeks were turning bright red and his eyes narrowed dangerously. He looked at his empty coffee cup and back again at the vial Drew held lazily in his hand.

"You ignorant little fool!" he spat. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Drew smiled, that Cheshire Grin. "I think I've turned the last person in Athens into a zombie. At the very least it'll be the end of that. And I can't think of a better way for you to suffer either."

“There is no antidote you fool!” he hissed. “It took me years to formulate Compound Z and it could take years to develop an antidote. My god,” he said suddenly desperate. “I need to get to my lab. There isn’t much time!”

Mr. Schwartz lurched to his feet and tried to shove past them, but Officer Mallory grabbed his arm and with a quick twist had it pinned against his back. He forced Mr. Schwartz’s head down onto the table and pulled out his handcuffs.

“You aren’t going anywhere I’m afraid,” said Officer Mallory. “Except to jail. You have the right to remain silent.”

Mr. Schwartz struggled for a moment. “You can’t do this!” he shouted. “I must get to the lab immediately! There isn’t a moment to lose!”

Officer Mallory said, “I thought you didn’t have a lab?” as he ignored his frantic pleas and read him the rest of his Miranda Rights. By the time he finished Mr. Schwartz had gone limp and had actually sobbed.

“What have you done? What have I done? My god, I’m ruined!” he shrieked.

“What they’ve done Mr. Schwartz is something none of us could do,” said Officer Mallory. “They’ve caught the man responsible for poisoning those poor kids.”

Mr. Schwartz sobbed as Officer Mallory led him meekly to the door. “They’re heroes Mr. Schwartz, and you’re the villain and you’re off to jail. But don’t worry. We have an antidote.”

Mr. Schwartz suddenly came alive. “What do you mean?”

Officer Mallory winked at Drew and said, “We received a call from the hospital. It appears that good old-fashioned orange juice seems to snap those kids out of their stupor. So you don’t really have to worry about being comatose for life.”

Mr. Schwartz stood up straight. “Orange juice? Of course,” he said to himself. “The acidity would act as a natural reagent. It could work.”

“It does work,” said Officer Mallory. “And we’re going to use it on you too. But only after you’ve suffered the same fate as your victims.”

Mr. Schwartz seemed to recover himself somewhat and anger surged anew. He shook himself once in Officer Mallory’s

clutches and then sneered at Drew and Jen. "You meddlesome children! You'll regret this day. I swear it!"

"That's enough!" said Officer Mallory. "Let's go!" and he pushed him roughly out the door.

As the door swung closed Drew let out a deep breath. Jen turned to him and smiled. Not that Cheshire grin either. This was something new to Drew and he liked it. She then threw her arms around him and hugged him.

The entire restaurant then erupted in cheers. The businessman came over and slapped him on the back. Everyone stood, clapped and whooped, but Drew barely heard any of it. He could smell Jen, her flowery scent gently caressed his nostrils, her warm body pressed firmly against his. He started to feel light-headed and his world shrank to nothing except her in his arms. His entire body tingled as if he stood in the center of one of those static electricity balls. She must have felt something too. She leaned away from him and left her arms to rest on his shoulders, her hands clasped gently behind his neck. His arms wrapped around her waist, though he couldn't recall when he put them there. He was lost in her eyes, large brown pools that he wanted to drown in. Her expression was something new, however, and he wondered what it meant. Only for a second though, as she leaned forward and kissed him. Not a simple peck on the cheek either. She pressed her lips firmly into his and closed her eyes. Drew stood still, shocked for a second, and his lips stiffened. Then something triggered inside him, some natural reflex and he closed his eyes and kissed her back. He was vaguely aware of the thunderous applause. He was too busy as he watched the fireworks go off against the back of his eyelids, lost in the warm softness of her lips.

Chapter 18

Drew pulled on his pale pink bow tie, and dug his finger into the starchy collar that chafed his throat. He felt awkward in his tuxedo, a simple black design with a matching pink cummerbund at his waist. He shrugged his shoulders, still unused to the feel of a tailored jacket. Even his shoes were uncomfortable. His feet felt like two sausages squeezed into leather skins a size too small. On top of it all he sweated profusely, though it was a cool June evening.

He rang the bell at Jen's front door and waited an interminable amount of time – all of five seconds before the door opened. There stood Mr. Harden. He beamed a friendly smile.

"Welcome Drew. Come in, come in," he opened the door wide and ushered Drew through. "Jen's not ready yet, but Ron's dressed and in the family room."

"Thank you sir," said Drew. "I've got a corsage for Jen. Pink like she wanted," he said and extended his prize still packed in a small clear box.

"You hold on to that a minute Drew," he said. He led Drew into the family room where Ron sat on the sofa. He

watched an episode of Ghost Hunters International on the television.

Ron hit the pause button and said, "Hey Drew! Have a seat, this could take a while. Girls!" he added with a chuckle. "Spend half your life waiting at red lights and the other half waiting for girls!"

Drew chuckled nervously and sat on the sofa by Ron.

Ron said, "You ever see this show?"

Drew shook his head no.

"These guys are crazy. They go all over the world hunting ghosts at some of the notoriously haunted places. Right now they're in a castle in Scotland and they've got some nasty elemental they're chasing. Crazy!"

Ron's dad asked, "Would you like a drink Drew? I'm afraid Ron's mostly right. Jen might be a few minutes more."

Drew nodded. "Water would be fine."

They watched the television for what seemed like hours to Drew, though it was really only a few minutes. Then Mr. Harden came downstairs, camera in hand and said, "She's ready. May I present Miss Jennifer Harden, future Queen of the Athen's High School Prom."

Drew stood and watched the stairs. He held his breath as he heard a gentle rustle precede the appearance of the hem of a pale pink gown. A few more steps and Drew could see her. She was beautiful in her dress, and her hair was pulled up on one side and fell over her shoulder in brown waves. She was the picture of elegance as she descended the stairs. She smiled at her dad who snapped pictures the whole while. Then she turned to Drew and smiled that new smile he enjoyed so much. It was his smile, a smile for him and him alone.

"Hello Drew," she said. "You look handsome."

Drew blushed. "I've got you a flower, but it's ugly. I mean, it'll look ugly on you. No, that's not what I mean. Ugh," he said frustrated. "I mean you look so beautiful, you make everything else look so plain."

Jen blushed and said breathlessly, "Well, it took you a bit, but you certainly found the right words. Thank you," she said

and took the arrangement from Drew. "Dad, can you get me the boutonniere please?"

Her father disappeared and returned with a pale pink rose for Drew and after a few awkward minutes both corsage and boutonniere were pinned successfully to dress and lapel. Mr. Harden snapped pictures for the next three hours, though it really only lasted a few minutes.

Finally Jen said, "Enough daddy. Are you ready Drew?"

Drew nodded and Mr. Harden said, "You kids have a good time now. I'll be by to pick you up around ten o'clock, okay?"

"Sure thing pops," said Ron. "Let's go. We don't want to keep Officer Mallory waiting.

Outside waited Officer Mallory, in full dress uniform, as he stood next to his police cruiser. "You kids look amazing," he said as they came out. "Ready?" he asked as he opened his back door like a chauffeur.

"Thank you so much Officer Mallory," smiled Jen. "This is going to be awesome."

"It's the least I can do little miss," he said with a warm smile. "I'll even run the lights and siren for you. We'll arrive in style."

"Awesome!" exclaimed Ron. "The girls are gonna flip for me!"

Drew and Jen rolled their eyes and climbed inside. Ron jumped in the front seat and off they went. True to his word Officer Mallory turned on the lights and siren from the start, though he didn't speed. When they pulled up outside the gymnasium, couples gawked and pointed. When they climbed out Drew could hear the teenagers' envious words. One even shouted, "Better than a limo! Way to go guys!"

Officer Mallory said, "You kids have fun. But not too much fun. I'll see you inside. I agreed to chaperone. I'm Ms. Jenkins' date and I'd hate to be a party pooper."

"Thanks again sir," said Drew as Officer Mallory climbed into his patrol car and drove off to park.

The three of them filed inside. Drew felt like everyone stared, which was true. Everyone looked and talked and pointed, but it wasn't like before. It wasn't the freak they stared

at. They stared at a celebrity. Of course the story of how Drew and Jen helped catch Mr. Schwartz, the Mad Zombie Scientist as he was dubbed, was all over the news.

Ron ate it up. "Oh yeah," he said. "The ladies love a hero."

"Shut up Ron," teased Jen playfully. "You're hardly the hero."

"Careful sis," he jibed back. "I may not be a zombie anymore but I've got this crazy hunger for brains," he said and reached for her head and moaned like a zombie.

"Not the hair Ron!" she squealed and laughed.

They took pictures, and then found their seats. The gym was decorated with flowers and balloons and streamers and banners. There were tables set with white linen and plates and glassware, like some fancy restaurant. There was a DJ table at the far end and there were strobe lights and colored flashing lights and half a dozen speakers blared music.

"They really went all out decorating," commented Ron.

"Not the Spring Social, is it," said Drew.

"Of course not silly," said Jen. "It's Prom. It's *the* dance of the year. They always go all out. It's supposed to be a night to remember."

Drew thought he'd never remember a thing. The night went on as if he were in a dream. They ate and he danced with Jen, even though he couldn't dance a lick. He couldn't say no to her. Thankfully she didn't make him dance too many fast songs. She did make him dance every slow song though. And he wouldn't trade one of them for the world, achy sausage feet be damned.

It was after one slow song later in the night that Jen excused herself saying, "I have to go powder my nose."

Drew gave her a funny look and asked, "What's wrong with your nose?"

"Nothing silly," she smiled. "That's just what girls say when they go to the bathroom."

"Oh," said Drew and blushed in embarrassment.

"I'll meet you back at our table," she said, but before she left she kissed him.

Not quite like the kiss in the diner, but close. It left him breathless and he stood and stared with a goofy grin as she walked to the bathroom, around the corner of the bleachers.

He went and sat down by himself, giddy. Ron talked with another boy over by the DJ booth. The song was a fast one and kids danced and looked like they had fun. Drew felt like he was on top of the world. He soared. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, and simply enjoyed the moment. As he sat, head back and eyes closed, he felt a cool chill. He opened his eyes and watched his breath mist toward the ceiling. He sat forward and nearly fell backward out of his chair. Shelly Dee stood before him and she looked as scared as he felt. She waved to him to follow, and she ran off. She stopped before she disappeared around the corner of the bleachers and waved frantically for him to follow. He looked around, but no one acted any differently. Nobody paid any attention to him right now. What else could he do? He went after her.

When he turned the corner he was totally unprepared for what happened next. Shelly Dee stood and pointed underneath the bleachers. He took three dreadful steps closer and looked where she pointed. There, in the shadows beneath the bleachers stood Jen, her face caught in a sliver of light as it shone through the benches above. Yet she was taller for some reason.

He stepped closer and said, "Jen, what are you doing here?"

A shadow moved beside her and a face appeared in another sliver of light. He'd recognize that face anywhere. An angular face stared back at him with a long nose with black glasses perched atop. Wispy gray hair silvered in the light. His breath caught and his heart lurched. He took another step forward.

"Mr. Schwartz," he stammered. "What are you doing here?"

Mr. Schwartz cackled, a maniacal sound and said, "I told you that you would regret meddling in my affairs."

Jen croaked, "Run Drew!" but her voice sounded choked off.

He took another step forward and then saw it. The stool. Jen stood on a stool and she had noose around her neck. Her hands pulled at her throat. She frantically tried to loosen the knot, but to no avail. The rope was strung up to the rafters and was taut. As she struggled, she nearly lost her footing. Her heels wobbled on the tiny stool, and she gagged.

"Isn't this a pretty picture," sneered Mr. Schwartz. "But don't worry Drew, I don't want to kill your pretty little friend out of hand. Come closer," he said.

Drew stood frozen where he was. Part of him wanted to run, that cowardly part, but the other part of him could never abandon Jen. Yet what could he do? He couldn't overpower Mr. Schwartz, could he? He could scream for help, but Jen might die before anyone could come. That's if anyone could hear his cries over the loud music.

"Come here now Drew," he ordered. "Or I give her a little shove and your pretty little plaything breathes her last strangled breath."

Drew still paused, stalled, and wondered what he might do.

"Don't think I will?" he dared. "I've done it before. You were right. About Shelly Dee. I don't know how you figured that one out, but I have done it before. You should have seen her eyes bulge. Her little legs kicking at air. Terrible sight really, if you actually care about the person." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Sure you don't want to come here? Last chance."

Drew sighed, and slumped his shoulders in defeat. He was only ten feet away. He took a resigned step and then another and then he ran, as fast as he could directly at Mr. Schwartz and threw himself at Mr. Schwartz's waist in an attempted tackle.

But Mr. Schwartz was bigger, stronger and unfortunately smarter. He deftly spun Drew around and before Drew knew what had happened he felt the noose slip over his head and tighten around his throat.

Mr. Schwartz's maniacal laughter blended with the music. Drew was suddenly hoisted off the ground by the noose and he felt the air cut off in his throat. He kicked his legs wildly for a

few seconds until he heard a scraping noise as something dragged on the floor.

Mr. Schwartz said, "Stop kicking and stand up you fool!"

Drew tried to stand and his toes found purchase. He was on a stool, faced right at Jen, his neck strung up like hers.

Mr. Schwartz was holding the end of Drew's rope tightly, but he hadn't tied it off.

"Now I've got you both, right where I want you," taunted Mr. Schwartz. "It's a real shame two young children die. Double suicide should really make a splash. Misunderstood youth and all that. The media will have a field day."

Drew looked around for help. Shelly Dee trembled only a few feet away, but she was only a ghost. No one could see her. No one could hear her. He could see students as they walked by the bleachers, as they went to and from the bathrooms, but they were too far away and it was too dark for anyone to see them. And the noose was too tight to scream. It was certainly too tight to scream loud enough for anyone to hear.

"But before I do this," continued Mr. Schwartz. "I have to know. I can't exactly have any loose ends lying around. How did you figure out about Shelly Dee? Tell me," he ordered and he let a little slack into the rope so Drew could just barely talk.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," said Drew.

"Try me," said Mr. Schwartz. "I'm a surprisingly good listener and I'm so curious to know how a forty year old murder was figured out by a teenager."

Drew had a sinking feeling they were going to die anyway. He looked at Jen and offered her a wan smile. He looked over at Shelly Dee, who still sobbed silently, unable to help. "Why were you trying to turn college kids into zombies? It doesn't have anything to do with Shelly Dee."

"Of course it doesn't," scoffed Mr. Schwartz. "The two events have nothing to do with one another." He paused a moment in consideration. Then he said simply, "Revenge. I was a professor at Ohio University and the university didn't like the direction my experiments were going. They pulled my grants and ordered me to stop but I didn't. So they let me go. Short-sighted fools."

"You'll never get away with this," croaked Drew.

"And your girlfriend won't survive the next minute if you don't tell me how you found out about Shelly Dee," warned Mr. Schwartz.

"She told me," Drew croaked past the noose.

"Who told you? Shelly Dee?" scoffed Mr. Schwartz. "I can hardly believe that. You'd have to talk to ghosts."

Drew said, "I told you that you wouldn't believe me."

Mr. Schwartz studied Drew in the dim light. "I'm going to kill your girlfriend here if you don't tell me the truth. Last chance."

Drew tried to scream, but it just came out a strangled yelp. "Don't kill her, please! I told you the truth! I see ghosts! They talk to me and they're nothing but trouble!"

Jen rasped, "He is telling the truth. That's why we brought him to your house. He's seen Jasper."

Mr. Schwartz studied the pair. "Jasper huh? He's a crazy old coot. Didn't do Shelly Dee any favors, that's for sure. Some grandfather."

Drew was so shocked he nearly fell off the stool.

"You didn't know that little tidbit, did you?" teased Mr. Schwartz. "Her mother was crazy. Drove her husband to jump in front of a bus. Then threw herself in front of the next car. She was less than a year old. Jasper was her only surviving relative. Huh, I bet there's a lot you don't know."

Drew was truly surprised now. He said, "I've seen what you just described, back in the graveyard weeks back. Now it all makes sense. The house, the graveyard, Jasper, Shelly Dee, they're all connected."

Mr. Schwartz scrutinized Drew for the lie. "Perhaps you are telling the truth."

"You're crazy," croaked Drew. "You'll never get away with this."

"I almost wish you could talk to ghosts," said Mr. Schwartz almost wistfully, his breath misted before his maniacal face. "I'd love to give old Jasper a piece of my mind."

Drew felt the hair on the back of his neck raise and the temperature dropped. "And just what would you say to him?" asked Drew.

"I'd tell him his granddaughter was a fool to think a Wyatt could ever be accepted by a Schwartz and he should have known better himself. I'd tell him my grandfather always thought him a buffoon Sherriff and took great pleasure at orchestrating the foreclosure and sale of his house – all to a private trust. A trust my father inherited, and was passed down to me. Yes, I own the house I live in, though everyone thinks I rent."

"Unbelievable," whispered Drew. He shivered with the cold chill that swept through the bleachers like a winter wind through a graveyard. "Maybe you'll get the chance to, real soon."

Mr. Schwartz scoffed again. "I don't believe in ghosts, or at least in their ability to affect our plane of existence. Simply put, they have no matter so they really don't matter."

Drew felt it before he saw it. A warm glow off to his left, right beside Mr. Schwartz, though no one else reacted to it. It grew larger and so bright Drew had to squint just to see. Suddenly the light dimmed, swirled and coalesced into a human form. As the light faded out, features grew discernable.

It was Jasper.

And he was angry.

Mr. Schwartz looked at his wristwatch and said, "Enough is enough. I've run out of time. You're a clever boy and so is your girlfriend. It's a shame you took your lives." And without another word he hauled on the rope, and hoisted Drew off the stool.

Drew clutched at his throat and immediately felt the air cut off. Spots began to appear and he was vaguely aware of his legs as they kicked wildly. The motion spun him slowly around. He saw Jen, her eyes wide and tears streamed down her face. He saw Jasper raise his arm and lower it with a blow so severe it dislodged the rope from Mr. Schwartz's hands.

Drew hit the ground and gasped for breath. As the spots cleared he looked up and saw Mr. Schwartz. He stared at his hands with disbelief.

"What did you do?" he asked.

Drew slipped the noose off his neck and stood on wobbly legs.

Mr. Schwartz saw Drew and sneered. "Say good bye to your girlfriend," he said and he kicked the stool out from under her.

She clutched her throat, and though her eyes were wide with panic, her body remained calm. Drew wrapped his arms around her waist and held her up. It relieved the pressure from the noose just enough.

"Can you loosen the rope?" asked Drew.

Before she could Drew was yanked from behind. He spun and twisted and squirmed and somehow managed to break free from Mr. Schwartz's grasp. Mr. Schwartz lunged at Drew again, but was yanked back. He saw a noose around Mr. Schwartz's neck and watched as he was hauled off his feet. He could see Jasper behind him. Jasper hauled on the rope until Mr. Schwartz kicked and frantically clawed at the noose.

Drew didn't waste another second on Mr. Schwartz. He turned back to Jen and once more grasped her waist and held her up.

"Can you get the noose loose," he asked.

Jen said, "I can't. It's too tight."

"Keep trying," urged Drew, but he knew he would get tired. He knew he couldn't hold her forever. They needed help. He looked over at Mr. Schwartz, who still dangled and fought for air. Jasper held him aloft and even in the dim light Drew could see the fervor in Jasper's eyes. He looked over at Shelly Dee, who was still huddled on the floor, hands clasped around her knees drawn up to her chest. "Help me Shelly," begged Drew. "Go get help, hurry!"

Shelly looked up, scared at first, then Drew recognized a determined look come over her. She stood and in an instant she ran, straight through the bleachers and into the gymnasium.

Drew couldn't see what happened, but in a few seconds he heard the sound system explode and could see the sparks fly and the flash of light, and the screams of students all taken by surprise. It sounded like mayhem, but the music was off, and as loud as the students screamed, they subsided quickly. In a

minute, things settled to a normal tone. That's when Drew screamed.

"Help!" he yelled. "Help! Under the bleachers, please help!"

It took only a few seconds for help to arrive. Ron, Ms. Jenkins and Officer Mallory darted underneath, his flashlight in hand and stopped dead in their tracks. A few students followed them. Drew thought it must look awfully strange, Drew held Jen up, kept her from hanging, while right behind him dangled Mr. Schwartz, apparently held up by thin air. Drew could see Jasper at the end of the rope, but he was sure all anyone else saw was a rope held taut by nothing.

"Help me please," begged Drew. "I can't hold her anymore."

Officer Mallory ran to Jen, loosened the noose and lifted it over her neck. She collapsed into Officer Mallory's arms and Drew sat down hard, exhausted. Then they all looked at Mr. Schwartz. His eyes bulged and his hands still clawed at the rope around his neck, but his legs kicked less and less.

Officer Mallory said in disbelief, "What in the hell is happening?"

Drew shook his head and addressed Jasper. "Don't do it Jasper," he said. "Please. He's going to jail forever. Isn't that enough?"

Jasper looked at Drew and considered.

Drew said again, "Please. Let him down. It's over."

Jasper stared at him a moment and then at Officer Mallory and with a salute to them both he released the rope from his invisible hands. Mr. Schwartz slumped to the ground and gagged.

Officer Mallory said, "I don't know what that was, but you Mr. Schwartz are under arrest." He then knelt over Mr. Schwartz, pulled his arms behind his back and slipped handcuffs on his wrists. "And this time there wont be any bail offered. Attempted murder on two counts will put you away for what life remains to you."

Jen knelt down and threw her arms around Drew's neck and whispered in his ear, "Thank you Drew."

Drew held her tight. Enveloped by her scent he felt like he could stay in her arms forever. Yet he could feel eyes on him. He pulled away and helped Jen to her feet. Before him stood Ron and Officer Mallory with Mr. Schwartz still dazed and handcuffed. Behind them were Ms. Jenkins and several students. Ms. Jenkins quickly ushered the students out from underneath the bleachers. Turning, Drew saw Jasper, his arm around Shelly Dee. They shared a smile and turned to Drew. He couldn't hear their words, but he recognized the words 'thank you'. A small dot of white appeared behind them and began to grow. Officer Mallory, Ron and Jen all let out a gasp, clearly able to see the light. The light grew brighter and brighter until they all shielded their eyes. Shelly Dee waved and she and Jasper turned to the light and walked. The light swallowed them in its brightness and with a final brilliant flash they, and the light, disappeared.

After a few moments of breathless silence Officer Mallory said, "I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it. But I suspect no one will ever believe me."

Drew smiled and said, "I know how you feel."

Jen clasped his hand in hers and said, "I believe it."

"I don't think we'll ever forget this night," said Officer Mallory. "But just the same, we should probably not say anything about what just happened."

"Yes," said Drew with a chuckle. He smiled at Jen and said, "How's that for an unforgettable prom?"

She smiled her new adoring smile and said, "With you Drew, I think I'm in for many more unforgettable nights." And then she kissed him.

The End

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Book 2 of the Last Defender Series

Available early 2019

*The Dragon's Eye – Preview***Chapter 1**

There was a hoary haughtiness to his gaze, like the frosted window in the steeple of a church. He didn't belong here. His clothes were plain, for a lord. Yet they bordered on extravagant for the smoke-filled tavern that smelled of stale ale and sweat. Someone hammered on a dulcimer in a far corner while bawdy lyrics in a drunken voice kept time. He was too young for this place as well. He was tall and gangly lean, as though his girth were two summers behind his length. He leaned on the corner of the scarred wooden rail as he disdainfully surveyed the tawdriness of the patrons. His dark hair was pulled neatly back with a braided leather cord. His dark eyes penetrated the smoky room to see things others surely missed. I could see he possessed a rare intelligence for one so young. If he were more than seventeen summers I would eat my lambskin boots. And he was dead if I did nothing.

I watched and I waited.

Smoke from the poorly ventilated fireplace occasionally wafted into my little slice of paradise, a dark corner of the Laughing Mule.

A surly group dicing erupted in an argument that quickly turned violent. Fists flew first, followed quickly by the thump of Big Baor's club. Big Baor was the hired tough keeping the patrons in line. He was big. He mostly kept them from killing each other. Though the freedom and adroitness with which he wielded his thick, knotted club of oak made me think the point

moot. In this latest quarrel Big Baor's club settled the argument evenly. Two men were dragged dazed and bleeding to the street.

They may kill each other outside tonight, yet their death was no concern of mine. The young lord had entered over a candle mark ago and held my attention. He waited and watched with equal parts disdain and morbid curiosity the baseness of his surroundings. He was waiting for someone.

The room looked back at him. Some cast a furtive glance, others ogled hungrily, but all let an eye wander over this young man so obviously out of his element. That is, all, but two men sitting at the other end of the bar. They appeared not to notice him at all. They were hard looking men standing out in a room full of hard looking men.

This young man perked up as a new stranger entered the dingy room. He caught the stranger's attention with a wave. The stranger nodded, waded through the crowd and sidled up to him. He was a big man. Not like Baor, but wiry, and slender and tall. Not thin like the younger man, rather he was an oak branch whittled into shape by weather and wear, lean yet strong. His clothes were those of a woodsman or hunter. They were travel stained and worn. He wore a short, curved sword at his hip as well as a long thin dagger. I was much too far away to hear what was said. A draught of ale arrived for the hunter. Their heads were lowered together, voices I'm sure pitched for their ears only. This new stranger pulled up suddenly. He angrily pushed off the bar. My finely dressed youth grabbed him by the arm, earning him a

glare from the stranger for his trouble. Whatever he said kept the hunter from leaving. He turned back to the bar and they talked another few moments. The youth pulled a hefty purse from his cloak and placed it on the bar. The surly stranger snatched it up and quickly hid it within the folds of his own cloak. He looked around, yet everyone was looking anywhere but at him. I could see the curse on his lips for the young fool. I watched the young man bristle in indignation. The stranger pulled a piece of parchment and mashed it into the young man's chest angrily. He pushed away from the bar, heading for the door, his hand gripping the bone handled knife at his belt. Eyes followed hungrily. Most eyed the sword and knife, and decided the purse wasn't worth the price. Except for the two men that had ignored my young friend earlier. They both looked at him as he left. They shared a glance with each other as the stranger left the tavern. One of them stood and made his way hastily to the door.

I stood to follow but the pull of my ring urged me to stay. I sat down. The hunter would have to take care of himself against the cutthroat. I watched the young man unfold the parchment. He stared at it for a long time before finally folding it into a pocket in his tunic. The second cutthroat had gone back to his drink, unconcerned. Another man well in his cups bumped into the young man. He apologized profusely and stumbled off. It earned him an irritated glare from the young gentleman. I slipped out from behind my seat as the drunkard stumbled by my table.

"A drink my good man?" I offered, stepping in his way and motioning to a chair.

The drunkard pulled up looking sharply at me. For a brief moment he didn't seem so deep in his cups. Then the glossy look returned to his eyes and he swayed a bit. "Migh' be a fine idea, migh be no'," he said. "Migh' be I ough' a be on me may, I mean way," he slurred. It was an excellent performance.

I leaned forward, eyeing him dangerously. "You can leave, but not before I get the young lord's purse," I said.

Gone was the glassy look, replaced with a wary one. One I've seen plenty on cornered men.

"You're mistaken sir," he said. "If you'll excuse me," he finished and tried to shoulder by me.

I grabbed him by his elbow. With my other hand, I slipped a dagger against his midsection. "I will gut you here if you insist," I threatened.

He froze and then cursed and said, "Bloody stone fool I was, thinking I could get a little coin for my troubles. Here!" he sputtered, tossing a purse on the table with a loud clink. Heads turned. "Now release me!"

I let him go and he scampered as quickly as he could out the door. I scooped up the purse and cursed under my breath. It was lighter than it should have been for a purse full of coin. I opened the drawstrings and looked inside. Round pieces of tin clinked together. "Fool!" I muttered, dropping the useless bag back on the table. I returned my attention to the young lord, but he was gone. "Stone fool indeed!" I swore.

I took a step toward the door when a young lady stepped in front of me, barring my way with a smile and doe eyes. Her dark hair was tied back in a flowing tail. She wore loose fitting breaches gathered at the

waist and ankles. Her shirt was the same airy material, the strings lacing up the front from her navel hung loose at the collar, and clung to her lithe frame, accentuating her figure well. Contrasting nicely, she wore her sleeves tucked into a thin steel band at her wrist, with strips of steel running up her forearm to a second band just below her elbow. I had seen these before, a sort of barrel-stave wrist greave. She wore the same running from her ankles to her knees.

"Hello my handsome fellow," she said, eyeing me up and down. "And where might you be from, for you're certainly not from Ishalem?"

"I'm from afar and have no time for idle talk with women," I said and put a hand on her shoulder to push her aside. Her smile set into a grimace and her eyes went steely. I could feel the point of a dagger on the inside of my leg, just beneath my crotch.

"Another move and I'll cut you," she threatened, her voice pitched low. "Two ways for it to end. I slice sideways," and I felt the pressure of her blade on my inner thigh. "And you bleed out after cutting that vessel in your leg, or I slice up," and now I felt the blade rise uncomfortably into my crotch. "And you live life as a eunuch. Tell me, which would you prefer?"

"There is a third way," I said remaining calm, despite the awkward pressure of a knife in my groin.

"Do tell," she cooed.

"You can put the blade away and I let you leave with your life," I said. "I have no quarrel with you and if you seek one with me be warned, it will not end well for you." I cast a look toward the door, growing impatient at this delay.

She looked to the door as well. "Perhaps you tell me what you want with the young master and I'll let you be?"

"You're his-," I was going to say 'man' but I settled for, "in his employ? Then you truly are making a big mistake. I mean him no harm."

"Then why do you ogle him from across the room," she asked, "and then move to follow him after he leaves. And who was that so-called drunk who paid you in coin just now? Did he hire you to kill the young master?"

I scoffed. "Take the coin and ask yourself how much death you could buy with it?" I challenged.

She looked at the bag I had left on the table, leaned over and scooped it up. Hefting it in her palm she said, "It's big enough to purchase a life."

I scoffed again. "Does it feel heavy enough to you?"

Irritated, she hefted the bag again but now her eyes narrowed. Keeping pressure on my inner thigh, she pulled the drawstring with her teeth and looked inside. Now it was her turn to tease. "It appears you were duped," she laughed.

Her laugh tinkled like crystal chimes swaying in a lazy summer breeze. It is strange to think such a thing about a woman with a knife to your groin. Yet I found her voice pleasant. "You mistake my intentions and have entirely missed the two toughs that were watching your master from the other side of the bar." I glanced over at the second man, and realized he was gone. I stifled a curse and said, "If you care about your master you should let me go now. They both are gone, as well as the so-called drunkard who stole whatever information your master just purchased. I thought it

was his purse, which he gladly let me believe the truth, and fed me this bag of tin to buy time to escape. Your master will not survive the next candle mark if he faces those three alone.”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, but I could see the confusion. “Two at the bar?” she said and looked over her shoulder. When she turned back to me her eyes sparkled as though she were privy to the joke. “I know the two you speak of and they never glanced his way,” she said.

The way the flickering candles and firelight danced in her sparkling eyes, it was like watching the reflection of stars in a rippling pool of water. The image was broken by the clear sound of steel against steel, carrying from outside. We both looked to the sound. She cursed and sprinted to the door, artfully dodging her way through the crowd.

I shouldered my large frame through the throng angering several patrons along the way. By the time I made it outside all I could hear were dashing footsteps off to my right. The street lamps cast a weary, flickering light. I sped after the sound of footsteps and heard a clamor ahead, steel upon steel.