

Fallwell Paranormal Research

Book 1: Case# 20151022F

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"Is that it?" Charity asked hopefully.

"No such luck." Alana said tiredly.

"It's less than ten days until Halloween. Remember, this is our holiday season." Derek said, obviously trying to inject some cheer into the conversation.

"People see a few jack o'lanterns and all of a sudden every time a floorboard creaks, they're sure that their house is haunted." Charity said wearily.

"Let's just tough it out. We're almost done." Alana reassured her, then continued, "Case number 20151022F, our contact is named Lorraine Hyde. She called on us regarding a friend of hers who just moved into a house that she's sure is haunted."

"Seriously? Let me guess, creaking floorboards and an unexplained feeling of being watched." Charity said tiredly.

"Actually, no. Keep in mind that what Lorraine told me is second hand, but... just listen. There are some elements of this that caught my attention." Alana said seriously.

"It's your show." Derek said simply.

"Right. Let's see. To start with, it appears that the house already has something of a reputation for being haunted." Alana began.

"Just like ninety percent of the houses in Massachusetts." Charity interjected.

Alana didn't dignify the statement with more than a glance in Charity's direction, then she continued, "The Hinton family moved into the house three weeks ago and almost immediately, started on renovations."

"Okay. So far we have a known haunted house and renovations, that's two red flags." Derek said seriously.

"Lorraine, she goes by the name Lorra, made contact with one of the members of the household to find out if they've experienced any paranormal activity. Antonia Hinton, who goes by Toni, reported hearing whispering voices that sounded afraid." Alana said carefully.

"If every person who thought they heard voices was actually experiencing a haunting, we'd be up to our necks in ghosts." Charity said frankly.

"Granted. But typically, when people are telling ghost stories, they talk about the ghosts saying something ominous. Lorra said that Toni only hears panicked whispers and faint running footsteps." Alana said carefully.

"There's the creaking floorboards." Charity said quickly.

Alana smiled, despite herself, then asked, "Happy?"

"Yeah, I am if we're almost done. Believe it or not, I really *do* have a life outside of this place." Charity said honestly.

"I'll believe *that* when I have verifiable evidence." Derek said with a grin in her direction.

"One last detail, then we can make a decision." Alana said quickly.

Derek and Charity looked at her expectantly.

"Lorra and Toni are both thirteen years old." Alana said simply.

"A pubescent girl, a haunted house AND renovations? No wonder you wanted us to look at this one." Derek said frankly.

"It's just whispers and creaks." Charity said firmly.

"It's possible that the girls just got spooked." Alana conceded, then continued, "But it looks like we have all the ingredients needed to spawn a paranormal event. That's all I've got. Do we investigate?"

"Investigate what? Hearing voices? There's a pill you can take for that." Charity said flatly.

"I say we start a case file and mark it as 'active'. We can check back with them after Halloween and see if things have settled down." Derek said thoughtfully.

"That sounds reasonable to me. Charity?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I guess. But I'm still betting that this is all because that little girl got her first taste of estrogen and didn't know how to handle it." Charity said sourly.

"That's it. I'll see you tomorrow night. We're going to be investigating the haunted bridge, south of town." Alana said as she gathered her files.

"All my friends get to go out to dinner and a movie on Friday nights. Me? Noooooo. I get to hang around an old bridge, waiting for 'ghosties' to show themselves." Charity grumbled.

"If you hate it so much, you don't have to go. We can cover it without you." Derek said frankly.

"I fell for that *once*. I took a night off and you collected evidence that I couldn't debunk, because I wasn't there." Charity said seriously.

"Don't you trust me?" Derek asked with a knowing grin.

"Not as far as I could throw you."

"Before we look at the new potential cases, I have one to look at from last week." Alana said seriously.

Charity and Derek both looked at her cautiously.

"Case number 20151022F. To review, Lorra contacted us about the Hinton family moving into a house that was rumored to be haunted. Then they started making renovations." Alana said carefully.

"I remember this one. I'm still claiming estrogen poisoning." Charity said simply.

"I received word today that Toni and Lorra had an incident last night where they actually SAW an apparition. Perhaps the most telling thing is, from what Lorra said, the apparition also saw *them*."

Charity let out a long sigh before asking, "What did the ghost do?"

"It said something, then disappeared." Alana said seriously.

Derek waited for a moment. When Charity didn't ask and Alana didn't volunteer it, he finally asked, "What did it say?"

"Lorra said that she couldn't make it out, but according to Toni, it said, 'I can't be here', then it faded away." Alana said carefully.

"So we have a ghost that doesn't believe in ghosts?" Charity speculated.

"Possibly. But I think, more importantly, that this may have just escalated the case from being a purported residual haunting to an active one." Alana said carefully.

"Is that it? Is that all that happened?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Toni's reported hearing the whispers and footsteps every night, but that was the only report of a visual manifestation or any indication of awareness." Alana said seriously.

Charity nodded thoughtfully.

"Do we want to investigate?" Alana asked carefully.

"No. A couple of giggly girls gave each other the creeps and thought that they saw something." Charity said in a voice that didn't seem to be entirely sure.

"Actually, I don't think there's enough to justify our participation, either. But if I were you, I'd keep that file handy. It looks like it's heading that direction." Derek said seriously.

"It's four days until Halloween. If it's going to happen, I'm guessing it will be soon." Alana said before closing the folder.

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"What's the emergency?" Charity asked as she rushed into the office.

"Miss Lessing, it's nice to see you again. I've been praying for you."

"Thanks, Father Francis, I can't tell you how much that means to me." Charity said flatly.

Father Francis laughed at the response, then turned when Derek hurried into the room.

"The van's loaded. Can you tell us what this is all about, now?" Derek asked hopefully.

"Father?" Alana prompted.

"I received a call last night from some rather distraught people, I believe you know of them, a Mr. and Mrs. Hinton." Father Francis said carefully.

"We've heard of them. What's going on?" Alana asked cautiously.

"They told me that their house was haunted and that they wanted my help. I could tell that they were in distress so, of course, I

hurried right over. It was my intention to sit and talk with them quietly for a time, to reassure them and help them find some sort of peace. However, when I arrived, I encountered a presence unlike anything I've ever experienced before."

"You got a creepy feeling?" Charity guessed.

"I believe the correct terminology for what I experienced is 'diabolic confusion'. As soon as I entered their house, something began assaulting me, making it impossible for me to think clearly." Father Francis said seriously.

"We've been hearing about a possible haunting, but we didn't have any reason to believe that it had escalated to that point." Alana said carefully.

"I don't claim to know much about your business and beliefs. But this seems to be more in your realm of expertise than mine. When the older girl, Toni, said that she and a friend had been in contact with you, I thought that I would let you know what I had encountered and allow you time to investigate. While you are doing so, I can prepare my spiritual defences so that I will be available to help, should you need my assistance at some point." Father Francis said carefully then got up from his chair.

"It's sounding more and more like we might." Alana said gravely.

"Do you really think it's for real?" Derek asked cautiously.

"There's only one way to find out." Alana said seriously.

"When a person dies, that's it. The end. I don't know what they're experiencing in that house, but I seriously doubt that it's anything *spiritual*." Charity said frankly.

"Miss Lessing, I very sincerely hope that you're right." Father Francis said firmly before leaving the room.

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"How do you want to handle this when we get there?" Derek asked as he started the van.

"Since I haven't had direct contact with the family before, I think that I should talk to them to make sure that they will allow us to do an investigation. If they agree, then I'd like for Charity to do her preliminary environmental sweep while Derek sets up a command center. Once I've gotten the basic information from the family, I'll start doing EMF readings with the K2 meter to see if I can locate any hot spots and I'll scout locations for cameras as I go." Alana said thoughtfully.

"Do you have any theory as to why this escalated so quickly?" Derek asked cautiously.

"What's tomorrow?" Alana asked him frankly.

"You can't seriously believe that Halloween has anything to do with this at all." Charity said in astonishment.

"No. I don't believe that it does." Alana said simply, then paused for a moment before continuing, "But unlike you, I don't already believe that it doesn't, either. I'm willing to wait and see where the evidence leads me."

"There it is." Derek said as he pulled up in front of the house.

A light flashed three times in one of the upper bedrooms before the window went completely dark.

"Do you think that means that they know we're here?" Derek asked nervously.

"There's no such thing as ghosts." Charity said firmly.

"Right." Derek said before opening the door.

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"Mrs. Hinton, my name is Dr. Alana Travago from Fallwell Paranormal Research. Father Francis stopped by our office and suggested that we might be able to help you."

"It's really you! Thanks for coming!" One of two girls said as they appeared from behind the woman standing in the doorway.

"Lorra?" Alana guessed.

"Yeah! I can't believe that you're really here!" Lorra said excitedly.

"We do our best to help out when we can." Alana said to her, then looked back to Mrs. Hinton inquisitively.

"Excuse me, Dr. Travago, but are you serious? Do you really think that you can help us?" Mrs. Hinton asked cautiously.

"Please call me Alana. To answer your question, maybe. If you will allow it, we will investigate what is happening here and try to make sense of it. I really can't say much more until I have a better idea of what we're dealing with, but if it's at all possible, we'll try to make things better, if we can." Alana said carefully.

"How much is this going to cost?" Mr. Hinton asked as he walked up behind his wife.

"We're a non-profit doing paranormal research. We're funded with grants and donations. We don't charge anything." Alana said seriously.

A shriek sounded from inside the house and Mrs. Hinton suddenly yelped, "Zoe!"

Alana waited outside the doorway, wanting very much to investigate what was happening inside the house as she watched Mrs. Hinton dash away.

"We just have to say 'yes'?" Mr. Hinton asked cautiously.

"That, and allow us to bring in some equipment so we can try to document what is happening. Hopefully, that will allow us to make sense of all of this." Alana said simply.

"Alright. Please, just make it stop." Mr. Hinton said anxiously.

"Can I help?" Lorra asked hopefully.

Alana smiled at her, then took a device off her belt and said, "This is a K2 meter. It measures electromagnetic fields. If you want, you could walk around the first floor of the house and take readings for me. Keep track of anyplace that has a reading outside the green range and let me know what you found when you're done."

"Really!?! Thanks!" Lorra said as she accepted the device.

As Lorra began to walk away, Toni moved to follow.

"Toni, I believe that you will probably be the best source of information on what's been happening up to now. Would you join us for a talk?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Yes, Ma'am." Toni said quietly as she stopped.

Alana turned to her team and said, "Go ahead and get started while I conduct the interview."

Charity and Derek were primed and ready to move into action.

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Alana walked into the house and it was easy to see that they were still in the midst of unpacking as well as renovation.

In the living room, most of the walls had been stripped down either to the studs or the masonry, which had previously been hidden behind drywall or plaster. There was a large brick fireplace, which appeared to be original to the house and was obviously non-functional, taking up one wall at the far end of the room.

From the look of it, the demolition had been completed and the debris cleared away, but they had yet to begin reconstruction.

As Alana walked further into the house, she noticed that the dining room appeared to be a storage area for boxes. No demolition appeared to have been done in the room, but it also appeared not to have received more than a quick sweep, as far as cleaning. Fortunately, in the next room the kitchen table and chairs were available for their use.

The kitchen proper was a smallish space and Alana could imagine that cooking in there was more of a chore than was necessary due to the cramped and confused layout. From the age of the house, Alana guessed that the current incarnation of the kitchen had been wedged into an area that had originally been designed for some other purpose. There were no signs of renovation being done, although, in Alana's opinion, it was the room that probably needed it most.

At the other end of the room, Mrs. Hinton was sitting at the kitchen table, holding her youngest daughter on her lap, doing her best to comfort the distraught child.

"Is she alright?" Alana asked with concern.

"Zoe felt something touch her leg. She's fine." Mrs. Hinton said in a soothing voice.

"Hello, Zoe. My name is Alana." Alana said gently.

The girl didn't make any move to acknowledge the statement.

After a moment, Alana opened her notepad and finally asked, "Toni, can you start at the beginning and tell me what's been going on here?"

Toni looked at her parents nervously for a moment, then quietly said, "It started last week. I kept hearing whispering and footsteps. No one else said anything about hearing them, so I didn't tell anyone."

Alana looked from Mr. to Mrs. Hinton and asked, "Did either of you notice any whispering or unexplained footsteps?"

"I might have." Mr. Hinton said quietly, then explained, "I just figured that it was an old house settling or something like that. I never gave it much thought."

Alana jotted down a note, then told Toni, "Go on."

"I guess what happened next was that Lorra found out where I was living and started asking me if there was anything strange going on. She said that this house was haunted." Toni said carefully.

"So you told her about what you had been hearing?" Alana asked speculatively.

Toni nodded.

"Tell me, can you remember if it sounded like the voices were always saying the same thing, or did it sound like people having different conversations?" Alana asked cautiously.

"The same. It sounded like it was always the same, over and over." Toni said thoughtfully.

Alana made another note, then asked, "What happened next?"

There was a sudden flash of light and the lightbulb over the sink exploded.

Zoe made a quick yelp of fear and clutched her mother more tightly.

Alana looked around to be sure that nothing else was happening before asking again, "What happened next?"

"Um, I um... I think it was Tuesday when Lorra was here and we were in my room. I was talking to her about what was happening when we saw this guy walking by the open door... he was about our age... maybe a little bit older. He was wearing a white shirt and

dark pants. Lorra and I were both frozen. The guy stopped all of a sudden and turned. Then he looked right at us! He said, 'I can't be here', then he just kind of broke apart and was gone. I mean, he didn't walk away, he just kind of dissolved into nothing, right there in front of us." Toni said quietly and it was clear that she was still shaken by the memory.

"If I remember correctly, Lorra didn't hear it, but you did. Is that right?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Yeah. She heard him say something, but she couldn't make out what it was." Toni confirmed.

A loud clanking, like something banging against the water pipes, started sounding in the room.

"Is that your people doing that?" Mr. Hinton asked loudly, to be heard over the din.

"I doubt it." Alana said anxiously.

"What's making all that noise?" Lorra asked as she hurried into the room, still carrying the K2 meter.

"I'm not sure. Would you go into the kitchen and see if there are any elevated EMF readings?" Alana asked seriously.

"Yeah. I guess." Lorra said hesitantly, but forced herself to walk into the dimly lit room.

Alana looked to Mr. Hinton and asked, "When did things get bad enough for you to realize that there was a problem?"

As suddenly as it had started, the clanging stopped.

"Last night. From the sound of it, I thought we were being robbed. I kept hearing boxes being moved and things being knocked over." Mr. Hinton said frankly.

"Did you see anything?" Alana asked as she quickly wrote down some more notes.

Mr. Hinton looked to his wife and waited.

"I did. I don't know what it was. I only saw it out of the corner of my eye, but when I looked directly at it, there wasn't anything there."

Mrs. Hinton said nervously as she held her youngest daughter a little bit tighter.

"Can you give me any kind of a description, even a vague impression?" Alana asked hopefully.

"It was blacker than midnight and it was big." Mrs. Hinton said with a shudder.

"Could you tell for sure if it was or wasn't a person?" Alana asked cautiously.

"If it was a person, it was someone wearing the scariest costume I've ever seen." Mrs. Hinton said firmly.

"I got a 'yellow' reading in here by the sink and an 'orange' reading in the living room, next to the couch." Lorra said as she handed the K2 meter back to Alana.

"Thank you. That was very helpful." Alana said appreciatively.

All of a sudden, it was pitch black.

Before anyone could react with more than a whimper, Alana had the flashlight off her belt and turned on.

"We can't live like this. I'm a nervous wreck." Mrs. Hinton said past her tears, barely visible in the light from the flashlight.

"I know. And it's probably going to get worse, before it gets better. How would you like to get away from this place for the night so that you can relax? My team and I will stay here and do our investigation and you can have a break from the stress." Alana

asked carefully. The sound of movement in one of the other rooms caught her attention and she had to fight the urge to turn the flashlight in that direction to investigate.

Mrs. Hinton looked at her husband hopefully, barely able to see him in the meager light.

"Please don't think that I'm ungrateful for the offer, but how can we leave you alone in our house? We never even met you before today." Mr. Hinton asked seriously.

"I can give you my business card and you can look us up in the phonebook to verify that we're an established business. If you like, you can call Father Francis and he can tell you what he knows about us. Or, if you'd rather, you can stay while your wife and children go to the hotel. It won't effect our investigation either way, I was just thinking that you might like to be away from the chaos for a little bit." Alana said frankly.

Without warning, the lights came back on. Alana looked around to survey her surroundings before turning her attention back to Mr. Hinton.

"Take the girls and go to the hotel. I'm going to stay here." Mr. Hinton told his wife seriously.

"Can I stay, too?" Lorra asked hopefully.

"I don't think that's a very good idea. Your parents are trusting us to see that you're kept safe." Mrs. Hinton carefully explained.

"We should still be here tomorrow, when you get back from the hotel." Alana said as she reached into her pocket and took out what looked like a business card.

"The address to the hotel is on this card. Give the card to the desk clerk and the room will be charged to my account." Alana said as she handed the card to Mrs. Hinton.

"I don't know how to thank you for doing this." Mrs. Hinton said as her eyes welled with tears.

"You just did."

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It took a few minutes for Mrs. Hinton to pack a few things for her and the girls. Alana stood back and watched as Derek carried various electronics in from the van and down a hallway toward the back of the house.

Once they were alone, Alana quietly asked, "Mr. Hinton, do you know if you have any occult devices in the house?"

"You can call me Kerry. And what do you mean by 'occult devices'?" He asked curiously.

"I'm asking if you have anything like tarot cards, an ouija board, voodoo dolls or anything else like that in the house." Alana asked seriously.

"No! God no! No one in this house..." Kerry trailed off, then looked toward the dining room anxiously.

"What was that?" Alana asked cautiously.

"My son, Mike, he's at college, back in Minnesota, where we're from. He went through kind of a dark phase, a while back. It's possible that there might be something like that packed in the things that he left with us." Kerry said reluctantly.

Alana made a note, then carefully said, "It's unlikely that something kept in a box and not actively being used could be responsible for all of this. I just have to ask, to try and get a sense of what we're working with."

"Environmental shows clear; No carbon monoxide, no radon, no excessive EMF." Charity said as she walked into the kitchen.

"Good. Would you go into the living room, by the couch and see if you can track down a high EMF reading?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Sure." Charity said before leaving the room.

"I don't know if I said it before, but thank you for doing this. We've never been through anything like this before and didn't know where to turn." Kerry said frankly.

"This is what we do. We help people with problems like these, and along the way, hopefully we'll be able to eventually collect enough evidence to prove what things like this really are." Alana said seriously.

"I never believed in anything supernatural before." Kerry said honestly.

"There's nothing wrong with that. I believe in what I can see, hear, touch and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt. That's what drives me and keeps me doing this. That being said, I'd better get to it. Do you think you could show me around and point out where activity has taken place?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Most of it's upstairs." Kerry said as he stood to lead the way.

Before Alana could join him, the lights had gone out again.

Alana turned her flashlight back on, then said, "I have a feeling that this is going to be a very long night."

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They remained in place and watched as Charity, working by flashlight, made a circuit of the living room, taking EMF readings.

When the lights came back on, Kerry reluctantly led the way toward the hallway.

"I guess the first thing would be, at the top of these stairs." Kerry said anxiously.

The hallway that led to the staircase had been completely gutted and cool air, from the basement below, caused gooseflesh to rise on Alana's arms.

The staircase, itself, was mostly intact. With the exception of a few missing balusters, everything seemed to be sturdy enough, although, the stairsteps creaked with every step.

"That's where Toni said that she heard the footsteps." Kerry said as he stopped at the top of the stairs and looked around for any evidence of something out of place.

Alana took the K2 meter off her belt and began taking readings of the area.

"What's that?" Kerry asked curiously.

"It's a K2 meter. It measures fluctuations in electromagnetic fields. Some paranormal researchers theorize that spiritual entities are actually made of electromagnetic energy, and whether they're physically manifested, or not, they still emit electromagnetic waves wherever they're present." Alana explained as she moved the meter around and watched the lights carefully.

"Are you getting anything?" Kerry asked nervously.

"No. At least, nothing that can be distinguished from the normal EM fields you'd find in any house." Alana said seriously.

"The first room is going to be Mike's. We're remodeling it, so there's nothing in there, right now. Over here is Toni's, that's where she saw the ghost." Kerry said as he gestured toward a doorway, further down the hall.

As Alana approached the doorway, she suddenly stopped.

"Is something wrong?" Kerry asked in panic.

"Just an EM spike. Nothing to worry about." Alana said calmly as she backed away, then moved closer, to see if she could reproduce the reading.

"I'm set up, are you ready for me, yet?" Derek asked as he walked up the stairs.

"Get with Charity and see if she was able to pin down a location in the living room. I'll be done here in a few minutes. Do you have any tape on you?" Alana asked as she continued to try and zero in on the anomalous reading.

"Here." Derek said as he approached and held out a roll of blue masking tape to her.

The lights suddenly went out again.

"Just to confirm, were you having any electrical problems before yesterday?" Alana asked as she turned her flashlight on again.

"No. Not even a flicker. But we *did* have an evaluation of the property done before we moved in and they said that the electrical wasn't up to code, so at some point we're going to have to have the whole thing rewired." Kerry said seriously.

The lights came back on and Alana found that she had more things to carry than she had hands to carry them.

"Would you hang on to this for me?" She asked as she handed her flashlight to Kerry.

"Sure."

"Derek, we're going to need a camera at the top of the stairs, looking down this hallway... and probably one at the other end, looking back. Also I'm going to need one in this bedroom, make sure you get a good view of the door." Alana said as she handed the blue tape back to him.

"No problem." Derek said as he started pulling tape off to make an 'X', to mark the first location.

"And since there have been reports of auditory phenomena, we should set audio recorders in all three locations." Alana added thoughtfully.

"Got it." Derek assured her.

Alana then turned her attention to Kerry and asked, "Where else?"

"Up here, the only other place anything's happened is the master bedroom. That's where my wife saw... whatever that was." Kerry said nervously as he pointed to the far end of the hallway.

"Lead the way."

* * * * *

"Do you know where Mrs. Hinton saw the apparition?" Alana asked as she looked around the bedroom.

"She was standing right where you are and saw the thing standing in the doorway." Kerry said as he took another step away from the door.

"Okay. We'll set up another camera in here, and a voice recorder as well, just to be safe." Alana said decisively, then asked, "Would you ask Derek to come in here?"

"Yeah." Kerry said nervously, then edged his way through the door and into the hall.

Alana noticed the condition of the room. There were boxes stacked along the walls and from all appearances, the room had been cleaned, but there was no indication that it was being remodeled, yet. From the way things were organized, she suspected that they intended to get another room finished, then move in there while the master bedroom was being done.

"What did you need?" Derek asked as he rushed into the room.

"A blue 'X' here, focused on the door and, if you've got it to spare, another one to surveil the entire room." Alana said thoughtfully.

Derek thought for a moment, then said, "If you don't need the live feed, I can use a DVR camera for the surveillance and we can check the footage later."

"Yeah. Do that." Alana said seriously, then turned to Kerry and asked, "Were there any other locations where events have occurred?"

"That's it, up here. But down in the dining room, no one saw anything, but we heard all kinds of movement." Kerry said nervously.

"Can you cover that, Derek?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Yes. If you don't mind, I'd like to use the infrared camera in there, just in case we're dealing with something in that wavelength."

"That's fine." Alana said as she started toward the door.

A low, ominous growl sounded from near the door, which caused Alana to freeze in her tracks.

"What the FUCK was that?!" Kerry screamed as he backed further into the room.

"That's what we're here to find out." Alana said as she held up her K2 meter. The meter lighted all the way to the red zone for an instant, then just as suddenly, reduced to nothing.

Derek immediately started snapping pictures in the direction that the noise had come from.

Suddenly, the lights went out and they were standing in near complete darkness.

"Kerry, you've got the flashlight." Alana reminded him, trying to sound calm.

Before Kerry could figure out how to turn the flashlight on, Derek had his own flashlight lit.

"Derek. Don't forget the audio recorder in this room." Alana said firmly.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure I'll remember." Derek said, sounding to be scared half out of his wits.

"Let's head downstairs and get started." Alana said firmly, then looked up as the lights came back on.

"Yeah. Right behind you." Derek said nervously.

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"How are things going down here?" Alana asked as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Fine. There's nothing wrong that a good electrician couldn't fix." Charity said frankly as she clipped her K2 meter onto her belt.

"Come into the kitchen so we can sort out our battle plan." Alana said seriously.

"We heard a growl." Derek said with a slight amount of braggadocio in his tone.

"You probably should have eaten something earlier, when you had the chance." Charity said with an eyeroll to illustrate how unimpressed she was.

Alana looked at Kerry and quietly said, "You have kids. You know how it is."

"Actually, mine are aged far enough apart that bickering was never really an issue." Kerry said frankly.

Alana looked from Derek to Charity, then turned to Kerry and said, "You're lucky."

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Once they were all settled in around the kitchen table, Alana turned to Derek and asked, "Where did you locate tech?"

"The back porch. It seems to be out of the way, but close enough to get a strong signal. And even though it's not heated, it's enclosed, so it should be fine for our needs." Derek said seriously.

"Charity, did you come up with any interesting readings?" Alana asked curiously.

"Interesting, yes. Verifiable or reproducible, no." Charity said seriously.

"What did you get?" Alana asked cautiously.

"I kept getting EM spikes. But I didn't really identify any 'hot spot' locations. The spikes seemed to be random and when I'd go back and check the same spot later, it would be stone cold." Charity said frankly.

"I had an EM spike upstairs and Lorra had one in the living room." Alana said thoughtfully.

"It sounds to me like this whole place is a hot spot." Derek said frankly.

"It's looking that way." Alana said slowly, then turned to Charity and said, "With things escalating the way they are, there's one more thing we can try, to lay the groundwork. I already know how you feel about this..."

"Oh sweet Jesus. Don't tell me you're considering bringing in some woo-woo nutjob to 'help' us." Charity said miserably.

"Listen. While I don't believe in a lot of what psychics claim to be able to 'sense', I can't deny that they sometimes are able to pick up on things that I can't explain. This house is active and seems to be getting more so. In my considered opinion, the best way we can bring this matter to resolution and leave this nice family in peace is to employ every resource at our disposal before this ends up getting any worse." Alana said firmly.

"You're the boss." Charity said unenthusiastically.

"And I'm going to be counting on you to see to it that we don't take what the psychic says too seriously." Alana added with a smile.

Charity gave her such a look that Kerry couldn't help but laugh at the expression.

Alana looked around the table, then said, "Let's do this."

* * * * *

"How are things looking in here?" Alana asked as she walked onto the back porch, with Kerry following a step behind.

"Everything's set up. All the cameras are transmitting. What do you think of the angles?" Derek asked as he moved out of the way of the monitor.

Alana looked the various video frames over critically before saying, "Looks good. Mrs. Batton should be here in a few minutes. I'd like for you to stay out here and keep an eye on things. After she's done her initial walkthrough, I'm going to see if I can get some EVPs."

"No prob..." Derek began to say, then froze.

"What?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Something just moved in the master bedroom." Derek whispered.

"Play it back." Alana snapped.

Alana and Kerry watched silently as Derek pulled up the recording and played the video on his screen.

Regardless of the temperature on the back porch, a simultaneous chill went up all their spines when they saw a black blur dart across the doorway.

"Mark that for later review. I need to get inside or Charity is going to end up greeting Mrs. Batton." Alana said frankly, then thought to ask, "By the way, where is Charity?"

Derek switched his screen back to the multi-view of all the cameras and said, "At the kitchen table, double checking that all the audio recorders are fully charged and properly functioning."

"Good." Alana said with satisfaction, then thought to ask, "Are you going to be warm enough out here?"

"I brought my coat. I'll be fine." Derek assured her.

"Let's go." Alana said to Kerry quietly, then led the way back into the house.

* * * * *

"What's an EVP?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Electronic Voice Phenomena. Some paranormal researchers believe that spiritual entities are in... sort of another dimension. When they communicate, it isn't always perceptible to the human ear. By using electronic voice recorders, it's possible to amplify the sounds so that we can actually hear them." Alana said carefully.

"Do you believe it?" Kerry asked curiously.

"I've used the technique before and we've been able to hear things that we didn't hear at the time of the recording. But, just because I can't explain where a mysterious sound came from doesn't automatically make me believe that it's supernatural in origin. I take these things on a case by case basis and try to evaluate each

thing on its own merits." Alana said carefully as they walked into the dining area of the kitchen.

"We're all set here." Charity said as she looked up from her work.

"Why are you using the old 'tape' recorders?" Alana asked curiously.

"For contrast." Charity said simply, then explained, "Derek's your tech guy. He's the one who's always willing to accept that the latest and greatest technology automatically does a better job than the previous technology. But I think audio cassette recorders, with their lower level of sensitivity can be a more effective tool, sometimes. I get the feeling that the digital recorders are so 'good' that they have the capacity to pick up things from outside and make us think that we're hearing something inside the house."

"It won't hurt to try." Alana said with a shrug, then turned at the sound of a knock on the door.

"Kerry, be careful not to say anything to Mrs. Batton to give her any idea of what's going on. I'm not sold on psychics, to begin with. But if she walks in here cold, not knowing anything, and comes up with something useful, I might consider it to be slightly more credible." Alana said as she led the way to the door.

"Should I put the kettle on, so we'll have some hot water for her tea leaves?" Charity asked sourly as she followed.

"If you wouldn't mind." Alana said with a wink at her.

Charity rolled her eyes and stopped in the hallway, within view of the front door.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Batton, thank you so much for coming on such short notice." Alana said pleasantly.

"You've piqued my curiosity. I haven't been in this house in nearly twenty years." Mrs. Batton said as she was ushered inside.

"I didn't know that you'd been here before." Alana said honestly.

"Oh, yes. Mr. and Mrs. Cloyd moved in here just after their second daughter was born... they needed the space. Lovely people. Such a shame." Mrs. Batton finished quietly, then seemed to notice Charity.

"Charity, dear. I do hope that your bleak worldview hasn't dragged you into a pit of despair about your meaningless existence." Mrs. Batton said playfully.

"No more than your make-believe fantasy has caused you to have faith in a reality that is based on unjustifiable nonsense." Charity responded with a smile.

"Give me a hug." Mrs. Batton chuckled as she walked down the hall.

Charity's uncaring facade gave way for a moment as she gently hugged the elderly woman.

Alana waited for the hug to break up before quietly asking, "Would you like to walk through the house and see if you can get a sense of the place?"

Mrs. Batton glanced around before saying, "We should start upstairs."

Alana turned to Kerry and said, "Let Mrs. Batton lead the way. We're just going to follow along and listen, for now."

Charity turned on her mini audio cassette recorder, then nodded to Alana that she was ready.

* * * * *

"Oh, dear. This isn't good." Mrs. Batton said as she reached the top of the stairs.

"If it were something good, we probably wouldn't have called you." Charity said frankly.

Alana flashed her a disapproving glare, reminding her not to interrupt the psychic during a walkthrough.

"Write this down, Alana. Fear and despair. There's a hopeless inevitability to it." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

Alana quickly jotted it down on her notepad.

"Over here..." Mrs. Batton said as she walked to Toni's bedroom door, then turned and asked, "May I?"

"Yes. It's fine to go into any of these rooms." Alana confirmed.

Mrs. Batton stepped inside the room and looked around before saying, "This was 'his' room."

"Who is 'he'?" Alana asked carefully.

"It's a hard sound... A hard sound for such a soft boy... A gentle soul..." Mrs. Batton said ruefully.

"Can you tell us his name?" Alana asked quietly.

"Puh... no... Kuh... no, not that harsh." Mrs. Batton said, then turned suddenly to look back into the hall.

"Oh, my. Of course." Mrs. Batton said with a smile.

"What is it?" Alana asked in a whisper.

"Daniel, that was his name. This was his room." Mrs. Batton said with certainty.

"Daniel what? We need to know his last name." Alana urged.

"Daniel Quartermaine, of course. This is the old Quartermaine house." Mrs. Batton said as though it were obvious.

"Do you mean like Alexander Quartermaine?" Alana asked carefully.

"Yes, but a more distant relation. They inherited the name but not the money. They were proud of that name, so proud. Too proud, perhaps." Mrs. Batton said thoughtfully.

"Who is Alexander Quartermaine?" Kerry asked quietly.

"One of the founding fathers who settled here, back in the sixteen hundreds." Alana said absently.

"It's not his fault." Mrs. Batton said carefully, as though she were listening to something across a great distance.

"What's not his fault?" Alana asked carefully.

"I don't know. He's retreated. But he wanted me to know... no, he wanted for *you* to know that whatever's happening here, he's not causing it. I think he's worried that you're going to blame him for something." Mrs. Batton said with concern.

"I'll keep that in mind." Alana said seriously.

Mrs. Batton looked around curiously for a moment, then asked, "What's that?"

After straining to listen, Alana quietly asked, "What's what?"

"This way." Mrs. Batton said as she walked past Kerry and into the hallway.

"You've got something nasty, here." Mrs. Batton said with determination as she walked to the master bedroom.

"Define 'nasty'." Alana said carefully.

Mrs. Batton stopped just short of putting her hand on the doorknob and said, "Whatever has you worried enough to call on me is in this room. And it knows we're coming."

"Oh! Please!" Charity exclaimed.

Mrs. Batton smiled fondly at her, then the smile fell away as she opened the door.

* * * * *

"It's cold." Kerry said, as if no one else had noticed.

"Charity?" Alana prompted.

Charity took a gun shaped device off her belt and pulled the trigger on it before looking at the LCD display and saying, "Fifty-two point nine degrees."

"This room is always warm, usually too warm." Kerry said quietly.

"It's an old house with turn of the century windows. That's going to happen." Charity said frankly.

"Kerry, could you step a little to your left? You're blocking the camera." Alana asked quietly.

"Oh, sure. Sorry." Kerry said as he moved.

"What's that smell?" Alana asked cautiously.

"It smells like something's rotting... but I left my sneakers downstairs in the entry closet." Kerry said quietly.

"Charity?" Alana whispered.

"It's not me!" Charity immediately defended.

"What's the temperature now?" Alana asked impatiently.

"Oh, um. Forty-six point two." Charity stammered.

Alana glanced toward Mrs. Batton and found her staring sightlessly at the far wall of the room.

"What do you see?" Alana asked her in a whisper.

"Who are you?" Mrs. Batton asked in a low, angry voice.

Everyone silently watched and listened for any sign that something was going to respond.

"Tell me your NAME!" Mrs. Batton screamed at the blank empty space before her.

There was another long moment of silence, then Mrs. Batton seemed to wilt as she quietly said, "It's retreated."

"What was it?" Alana asked cautiously.

"I need to sit down. Let's go downstairs." Mrs. Batton said weakly.

"Let me help you, Felicia." Charity said with concern as she hurried to Mrs. Batton's side and gently put an arm around her.

"Thank you, Dear." Mrs. Batton said gratefully, then quietly added, "Why don't you come over to my house for Sunday dinner? My nephew will be in town. You two might get along."

"I have a feeling that from the way things are going tonight, that I may be busy." Charity said gently as she helped Mrs. Batton to walk slowly down the hallway.

"*We've got movement in the dining room.*" Derek's voice said from Alana and Charity's radios.

"Why don't you fix Mrs. Batton a nice cup of tea while I check that out?" Alana asked Charity with a smile.

Charity rolled her eyes a little, but didn't say anything.

Alana, followed by Kerry, hurried past Charity and Mrs. Batton.

When Charity reached the top of the stairs, she extended her elbow so that Mrs. Batton would have it to grip as they descended the staircase.

"Derek, what did you see?" Alana asked firmly as she walked toward the dining room.

"A cloud or an undefined blur of something. With infrared, it's not always easy to know what you're looking at." Derek said frankly.

Alana turned to Kerry and said, "I need for you to stay completely silent. I'm going to be doing an EVP session, so I need to minimize the number of possible audio distractions."

"I'll just watch and listen." Kerry said quietly.

"Thank you." Alana said with a smile, then stepped into the dark room filled with boxes.

* * * * *

Alana carefully placed her digital audio recorder on a box and quietly asked, "What is your name?"

She consciously waited for several seconds to give any entity that might be present an opportunity to answer before asking, "Why are you here?"

She waited again, as she looked around the dimly lit room, trying to spot any sign of movement.

"Do you know that you're dead?" Alana asked carefully.

To her left, a box suddenly shifted and the stack of books on top of it began to fall.

More out of reflex than thought, she caught the falling books and tried to right them.

"Did you just move those books?" Alana asked seriously.

After a few seconds had passed, she finally asked, "What do you want?"

She waited for a long moment, then picked up her recorder and left the room, with Kerry following a step behind.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Mrs. Batton?" Alana asked as she approached the kitchen table.

"Much better, now." Mrs. Batton assured her as she held a cup of tea in both hands.

"Can you tell us anything more about what was up in the bedroom?" Alana asked cautiously as she sat down.

"It was an inhuman, I'm certain of it." Mrs. Batton stated firmly.

"What's that?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Some people call them demons. Supposedly, it's the spirit of a being that's never been alive or walked the earth." Alana said carefully.

"I get the sense that it's only just recently arrived here and hasn't decided to make this its home." Mrs. Batton said thoughtfully.

"What about the other spirit? You called him Daniel." Alana asked carefully.

"He's a sweet boy, I believe it was his fear and despair that I was feeling earlier." Mrs. Batton said regretfully.

"So, you believe that we have two spirits, one that's human and another that's inhuman?" Alana asked to confirm.

"There's more, at least one other spirit, but his presence is so... indistinct. I really can't tell you more about him." Mrs. Batton said as she tried to focus on the vague feeling.

"Thank you again for coming to help us, Mrs. Batton. We appreciate your insights." Alana said sincerely.

Mrs. Batton chuckled, then said, "Don't play games with me, Dear. I know that you don't believe a word of it."

"I don't believe *every* word of it. There's a difference." Alana said honestly.

"If I've been of any help at all, then I'm glad." Mrs. Batton said warmly, then began to stand as she continued, "But I need to get back to the house before Lucas worries himself sick about me."

"I hope we didn't keep you out too late." Alana said as she walked with Mrs. Batton down the hallway.

"It's fine, Dear. I'm always happy to help." Mrs. Batton said as she reached the door.

"I'll help you out to your car." Charity said as she stepped forward.

"Thank you, Dear. I still don't understand how someone who doesn't believe in anything can have such a kind heart." Mrs. Batton said as she took hold of Charity's arm.

"The way I see it, I have one life, right here and now. I'm not going to waste one minute of it on hate." Charity said as she led Mrs. Batton out the door.

* * * * *

When Charity returned to the kitchen, she asked, "So, what are we doing now?"

"I'd like to go over what we've collected so far." Alana said decisively, then keyed her walkie-talkie and said, "Derek, we're doing a review in the kitchen. Can you step away for a minute?"

"*Sure, everything seems to be quiet, for the moment.*" Derek said cheerfully.

Kerry got up from the table and said, "I'm making some tea, would anyone else like some?"

"Yes. Thank you." Alana said absently as she reviewed her notes.

"Yeah. Thanks." Charity said with a smile in his direction.

"Active house." Derek said as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm making hot tea. Would you like some?" Kerry asked pleasantly.

"Oh, yeah! That sounds great! Thanks." Derek said as he dropped onto one of the kitchen chairs.

"So, did you see anything else on the video?" Alana asked seriously.

"There was a shadow in the girl's room, but I couldn't rule out headlights reflecting off something as a car drove by." Derek said with a shrug.

"So we've got a black blur in the master bedroom and a red blur in the dining room, right?" Alana asked to be sure.

"Basically, yeah." Derek agreed.

"Charity, what was your assessment of the psychic walkthrough?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Mrs. Batton walked through the house, got a creepy feeling, heard some voices, got another creepy feeling, then decided that she needed to fix me up with her nephew." Charity said frankly.

"So, in your opinion, as far as evidence goes, we haven't gained anything." Alana asked to confirm.

"No. Good spirit, bad spirit, creepy feeling... that's about it." Charity said unenthusiastically.

"We've also got a name. Derek, when you get back to tech, see if you can pull up any information on Daniel Quartermaine. If so, see if you can verify if he ever lived in this house. And I suppose, while you're at it, you could see if he *died* in this house. That would be good to know, too." Alana finished with a smile.

"You're not really taking her psychic act seriously, are you?" Charity asked disbelievingly.

"No. But of all the things that she claimed to have 'sensed', there was only one thing that had any possibility of being verifiable, so I'm asking Derek to check it out." Alana said simply.

"Okay. I can actually see that." Charity grudgingly agreed.

"Here you go." Kerry said as he sat a tray of filled tea cups on the table.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it." Derek said as he immediately took one of the cups.

"It's almost midnight. Typically, this is our best chance to capture evidence. I was thinking that each of us could take a hand-held video recorder and a digital audio recorder and go to a different room and try to collect as much video and audio evidence as we can." Alana said seriously.

Charity and Derek were both nodding their agreement.

"Kerry, if you wouldn't mind helping, we could outfit you with everything you'll need to participate." Alana said hopefully.

Before he could answer, the lights suddenly dimmed and three **pops** sounded from upstairs.

Everyone waited for a moment, until the light over the kitchen table returned to its regular illumination.

"If you'll tell me what to do, I'll help however I can." Kerry said, and sounded to be more than a little shaken.

"You're going to have a walkie-talkie, an audio recorder, a handheld video recorder and a flashlight. If you don't have any objection, we're going to turn off the power at the main so that we'll know that there's no background noise interference, like the furnace

kicking on. Then we'll each sit and wait, recording whatever happens." Alana explained carefully.

"If you turn off the power, the refrigerator and freezer will stop." Kerry said cautiously.

"As long as we're not opening and closing them, they should hold their cold for as long as we're doing this. We'll turn the power back on as soon as we're finished." Alana assured him.

"I guess so." Kerry said reluctantly.

"Good. Then let's go and get everyone their equipment. There's a good chance that if anything's going to happen, this is going to be when." Alana said hopefully.

* * * * *

Once everyone was outfitted, Alana led the way off the back porch.

Of course, Derek remained behind, so he could monitor all the remote video cameras.

Alana led Kerry to the dining room and told him, "There was some slight activity recorded in this room, but nothing that appeared to be dangerous or malicious. If you'll just stay here and record anything that happens, I'll announce it when we're done. Call in if you have any problem at all and one of us will help you."

"I think I'll be okay." Kerry assured her.

Alana accepted him at his word and led the way out of the dining room.

"Let me guess, the kid's room?" Charity asked as they walked.

"That's right. I'm taking the master bedroom." Alana confirmed as she opened the door to go down to the basement.

"Even though I don't believe in all that spiritual mumbo-jumbo, I still do my best to record everything that happens. Someday, you're going to have to trust me." Charity said frankly.

"I *do* trust you. But if anything happened to you because I allowed you to take the greater risk while I was playing it safe, I'd never forgive myself. If you don't like it, you can start your own paranormal group. On this one thing, I'm not backing down." Alana said firmly.

"Maybe I'll start my own group someday. But not today." Charity finished with a smile.

"Go on ahead, I'll be up as soon as I've cut the power." Alana said warmly.

* * * * *

"Radio check, is everyone in place?" Alana asked seriously.

"Derek in Tech. Everything is good, here."

"Charity in the girl's room. You're coming in loud and clear."

"This is Kerry in the dining room. Radio's working fine."

"Good. From here on, it's radio silence. If you're in any danger, call. Otherwise, keep it quiet. I'll make an announcement when we're done." Alana said firmly, then clipped her walkie-talkie to her belt.

* * * * *

The room had been dark to begin with, but when Alana shut off the power, Kerry found himself sitting in nearly complete blackness.

The one little light in the room came from the handheld video recorder's LED screen.

When he picked the camera up and looked at the screen he was surprised to find that the camera was equipped with night vision

and could see every detail of the room as if it were lit by the noonday sun.

A sound at the far end of the room made Kerry suddenly turn the camera in that direction.

Nothing seemed to be out of place, and the room was silent as a tomb.

After a few more seconds of quiet, Kerry checked the camera's controls to verify that it was, in fact, recording.

Once he was assured that everything was working as it should be, he made a slow visual survey of the room with the camera.

A few minutes later, he decided to try what Alana had done earlier.

"What is your name?" He said into the empty room.

Of course, there was no response, but he did as Alana had done and waited to give the ghost or spirit or whatever an opportunity to answer.

"Did you live here?" Kerry asked cautiously.

The sound of cardboard scraping against cardboard made him suddenly turn to try and discover the source of the sound.

When he looked carefully, he noticed that one of the boxes seemed to be in a slightly different position than it had been. Of course, he couldn't be sure. It could just be his mind playing tricks on him.

"Is there something in one of the boxes that you're looking for?" Kerry asked cautiously.

Again, there was no response.

"Knock on one of the boxes if you understand me." Kerry said anxiously.

He waited for a long moment and was about to ask another question when he suddenly heard a loud knock on the box right next to him.

Kerry quickly turned the camera to where the sound had come from and found nothing out of place.

"Thank you. I feel better knowing that I'm not just talking to myself." Kerry said nervously and his fear could clearly be heard in his voice.

"Just in case you didn't know, I can't see you or hear you. But I can hear it when you move something or knock." Kerry said frankly.

The sound of something landing on the floor at the side of the room caused Kerry to turn his camera in that direction.

There lay a book in what had previously been a clear walking path between the stacks of boxes.

Before he could think of what else to say, another book fell onto the one that was already on the floor.

"I saw that. I can see what you're doing. I just don't know why you're doing it. Why are you here, scaring my family?" Kerry asked plaintively.

* * * * *

Charity sat alone in Toni's bedroom and waited in silence.

While she didn't expect anything to come of their night's investigation, she was part of a team and was willing to go along with Alana's plans, if only to prove that all the paranormal nonsense was nothing but hysterical people trying to explain away perfectly normal and understandable phenomena.

"What is your name?" Charity asked dutifully.

The first few times she had participated in an investigation, she still felt enough uncertainty in her beliefs to expect a response.

"What are you doing here?"

She froze in place when she heard the low creak of the bedroom door.

She knew that she had closed it firmly when she entered. She wanted to tell herself that it was Derek, just messing with her, but she knew better.

For all his goofiness and non-scientific beliefs, Derek was a consummate professional when it came to paranormal investigation.

Reluctantly, she pointed her camera toward the doorway and her breath caught when she just barely caught a glimpse of a head peering around the edge of the door.

"My name is Charity. I just want to talk to you for a minute. What is your name?" Charity asked carefully, trying to keep her hand steady as she focused the camera on the door.

The single eye that could be seen around the edge of the door looked directly at her, then the head withdrew.

"Wait! I'm not going to hurt you! I just want to ask you some questions!" Charity said as she ran to the door and pulled it open.

She used her camera's night vision to look up and down the hallway, but no one was there.

Charity could feel the adrenaline coursing through her as she slowly walked back to Toni's bed and sat down, trying to reconcile what she had just seen.

* * * * *

Alana carefully scanned the room with her night vision camera to confirm where everything was located.

She decided to settle into the low cushioned chair that was located by the door, so that she could have a good view of the spot Mrs. Batton had been looking at.

Once she was sure that all her electronics were recording, she carefully said, "What is your name?"

The silence that followed wasn't a surprise, but then she remembered the way Mrs. Batton had asked the same question.

"I am speaking to the entity present in this room. Announce yourself." Alana said more firmly.

Still, there was no indication that any being other than herself was in the room.

Thinking to try another approach, Alana stood and quietly began to recite from memory, "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; and do Thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the Divine Power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls."

A low guttural growl sounded at the far side of the room. A moment later Alana was only vaguely aware that something had happened until she felt herself crashing into the bedroom door.

* * * * *

"Everyone, Alana's been attacked. She's in the master bedroom!" Derek called over the walkie-talkies.

Charity dropped her camera and turned on her flashlight as she ran down the hall.

"Alana? Are you alright?" Charity called as she approached the door.

"Alana! Answer me!" Charity screamed as she realized that the door would only open about an inch. It was being blocked from inside.

"What?" Alana asked incoherently.

"Alana. Open the door and let me in." Charity said firmly as she heard footsteps on the stairs.

"What happened?" Alana asked as she slowly opened the door.

"That's what I'd like to know. Get out of there and let's see if you're hurt." Charity said firmly.

"I need to turn the electricity back on." Alana said distractedly.

"Don't worry about that. I'll get it." Kerry said before dashing away.

"Thanks... what was his name, again?" Alana asked blearily.

"That was Kerry. This is his house. Now come on. We're going downstairs." Charity said as she guided Alana to walk with her.

"How are you feeling, Alana? Does anything hurt?" Derek asked anxiously.

"My head. I must have bumped it on something." Alana said confusedly.

"The bedroom door. You did that when you were knocked off your feet and flew about four feet back." Derek said as he focused the beam of his flashlight ahead of them on the stairs.

All of them were relieved when the lights came on.

"Did you get anything on the recording?" Alana asked as she tried to focus her attention.

"Are you kidding? When I saw you being attacked, I didn't stop to do an instant replay, I went to help you." Derek said with a bit of annoyance in his voice.

"Sit down and take inventory and I'll make you some tea." Charity said as she encouraged Alana to take a seat.

"I'm burning." Alana abruptly gasped.

"Where?" Derek asked with sudden panic.

Alana slowly lifted her blouse and revealed three angry scratches diagonally across her midsection.

"Oh my God!" Derek gasped at the sight.

"I don't think God had anything to do with this." Alana said as she stared at her stomach disbelievingly.

* * * * *

"What's wrong?" Kerry asked when he noticed everyone gathered around Alana.

"Something clawed her." Charity said absently as she tried to concoct a 'reasonable' explanation for what she was seeing.

Derek took a digital camera out of his pocket and was taking multiple pictures of Alana's injury from different angles.

"The skin's been broken, we need to clean that up." Kerry said as he walked toward the kitchen.

"You don't need to bother. We've got a first aid kit in the van." Alana said distractedly.

"Don't worry. I've got three kids, I know how to handle scratches." Kerry said simply as he went to the sink and started running hot water.

When Derek felt that he had all the pictures he needed, he quietly asked, "What do you want to do next?"

Alana was still considering the question when Kerry approached with a bowl of hot soapy water and said, "This may sting a little."

"You really don't have to..." Alana began to say, but stopped when her words didn't deter him.

"I just need to clean this, then I'm going to put on some antiseptic. Don't worry, it's the kind that doesn't sting." Kerry finished with a reassuring smile.

"Thanks." Alana said to him, then looked at her teammates and said, "I think we've done enough investigation for one night. It's time for all of us to dig in and start reviewing evidence."

"Aren't you going to do something to get rid of the demon?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"We need to gather as much information as we can about what just happened so that we can devise a plan to combat it. Derek, start on the review of the remote videos. Charity, start on the audio recorders. I'm going to start reviewing the DVR cameras." Alana said decisively.

When Kerry was finished spraying the antiseptic on the wound, he quietly said, "Hold on, I'm going to get you a gauze pad."

"Thanks." Alana said to him appreciatively, then looked at her teammates with question.

"I think this might be too big for us to deal with." Derek said honestly.

"We won't know until we've tried." Alana said seriously.

"I can't believe this." Charity said absently.

"I'm not asking you to believe anything. I'm asking you to review the evidence and make judgements based on what you can 'prove'." Alana said firmly.

Charity blinked a few times, then quietly said, "Right. We need to look at the evidence."

"Hold still." Kerry said, then carefully placed a gauze pad on Alana's belly and taped it down.

"Thank you, Kerry." Alana said appreciatively.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Kerry asked as he sat the tape and scissors on the table.

"If you want, you can work with Charity on the review of the audio recorders. It's really time consuming." Alana said seriously.

"Just show me what I have to do." Kerry said immediately.

"Derek, did you bring an extra set of headphones?" Alana asked as she glanced at him.

"Um, yeah. Come with me and I'll get you set up." Derek said distractedly.

* * * * *

"I think I've got something." Kerry said suddenly, breaking the long silence at the kitchen table.

"Let me hear it." Alana said as she paused the handheld DVR camera and set it aside.

"I'll back it up." Kerry said quickly, then handed it to her.

Alana put on the headphones and listened carefully.

"What was that?" Alana asked curiously, then rewound the recorder and increased the volume before listening again.

"What is it?" Charity asked in a whisper.

"I couldn't make it out, but when I asked, 'What's your name?', I think something answered." Kerry said anxiously.

"Benjamin." Alana said suddenly.

Kerry and Charity looked at her expectantly.

"The voice said 'Benjamin'." Alana said in amazement.

"So, not only did you get an EVP, but you received an intelligent response to the question that you were asking?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Hold on." Alana said as she froze in concentration.

Kerry and Charity waited with anticipation as Alana continued to listen.

"You asked, 'Did you live here.' and the voice responded, but I can't make it out. Maybe Derek can clean it up on the computer and make more sense out of it." Alana said as she stopped the recorder.

The sudden darkness wasn't a surprise. All of them waited silently and no one even bothered to turn on a flashlight, knowing that the lights would come back on in a moment.

"That's really annoying." Charity finally said into the darkness.

When the lights suddenly came back on, Alana said, "If there's an intelligence at work here, then I'm sure that that's the point."

Charity sullenly nodded, then reluctantly said, "Up in the girl's room... I saw something."

"What?" Alana asked curiously.

"Just review my handheld, right at the end." Charity said quietly.

Rather than push further with her questions, Alana picked up the handheld DVR camera that Charity had been using and began to review the end of the video.

"What!? It's an apparition!" Alana said in astonishment.

"I didn't want to believe it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner." Charity said repentantly.

"We're all a little overwhelmed, right now. Don't worry about it." Alana assured her, then turned the camera's LED screen so Kerry and Charity could see it and played the video again.

Kerry's mouth fell open when he saw the image of a young teenage boy peeking around the edge of the door.

Charity closed her eyes and pulled her hands under the table to hide the fact that they were trembling.

"*Alana, I was just reviewing the video from upstairs and...*" Static began to crackle and completely blocked whatever else Derek had been trying to say.

Glances flew around the table, and as they stood in unison, the lights went out again.

"We need to get out of this house." Alana said firmly as she turned on her flashlight.

"You're not giving up, are you?" Kerry asked anxiously.

"No. But we can't do our work under these conditions. We need to gather our evidence and take it back to the office so we can review it there. Once we've had a chance to calmly and rationally sit down and review everything, we can consider what to do next." Alana said as she led the way to the back porch.

"Yeah. Calm and rational sounds really REALLY good right now." Charity agreed.

As they opened the door to the back porch, Derek jumped. All of them noticed that he was white as a sheet and shaking uncontrollably.

"What's wrong?" Alana asked cautiously.

"I saw something... it had teeth!" Derek fought to say.

"Gather what you need. We're leaving." Alana said firmly.

"But... you've got to see this! It had TEETH!" Derek implored her to understand.

"Derek! Snap out of it! Gather your essential equipment. We'll look at everything back at the office." Alana said firmly.

It took a moment for Derek to collect himself, but he was finally able to say, "I just need the external hard drives. Everything's backed up there."

"We need the DVR cameras and the audio recorders from the kitchen. Would you guys go and get those while we get this together? We'll meet you out at the van." Alana said decisively.

Charity and Kerry looked at each other, but neither made a move to leave the security of their group.

"Stay together. Grab it and go." Alana said seriously.

"Come on." Charity said quietly and put a hand on Kerry's arm to urge him to go.

Kerry took a step, then stopped, "My wife and the girls, they're going to be coming back here in the morning."

"We'll leave a message for them at the front desk of the hotel. Go on." Alana said assuringly.

It took a moment, but the words finally seemed to sink in.

Alana watched Kerry and Charity leave the room, then turned to Derek and asked, "Do you need anything from inside the house?"

"Absolutely not!" Derek said as he rushed to disconnect the cables from the hard drives.

"Give me something to carry, I'll help you." Alana said anxiously.

Derek thrust a handful of tangled USB connectors and power cords in her direction.

"Almost done?" Alana asked hopefully.

"In more ways than one." Derek muttered as he picked up a stack of three large capacity external hard drives in his arms.

"Let's go."

* * * * *

The ride in the van had been tense and silent.

Everyone seemed to be doing their best to process everything that had happened in the past few hours.

When they reached the office, Alana finally broke the silence by saying, "Derek, connect your hard drives and copy the files to the server. Charity, start popping the DVDs so Derek can get us copies of them, too. Kerry, if you're willing to help, we're also going to need copies of all the digital audio files." Alana said decisively.

"Yeah. If you'll show me what to do." Kerry said uncertainly.

"If you can drag and drop, you can do this." Alana said to him with a reassuring smile, then added, "We'll deal with the audio cassettes, after."

It seemed to take a minute for her words to sink in, but soon, everyone was dedicated to working on their assigned task.

Apparently, all of them needed to be told what needed to be done, 'here and now' because they were still so overwhelmed by all that had happened.

* * * * *

"Look at this." Derek said from his computer as he looked at the large flat screen TV that more often than not served as a backup monitor for their conference room.

Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and turned their attention toward the big screen.

The scene displayed was simply that of the master bedroom. There wasn't anything the least bit frightening and yet, every person in the room got a chill up their spine at the sight.

The fact that out of the still nothingness, something suddenly appeared was enough to make all of them jump. But the... creature, for lack of a better term, was horrifying in its own right. There weren't any earthly terms to adequately describe what they were seeing.

The head was smooth, whether naturally or slicked down with some vile substance. The snout or possibly beak, protruded from the middle of what was most likely its face. But the most prominent and, by far, the most disturbing feature was the snarling teeth, almost like those of a dog or a wolf.

Before the image had fully registered, it was gone.

"Play it back. Freeze it." Alana said quickly.

It took a moment, but Derek was finally able to get a freeze frame of the image.

"Screen cap that." Alana said as she stepped closer to get a better look.

"Got it." Derek said absently as he stared at the image.

"So, that's what we're dealing with." Alana said carefully.

"What is it?" Charity asked in wonder.

"I believe that this is what is commonly called, a demon." Alana said frankly.

"It can't be..." Charity tried to say, but the words fell flat.

"I'm not making any claims about it being supernatural, but the evidence before me has convinced me that, whatever it is, it *does* exist." Alana said reasonably.

"I guess it doesn't do any good to say that you don't believe in it when it's right there in front of you." Charity reluctantly agreed.

"We still need to go through all the rest of the evidence and see if we can glean anything else from it. Once everything's been collected, we'll look at what we've got and decide what to do next." Alana said decisively.

"What can you do to stop something like *that*?" Kerry asked disbelievingly.

"At this point, the only thing I can suggest is to use the methods that have been reported to be effective in the past." Alana said carefully.

"What does that mean?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"She's talking about an exorcism or a cleansing." Charity said quietly.

"That's just what we're talking about at this point. Hopefully, when we review the evidence, we'll be able to find something that will reveal another option." Alana said firmly.

"I can't imagine what that would be." Derek said frankly.

"Good. Because you're not here to imagine. You're here to scientifically study and verify what we've encountered, without

conjecture. We'll only fall back on imagination when all other avenues have been exhausted." Alana said seriously.

"Speaking of exhausted..." Charity said with a pleading look.

"Get your files copied to the server, then if you need to close your eyes for a little while, you can go into the other room and lay down on the couch." Alana said simply.

"Slavedriver." Charity muttered sourly, then smiled at Alana to take any sting out of the words.

"Kerry, I called and left a message for your wife. I told her that when she checks out, that she should come over here to get you." Alana said absently as she looked back at the big screen.

"Thanks." Kerry responded as he watched the files copying from the digital audio recorder.

* * * * *

A knock on the door caused everyone to look up.

"I got it." Charity said tiredly as she forced herself to get up from the computer where she had been sitting for hours.

"How are you doing, Kerry?" Derek asked across the room.

"I'm being as careful as I can, but I'm not sure that I'm catching everything." Kerry said honestly.

"You're doing fine. When this is all over and we're ready to close your case file, we're going to go back through everything again, sometime when we're all well rested and there's no time constraint." Derek assured him.

"Daddy!" Zoe crowed as she ran into the room.

"Good morning, Angel. How are you doing this morning? Did you have a good sleep?" Kerry asked as he hugged his youngest daughter.

"We stayed at a really nice hotel! It was big and pretty and smelled really nice!" Zoe said enthusiastically.

"That sounds wonderful." Kerry said, then looked to his wife, who had just entered the room, and asked, "How are you, this morning?"

"Better."

"Is everything okay at the house?" Toni asked cautiously.

"Not exactly." Kerry reluctantly admitted.

"Things are a little more complicated than we first suspected." Alana interjected.

"Is it really bad?" Mrs. Hinton asked cautiously.

"It shouldn't be quite as bad during the daylight hours. It would probably be safe if you wanted to return." Alana said, more to Kerry than his wife.

"Maybe we should just move." Kerry said anxiously.

"I can't be sure, but there's a possibility that it wouldn't help." Alana said regretfully.

"Why not?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"We need to finish our evidence review before I can really discuss that with you, but I promise that, when we're done, I'll explain as much as I can." Alana said carefully.

"Can Toni and I help?" Lorra asked hopefully.

Alana seemed to be ready to refuse her offer, out of hand, but caught herself before she did.

"Do you think there'd be any problem if Lorra and Toni stayed here and helped us?" Alana asked Kerry curiously.

"No. There's no way I'm letting Teresa and Zoe go into that house without me, but if Lorra and Toni stay here, I won't have to be worried about them." Kerry said honestly.

"Toni, why don't you get your dad to show you and Lorra what he's been doing so that you can take over for him. While he's doing that, I'll get a laptop set up so that you can both help." Alana asked with a grin.

After a moment of consideration, Toni broke into a smile and said, "Yeah. Sure."

"Good." Alana said with satisfaction, then turned to Kerry and said, "As soon as we're done with our evidence review, I'll drive Toni and Lorra over to your house and fill you in on what we've been able to come up with."

"Thank you for all that you're doing." Kerry said sincerely.

* * * * *

Once Mr. and Mrs. Hinton were gone, Alana quickly checked with the girls to verify that they understood what they would be doing, then left them to their work.

After watching nearly an hour of video footage which chronicled absolutely nothing, Alana was surprised to hear Toni suddenly say, "I heard something."

"What was that?" Alana asked as she paused her video and turned her attention to the girls.

"Listen. I think I got something." Toni said happily.

Alana moved to where she could reach the keyboard and located the waveform pattern on the display then placed the cursor right in front of it.

Toni handed her the headphones and waited expectantly for her reaction.

The amplified voice of Charity, asking '*What is your name?*', made her wince at the volume, but then she carefully listened and was able to hear a faint response.

Alana increased the volume to maximum and slowed the playback slightly, then listened again.

After a few more passes, Alana reached awkwardly around Toni and wrote on the notepad, "*Daniel.*"

"That was a good catch, I almost couldn't make it out. Make sure that you log the timestamp so that we can go back and listen to it again in the review." Alana said with a smile.

"Was that really a ghost?" Lorra asked in wonder.

"A lot of people would make that assumption, given a lot less evidence." Alana said carefully.

"What does that mean?" Lorra asked curiously.

"It means that we don't automatically jump to the first conclusion. We collect as much evidence as we can, then we look at what we've got and try to figure out what's the most reasonable, natural explanation for it." Alana said seriously.

"And if there isn't one?" Lorra asked cautiously.

"Sometimes, we have to admit that we just don't know. But it isn't until we can verify, without a shadow of a doubt, that something is breaking the physical 'natural' laws of our reality that we'll even consider calling it *supernatural.*" Alana said carefully.

"How often does that happen?" Lorra asked seriously.

"Not often." Alana said before turning to go back to her investigation.

* * * * *

"What happened last night?"

"I'm not sure. I saw things last night that I can't explain." Kerry told his wife honestly.

"Should we move somewhere else?" She asked cautiously.

"I've thought about it, but I'm willing to give the paranormal team a chance to fix things before we take that step." Kerry said seriously, then continued, "Listen, Teresa, I couldn't, in good conscience, sell this house to someone else, not the way it is. And we can't afford to get another house unless we sell this one. Right now, the only thing I can think to do is let the paranormal team try to help us. If that doesn't work out, then we'll have to consider other options."

"We could go stay with my mother, at least until you've decided what you want to do." Teresa said urgently.

Kerry pulled into the driveway, then stopped for a moment to think about it.

Finally, he quietly said, "I have a job here. I really can't afford to give it up. Let's see what the paranormal team comes up with when they're done with their investigation. If this thing looks like it's going to drag on, then you and the girls can fly out to your mother's until I can get this all sorted out."

"Why is this happening to us?" Theresa asked in a whimper.

"We might think about asking them about that when their review is finished." Kerry said frankly.

"Are we going inside or not?" Zoe asked indignantly from the back seat.

"Yes, honey. We're going in right now." Kerry said to his daughter with a smile.

* * * * *

"I think that's got it. I've finished all the remote video." Derek said tiredly.

"The DVR video is just about done, too." Alana said as she looked up from her screen.

"We've still got two more to do." Lorra said quickly.

"With two of you doing it, that shouldn't take long." Derek said with a smile at the girls.

"Charity? How is your cassette tape transfer going?" Alana asked curiously.

"Next time I say I want to use magnetic tape, just smack me, alright?" Charity said miserably.

"Can I? Can I? Me! Me! Me!" Derek called as he bounced in his seat.

Alana was just tired enough to find that funny and let loose a good long laugh.

"So, what do we do now?" Lorra asked cautiously.

"When you're finished, we're all going to sit over there at the table with Charity and since everything's been copied and converted to uniform data files, Derek's going to bring up whatever each of us has been able to find on the big screen, so we can all look at it together." Alana explained patiently.

"We'd better hurry, then." Lorra said as she returned to her work with renewed dedication.

* * * * *

"What happened here? Did someone break in?" Teresa asked as they walked into chaos. Zoe was held close to her mother's side as she stared in wonder at the ransacked house.

"I'd pity them, if they did." Kerry said as he automatically started moving the furniture back into place.

"What's that smell?" Zoe asked with a scrunched up face.

"Either a demon or my sneakers." Kerry answered, mostly without thinking.

Fortunately, his daughter wasn't listening. Her question had been mostly rhetorical.

"Did those people do this?" Teresa asked cautiously as she hugged her daughter close, as much to comfort as to be comforted.

"No. Whatever it is that they're trying to get rid of, did this." Kerry said frankly.

"Should we even be in here?" Teresa asked nervously as she looked around.

"I don't think it's as bad in the daytime... even so, you couldn't pay me enough to go into our bedroom, right now." Kerry said frankly.

"What did you see?" Teresa asked hesitantly, obviously afraid of the answer.

"Just think of your worst nightmare, and you're halfway there." Kerry said seriously.

"If we can't go into the bedroom, what are we going to do about our clothes? How are we going to live like this?" Teresa asked anxiously.

"We won't have to. I promise. Let's wait for the team to finish their investigation, then we'll listen to their findings and decide what to do next. Until then, I need some sleep." Kerry said frankly.

"How can you sleep at a time like this?!" Teresa asked incredulously.

"Mostly because I didn't sleep at all last night, not even for a minute. Please, just let me sleep until they're done with the evidence review." Kerry almost begged as he walked to the couch and sat down.

"What am I supposed to do while you're sleeping?" Teresa asked as she looked around.

"I don't know. It's Halloween. Maybe you and Zoe could do something for that. After all, we've already got the haunted house." Kerry said as he rested back and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

"Before we begin, I'd just like to explain a few things to Lorra and Toni." Alana said as she took her seat at the table.

Both girls turned their attention to her.

"First, I'm going to define some terms. That way we all know that when we say something like 'ghost' that we're all talking about the same thing." Alana explained carefully.

Toni was looking on with interest, but Lorra was nearly bouncing with anticipation.

"I suppose that I'll start with 'ghost'. We commonly use that to describe the manifestation of a once living being that is now departed. Most commonly, we use the word 'ghost' to describe the spiritual manifestation of a person, but animal spirits are not unheard of." Alana said carefully.

"When I was little, we had a cat that died and I never saw a spirit or anything." Lorra said thoughtfully.

"Some people believe that when a living being dies, that some sort of spirit emerges and crosses over to another spiritual realm. Be that limbo, heaven, hell, elisia or whatever, it's a completely different realm. The ghosts that we see on the earthly plane are the rare few who didn't cross over, for whatever reason." Alana explained.

"And no one has ever been able to prove that any of the spiritual stuff exists outside of people's dreams and nightmares." Charity said frankly.

Alana nodded, then said, "Which is why we're here, trying to either prove that such things are real, or provide natural explanations for what people are experiencing."

"So you don't believe in ghosts?" Lorra asked uncertainly.

"I don't believe or disbelieve. I do my best to look at the evidence and find the most reasonable explanation." Alana said seriously, then continued, "Next we have 'poltergeists'. They're said to be mischievous and sometimes malevolent spirits with the ability to move things and even hurt people."

"Is that what we've got in our house?" Toni asked with concern.

"I don't know, yet. Maybe you can help us answer that question when we review the evidence." Alana said frankly.

Toni looked at Lorra nervously.

"Next we have 'demons'. They're said to be spiritual creatures that were never alive and have never walked the earth." Alana said carefully.

"Where do they come from?" Lorra asked in wonder.

"If you look at the various mythologies, they each have their own creation story and many of them talk about the origins of angels, demons, spirit guides and the like. For the purposes of what we'll be doing, it doesn't really matter where they came from. What we need to determine is if we've got one and if we do, what to do about it." Alana said seriously.

"Now, the last thing before we begin. Since ancient times people have claimed to encounter supernatural entities. Through the ages, they've concocted various ways of dealing with them, with varying degrees of success. Once we've determined, to the best of our ability, what we're dealing with, then we'll look at those traditions and see which solution best fits our needs." Alana said carefully.

"So you don't have a proton pack that you can use to zap them away?" Lorra asked with a smile.

"The proton pack only restrains them until you can get them into the trap." Derek said seriously.

Charity couldn't contain her grin as she rolled her eyes.

"No. We don't have anything like that. Let's look at the evidence and see what we've got before we start worrying about what to do next." Alana said with a smile.

"Just poke me if I fall asleep." Charity said as she turned her attention to the big screen.

"I'll do it." Derek said with a grin.

Charity turned an icy glare on him and quietly said, "I'll break it off."

* * * * *

Teresa took her daughter into the kitchen to begin the task of making iced halloween sugar cookies in the shape of pumpkins.

Although she wasn't really in the mood, it made her feel slightly better to busy herself with the mundane task.

There was a sound, like something being dropped, upstairs.

"What was that?" Zoe asked her mother curiously.

"I don't know, baby. Just keep stirring." Teresa said as she tried to reign in her emotions.

"Are we going to go and live with grandma?" Zoe asked as she began to stir again.

A sudden thump sounded from the dining room, but Teresa did her best not to react as she said, "I don't know. I don't know much of anything, right now."

* * * * *

"Derek, do you want to start with the audio?" Alana asked as she turned her attention to the big screen.

"Sure." Derek said quickly, then looked back to the table and said, "Good work girls. You catalogued these just right."

A waveform pattern filled the big TV/monitor, then after a glance to be sure that everyone was ready, Derek hit the button to play the first audio file.

"I muted this to some degree so that the questioner's voice wouldn't blast us out." Derek explained before Charity's voice came over the speaker, rather loudly, saying, "*What is your name?*"

There were a few seconds of silence before a quiet, whisper of a voice responded, "*Daniel.*"

"Were you able to find any records of Daniel Quartermaine?" Alana asked seriously.

"Not much. We might have better luck looking for records at the public library or the county courthouse. But anything before 1790 is pretty much a shot in the dark. All I managed to come up with is a cemetery record that seems to match." Derek said frankly.

"Mark that for further investigation." Alana said decisively.

Derek nodded, then quickly typed a text note on his small screen.

"Next?" Alana prompted.

"Everyone flinched at Kerry's bellowing voice asking, "*What is your name?*"

What followed was a quiet, yet very clear, "*Benjamin.*"

Derek held up a hand, indicating that it wasn't finished.

Everyone listened carefully and watched the waveform moving on the screen.

Kerry's loud, distorted voice asked, "*Did you live here?*"

Then, barely audibly, a voice responded, "*This is my job.*"

"Wow! Okay. Good job on cleaning that up." Alana said frankly.

Derek smiled at her praise.

"So while we're looking for Daniel Quartermaine, we also need to be looking for someone, from the same timeframe, named Benjamin, who used to work in the house?" Charity speculated.

"If we could find a connection like that, it would be ideal. But I'm not going to hold my breath." Alana said frankly, then asked, "Any more audio?"

"There's a few, but only one that I've been able to do anything with." Derek said, then started the next audio file playing.

"I have to leave."

"I love you."

"I can't."

"I'll go with you."

"That's what they kept saying outside my bedroom!" Toni said suddenly.

"So, that's the residual." Alana said thoughtfully, then turned to Derek and asked, "Where was that from?"

"That was the digital recorder at the top of the stairs." Derek answered professionally.

Alana nodded as she made a note.

"I'm just going to play through the rest of these, back to back. I couldn't make any sense of them, but if something sounds familiar, just tell me and I'll stop and replay it." Derek said before playing another set of clips.

For the most part, it was just incomprehensible whispers, but at one point Lorra quickly said, "Stop!"

Derek stopped the playback and moved the slider back to the beginning of that segment of the clip.

"Can we listen to this one, then the 'I love you' clip? I think it's the same thing, just at lower volume." Lorra said seriously.

"Yeah, just let me queue it up." Derek said as he turned to face his computer.

Everyone watched as Derek manipulated the two clips in horizontal windows, one above the other. After a little squeezing and stretching, he was able to get the waveforms to almost match up.

"I have to leave."

"I love you."

"I can't."

"I'll go with you."

Then the second clip played and it was easy to tell that even though the words weren't understandable, the pitch and inflection were identical.

"Nice catch, Lorra. You have a good ear." Alana said seriously.

"That audio came from the recorder at the other end of the hall. It's virtually the same timestamp as the first." Derek said carefully.

"Is that all the audio?" Alana asked to be sure.

"Yeah." Derek said then clicked something on his keyboard and the screen filled with a blurry dark image.

"What are we looking at?" Alana asked curiously.

"This is one of the digital photos I took after we heard the growl in the master bedroom. This is the only one that showed anything besides a door." Derek said frankly.

"I can't make out any detail." Alana said carefully.

"That's as good as I could get it. Either it was moving quickly or it just looks like that. If you'll look in the background, the image of the door isn't the least bit blurred, so it's not camera movement." Derek explained.

"Any other photographic evidence?" Alana asked as she wrote down another note.

Derek hit a button and a picture of the scratches on Alana's belly filled the screen.

"I don't have anything to point out in this one, but I thought it was important to remember that whatever it turns out to be that we're dealing with, here, we have to keep in mind that it *can* hurt us." Derek said seriously.

"It hurt you?" Toni asked in surprise.

"Yes. I was using religious provocation and it lashed out at me." Alana said calmly, hoping to minimize the event.

"I didn't know that a ghost could really hurt you." Lorra said in wonder.

"Remember what I told you when we started. 'Ghost' is the term we use for something that was once alive. I would be willing to tentatively accept that Daniel and Benjamin might be ghosts. But whatever did this..." Alana said as she pointed at the large screen, "I would guess is more likely a poltergeist or a demon."

"What's the difference?" Lorra asked curiously.

"Actually, depending on who you ask, there isn't one. Poltergeists are thought to be a 'class' of demon. They're usually very powerful and fairly troublesome, but their reign of terror usually only lasts a few weeks to a few months. Demons... well, let's just say that they tend to stick around a lot longer." Alana said carefully.

Charity looked at Alana expectantly, but when she didn't continue, Charity added, "And poltergeists usually appear when there's a pubescent girl, or sometimes a menopausal woman, in the household."

Alana flashed Charity a warning look, but didn't contradict her.

"I could have caused this?" Toni said in realization.

"No." Alana said firmly, then explained, "At least, from what I've witnessed, the evidence doesn't bear out that assumption."

Charity looked at Alana curiously.

"If the 'entity' were somehow being fueled by Toni's hormonal state, then it would stand to reason that it would be weakened in her absence. I think I can safely say that what we encountered last night was, if anything, *gaining* in strength." Alana said seriously.

Charity considered Alana's words, then began to slowly nod in agreement.

"So, it's a demon?" Lorra asked cautiously.

"Given what we've seen so far, that seems the most likely conclusion. But let's see what else we've come up with." Alana said, then looked to Derek expectantly.

Derek nodded, then hit a key on his computer.

The screen filled with a psychedelic rainbow of colors, forming the image of a room filled with boxes.

"Freaky." Lorra said under her breath.

"This is infrared of the dining room. Just watch." Derek said as he watched the image on the big screen.

Everyone was silent as they waited for something to happen.

Suddenly, a red blur moved on the screen.

"Freeze it." Alana said quickly.

Derek tapped the spacebar on his keyboard and the image stopped.

Alana stood and walked to the screen as she said, "The entity is moving *between* the boxes. You can see a clear delineation where its lower half is blocked out."

"I think I see a nose." Toni said tentatively.

"Where?" Alana asked as she looked back at the image.

Toni walked to the screen and pointed.

"Back it up and slow the playback." Alana said as she carefully watched the screen.

As everyone watched the replay, Alana slowly said, "Yes. And I can make out the eye ridge. I think we can safely upgrade this from 'unknown blur' to 'possible apparition'."

"If you liked that, you're going to *love* this." Derek said enthusiastically.

Alana and Toni took their seats again as Derek started the next video.

Although the video seemed to be meandering around the room aimlessly, the sound of a creaking door caught everyone's attention.

When the camera focused on the door, everyone stared in wonder at the clear image of a young teenage boy peeking into the room.

"My name is Charity. I just want to talk to you for a minute. What is your name?"

The boy looked directly into the camera, then ducked back behind the door.

"Wait! I'm not going to hurt you! I just want to ask you some questions!"

Everyone watched the video jump and jiggle as Charity pulled the door open, then watched as it searched up and down the hallway, finding nothing.

"That's a 'Class A' piece of evidence." Alana said in an impressed tone.

"Yeah, and the investigator did a really good job of keeping it calm and professional." Derek said with a sincere grin at Charity.

"Excellent work." Alana agreed, then looked around the room and asked, "Any comments?"

"That's not the same guy we saw." Lorra said reluctantly.

"Do what?" Alana asked with surprise.

"She's right. That's not who we saw the other night." Toni confirmed.

Alana thought for a moment, then carefully said, "Since we have an audio file of Charity asking the entity its name and receiving the response, 'Daniel', I suppose that what you two might have seen was Benjamin."

"Here's another angle." Derek said before starting the video.

Everyone watched as the stationary camera, which had been focused on the door, caught the door opening and the boy's head peeking inside.

"Have you had a chance to check the hallway cameras for this timestamp?" Alana asked thoughtfully.

"I thought you'd ask." Derek said with a smile, then started the next video in his queue.

"There!" Lorra said as she pointed.

Only the vaguest outline of the boy's upper body could be seen as the door started to open.

"If I hadn't seen the view from inside the room, I wouldn't accept this as evidence of anything." Derek said frankly.

"What about the other hallway camera?" Alana asked curiously.

Derek hit a key, then said, "Even worse."

They all watched the door open slightly, then a moment later, Charity barrel into the hall, looking frantic as she scanned around with the video camera.

"Any thoughts before we go on?" Alana asked the room in general.

No one seemed to be inclined to answer, so she nodded at Derek to continue.

"Girls, brace yourselves. This one's hard to watch." Derek warned.

"We're not little kids." Lorra said indignantly.

Derek glanced at her with a dubious expression, then started the video.

Everyone watched as Alana slowly stood.

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle..."

Alana had to fight to continue watching, but since her memory of the incident was still so foggy, she knew that she needed to.

Whether they wanted to admit to it or not, every person in the room felt a chill when the low raspy growl sounded.

Then, suddenly, Alana was literally thrown off her feet and propelled four feet back, into the bedroom door.

"Replay that in slow-mo." Charity said in a firm, professional voice.

Derek turned to his computer and restarted the video at half the normal speed.

"I want to see if we can see what did this." Charity explained.

"I think we *know* what did it." Derek said frankly.

"No, you're *assuming* that you know..." Charity trailed off as the video reached the point of the attack.

"I can't see anything." Toni said cautiously.

"There may not be anything to see. I just want to be sure." Charity said as she kept her focus on the screen.

When the video had finished, she shook her head in defeat.

"What about the DVR?" Alana asked seriously.

"Coming up." Derek said, then started the next video.

Everyone watched as the same events replayed, but from a different angle.

"Look over there." Toni said as she pointed.

"At what?" Alana asked curiously.

"Back it up, I think I saw something over there, by the wall." Toni said seriously.

Derek quickly restarted the video then watched with interest.

"On the left side of the screen, you can barely see it." Toni said in a low voice.

When the video reached the point just after Alana had said the prayer, everyone watched as *something* seemed to come into being, for just an instant.

"Back it up. Freeze it." Alana barked as she got up from her chair and moved closer to the big screen.

"There." Derek said as he did his best to capture the image she wanted.

"The head of a bird, and the teeth of a wolf..." Alana said carefully.

"What's that?" Toni asked in confusion.

"It's kind of a long shot. I'm trying to guess at how a primitive person would describe this... thing. What I'm hoping is that I'll be able to find a historic incidence of someone encountering another one of these and, with any luck, find out how they defeated it." Alana said carefully.

Lorra looked at the vague image on the screen and seemed to be trying to make sense of it.

"What's next?" Alana asked as she went back to her seat.

"Last one. After this, I've got a whole bunch of little orbs and flares, but nothing significant." Derek said as he started the last video.

When the 'creature' popped into view for just a frame or two, everyone jumped, even those who knew it was coming.

"Let's see the screen cap." Alana said firmly.

The screen filled with a still image that was the stuff that nightmares were made of.

"*That's* in my house?" Toni asked in amazement.

"It seems so. Now we just have to figure out what to do about it." Alana said frankly.

* * * * *

"Are we going trick or treating tonight?" Zoe asked hopefully.

"I don't know yet. We'll see." Teresa said distractedly.

"I want to be a princess." Zoe said happily.

"We've already got your costume. You're going to be that pink ninja ranger thing that you picked out." Teresa said as she fought to focus more of her attention on her daughter.

"I want to be a princess!" Zoe said firmly.

"Keep your voice down. You'll wake your father." Teresa stage whispered.

"I want to be a princess." Zoe demanded.

"Honey, you're six years old. I think it's time you understood something." Teresa said seriously, "The movies and fairy tales lied to you. Princesses aren't all beautiful, they aren't all happy, and they don't always get everything that they want."

Zoe looked at her mother with confusion at the statement.

"I'd rather you be a pink ninja thing because at least then you're someone who can take care of herself. A princess is a boring, useless thing to be. I want you to be someone strong and independent, not ever needing for someone to 'rescue' her." Teresa said thoughtfully.

"Huh?"

Teresa snapped out of her thoughts and smiled before saying, "The cookies should be cooled down enough, let's start icing them."

"Okay!"

* * * * *

"I'm scared." Toni said frankly.

"I know. That's perfectly reasonable, given the circumstances." Alana said as she fought to keep her sleepy mind on her driving.

"Have you decided what you're going to do about the demon, yet?" Lorra asked from the seat behind Toni's.

"I still have a few things to check out, but I have a general idea." Alana said evasively.

"You look really tired." Toni said honestly.

"I am. But all I have to do is tell your parents what we've found and then I'm going to get a few hours of sleep."

"Thanks for letting us help." Toni said sincerely.

"You did really good work. Maybe, when this is all over, you two could help us with evidence reviews, if you'd like." Alana said as she pulled onto Toni's block.

"Really? That'd be great!" Lorra said happily.

"Sure. You take the work seriously and you do a good job. Evidence review is a long difficult slog at the best of times. We'd be happy to have the help." Alana said as she pulled the van to a stop.

"Could we, maybe, go on investigations with you, too?" Lorra asked hopefully.

"Let's save that discussion for some other time. Right now, we have a job to do." Alana said before getting out of the van.

* * * * *

"Hello, Alana. Please come in." Teresa said as she stepped away from the door, with Zoe almost glued to her side.

"Thank you. I've just come by to give you the summary of the evidence we collected last night." Alana said as she fought to force a smile past her exhaustion.

"Are you going to get rid of it?" Teresa asked hopefully as she put a hand on Zoe's shoulder.

"Yes. At least, we're going to try. But we're going to need to arrange a few things first. We'll do that tonight." Alana assured her, then asked, "Where can I set up my laptop?"

"Is the kitchen okay?" Teresa asked uncertainly.

"That will be fine."

"I'll wake Kerry, he'll want to hear this." Teresa said quickly, then dashed away, Zoe following a step behind.

"It smells like someone's been baking cookies." Lorra said with a smile.

Alana noticed Toni's expression of distraction.

"What's wrong?" Alana asked curiously.

"Is all of this my fault?" Toni asked quietly.

"Why would you think that?" Alana asked as she divided her attention to get her laptop ready to use.

Toni glanced at Lorra, then quietly said, "You said that someone... like me, could kind of 'summon' a poltergeist, right?"

"Something like that. Some people speculate that the changes in your body at this time in your life can sort of supercharge your psychic energy, which can attract spiritual entities." Alana said carefully.

"And what if someone like me was really worried or afraid about something? Could that make it even worse?" Toni asked cautiously.

"I suppose it could. If you take the psychic 'rush' from an unstable hormonal state and compound it with additional emotional stress, it could conceivably amplify the effect." Alana said speculatively.

"If that stress was gone, then would it fix it?" Toni asked reluctantly.

Alana thought for a moment, then carefully said, "No. At least, I don't think it would get rid of anything that's already here. But it could weaken it, depriving it of its primary source of power and it would also reduce the likelihood that another such entity might be attracted in the future... theoretically speaking, of course."

"Did you come up with anything?" Kerry asked hopefully as he walked into the kitchen.

"A few things. I think you're aware of most of them, but it paints more of a picture when you can see them all in a row." Alana said as she brought up the audio playback program on the screen of her laptop.

"Mom, Dad, I'm gay." Toni said firmly.

"What?" Teresa asked with confusion at the *non sequitur*.

"I'm a lesbian." Toni said with a tremble of fear in her voice.

There was a long moment of silence, then Teresa carefully asked, "Are you sure?"

"She doesn't have to be sure." Kerry said, before Toni could formulate a response, "If she feels strongly enough about it to 'come out' to us, then she's sure enough."

Kerry then turned to his daughter and said, "But just so we're clear, this isn't carved in stone. If, as you grow, you realize that your 'interests' have changed, we'll be fine with that, too."

Toni stared at her dad for a long moment, trying to comprehend what he was saying. When she finally deciphered his answer as

being acceptance, she turned and looked at her mother with concern.

"Your father's right. Be who you are and we'll be here when you need us." Teresa said decisively.

"That's so cool." Lorra said with a smile.

Both Kerry and Teresa turned their attention toward her and had matching inquisitive looks.

"She's just a friend. I told her before she spent the night, but we're not..." Toni faltered before she could finish.

"I'm glad you've got a friend who accepts you." Kerry told his daughter assuringly.

"It's not like it was back in the stone age. No one thinks it's a big deal." Lorra said frankly, then added, "No one our age, anyway."

Kerry chuckled at the statement, then looked to his daughter and said, "I'm glad that you told us, but you picked a really interesting time to do it."

Toni glanced at Alana, then said, "It's possible that I might be the cause of all the trouble that we've been having. Me being all worried about how to tell you and how you'd react might have..."

Alana noticed that Toni was having trouble finding the words and jumped in, "I can't say that Toni is the cause or even a contributing factor in what's been happening in your house, but if she were, her 'coming out' and you reacting as well as you did may have just deprived the entity of a much needed source of psychic energy."

Kerry walked to his daughter and gave her a firm hug.

"Let me go ahead and show you what we've found, so I can get some sleep before we have to fight this thing." Alana said as she turned her attention back to her laptop.

"What's a lesbian?" Zoe asked her mother quietly.

"A girl who loves other girls." Teresa said simply.

Zoe seemed to consider that for a moment, then turned her attention to the laptop's screen.

* * * * *

"The files you're about to see and hear have been edited and computer enhanced to make them a little bit easier to understand. We have the raw files saved, back at the office, if you ever want to see the completely unedited versions." Alana said professionally.

She glanced upward at the sound of a thump from upstairs, then started the first audio file.

"This one came from Toni's bedroom." Alana hurried to add before the sound played.

"What is your name?"

"Daniel."

"When the psychic walked through the house, she said that one of the spirits she sensed was named Daniel Quartermaine. Supposedly, he's a distant relation of the Quartermaine family that settled this area." Alana said seriously, then pressed the button for the next audio clip.

"What is your name?"

"Benjamin."

It sounded like something bumped against the dining room wall. Alana glanced in that direction and waited a moment before she continued.

"We don't have any leads on a Benjamin in this house, but so far we've only been able to do Internet research. Once we've been able

to look at the village and county records, we may be able to find more information." Alana said seriously, then started the next recording.

"Did you live here?"

"This is my job."

"That might indicate that Benjamin was a member of the household staff. This is all speculation, but it's a place to start looking." Alana said, then started the next one.

"I have to leave."

"I love you."

"I can't."

"I'll go with you."

"This came from the top of the stairs. Toni said that it was what she kept hearing being whispered, over and over." Alana said carefully.

"They were lovers." Lorra said thoughtfully.

"With a conversation taken out of context, we can't automatically make that assumption." Alana warned.

"Daniel lived in this house and Benjamin worked here. They were in love, but because they were master and servant, they couldn't be together." Lorra said distantly.

"And because they were both guys." Toni added simply.

"Yeah. They used to burn witches here. I seriously doubt that they'd be okay with a gay couple." Lorra said with a nod.

"Keep in mind, this is all speculation on our part. We need to base our conclusions only on the facts." Alana warned.

Toni and Lorra both nodded their agreement.

Alana pressed a key on the laptop and the rainbow hued image filled the screen.

"If we're working under the assumption that Benjamin and Daniel are the ghosts of people who used to live here, then it would stand to reason that this is a picture of Benjamin." Alana said carefully.

"Is that the dining room?" Teresa asked uncertainly.

"Yes. And that's also where Kerry caught the EVP of Benjamin." Alana confirmed.

"Why do you think he's making all the racket in there at all hours of the day and night?" Teresa asked as she moved closer to get a better look at the screen.

"Because it's his job." Lorra said suddenly.

"What was that?" Alana asked curiously.

"If Benjamin was a servant in this house, it's his job to keep the place neat and clean. Maybe that's why he's moving stuff. He's trying to clean it up." Lorra speculated.

Alana considered for a moment, then said, "That's quite a leap in reasoning, but until we've got a better explanation, I'm inclined to go with it."

Lorra smiled proudly at the announcement.

Alana pressed the button and waited for the reaction to the next video.

"Oh my God!" Teresa exclaimed.

"That's Daniel." Toni told her mother.

"Yeah. Benjamin's got black hair." Lorra added.

"I can see him... I mean... how..." Teresa stammered.

"This has to be one of the best pieces of evidence that we've ever collected." Alana said honestly.

"I can't be here." Toni said suddenly.

"What was that?" Alana asked curiously.

"When Benjamin stopped at Daniel's bedroom door, when Lorra and I were in there, he said, 'I can't be here.'" Toni said quickly.

"I suppose that *does* kind of fit in with your 'forbidden love' theory." Alana said in a considering tone.

"But they're together now." Lorra added quietly.

Alana was about to start the next video, but caught herself.

"You might not want Zoe to see this one, it might give her nightmares." Alana said frankly.

"Come here, Angel. Why don't you show me where Mommy hid the cookies?" Kerry asked his daughter gently.

Zoe ran to her father, happy to be receiving his attention.

When Alana was sure that they were far enough away, she started the video.

Everyone watched as Alana was knocked completely off her feet and thrown into the bedroom door.

Teresa brought up a hand to cover her mouth as she stared at the horrific sight.

"It's a nasty one." Alana said, then brought up the still image of the 'beast'.

Teresa began trembling uncontrollably as tears started sliding down her cheeks.

"We made cookies!" Zoe said proudly as she carried a plate of iced sugar cookies toward the table.

Alana casually closed the laptop before Zoe could get close enough to see the image.

"So, have you decided what we're doing?" Kerry asked seriously as he returned to the gathering.

Alana glanced at Teresa, who seemed to be trying to gain control of her emotions.

"I think, for this to work, we're going to need to have Toni here, and of course, you'll need to be here, Kerry. It would probably be best if Zoe were out of the house..."

"We're going trick or treating!" Zoe said happily before snatching another cookie from the plate.

"There will probably be some Halloween parties in the area, it might be good to stop in and check those out, too." Alana said in a leading tone.

Teresa caught on to what she was saying and nodded her agreement.

"I'll get in contact with Father Francis and we'll set up a time for everyone to meet here. I'll call you with those details as soon as everything's been arranged." Alana said, mostly to Kerry.

"Can I come, too?" Lorra asked hopefully.

"I think that it would be a great help if you were here to lend Toni your moral support." Alana said with a smile.

"Make sure to call your mom to be sure that it's okay." Kerry told her seriously.

Lorra nodded her agreement.

"Okay. If no one has any questions, I'm going to make the arrangements, then I'm going to get some much needed sleep." Alana said seriously.

"I don't know how you do it." Kerry said honestly.

"Sometimes, neither do I." Alana chuckled as she picked up her laptop.

* * * * *

"Mr. Hinton, it's good to see you again. How are you?" Father Francis asked when the door opened.

"With all that's going on, I suppose I'm doing as well as I can be." Kerry said frankly, then quickly added, "Please, come in."

"I've been preparing since we last spoke. Rest assured, we will emerge victorious." Father Francis said confidently.

"I'm really glad to hear that." Kerry said honestly.

As they entered the living room, Father Francis noticed that Alana, Derek and Charity were all present, as were Toni and Lorra.

"Where are your wife and younger daughter?" Father Francis asked cautiously.

"They're out trick or treating. Teresa's going to keep them away until I call and tell her that we're finished." Kerry said frankly.

"Good. I'm glad that you thought to do that." Father Francis said with a smile.

"Do you know where you'd like to set up?" Alana asked curiously.

"That depends. Is there one area of the house that the demon tends to frequent?" Father Francis asked cautiously.

"The master bedroom, upstairs at the far end of the hallway." Alana answered seriously.

"Then I believe that I could set up here, then do a cleansing in each room, ending with that bedroom. That should reduce the possibility of it evading us." Father Francis said thoughtfully.

"I like that plan." Alana said with a nod.

The ring of a doorbell caught everyone's attention.

When it was obvious that no one else was going to do it, Toni said, "I'll get it."

Lorra automatically walked with her to the entry hall.

"Trick or treat!" Three kids chorused.

"Here you go." Toni said as she put a fistful of candy into each of their bags.

"Thanks!" One of the kids said happily, then the group ran, as one, down the walkway to a waiting car.

"Do you remember when life was that simple?" Lorra asked as she turned to walk back inside.

"You mean, two weeks ago?" Toni asked with a grin.

Lorra thought about it for a moment, and finally said, "It seems longer."

* * * * *

"What's that, you've got there?" Father Francis asked when he saw something that looked like bundles of weeds, tied with twine.

"Sage. I don't know a lot about your christian hocus pocus thing, but I've heard that this stuff helps when you're doing a cleansing." Charity said frankly.

"Typically, we use incense, but since I didn't think to bring any, I suppose that smudging with sage will suffice." Father Francis said consideringly.

"Is it going to hurt anything if I record what you're doing, Father?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I can't see any reason why it would. That is, as long as you don't interfere." Father Francis said thoughtfully.

"I just plan to stay in the background and watch." Derek said seriously.

* * * * *

It took a while for Father Francis to get everything in order, but finally he began the cleansing and blessing ritual to dispel any forces of evil from the house. As he went to each door and window, he marked it with holy water and said a special invocation to secure it against any who would intend harm.

Alana walked with the priest, carrying supplies, and seemed to instinctively know what he needed before he had a chance to ask for it.

Charity followed along with her bundle of sage, slightly smoking, to cleanse the air of each room they passed through.

Derek had his DVR camera in hand, documenting every step of the way.

Kerry, Toni and Lorra followed along, uncertain of their importance in the ceremony.

* * * * *

When the doorbell rang, Lorra would hurry back to the front door to attend to the trick or treaters, since they had been told that Toni might be needed and that Lorra was there for moral support.

Upon completion of the first floor, the entire party ascended the stairs and began the entire production again, this time starting with the room that would be Mike's, when he visited.

When they moved on to Toni's room, both she and Lorra had the same thought. They were worried that what the priest was doing might somehow harm or expel Daniel or Benjamin. Neither of them wanted for the young lovers to be forcibly removed from the house.

However, neither of them had the will to interrupt the Father as he continued on with his marathon blessing.

* * * * *

Finally, after what seemed to be an incredibly long time, they reached the last room of the house.

The feeling of foreboding and dread as they walked in was unmistakable.

The temperature in the room was a good twenty degrees cooler than anywhere else in the house and even though the lights appeared to be functioning normally, the room seemed to be dark and had the sense of being uncomfortably confining.

Throughout the house, Father Francis had conducted his blessings and prayers in English. But as soon as he stepped into the master bedroom, he immediately switched to Latin.

Alana was on alert, determined that the thing that had attacked her before wouldn't get a second chance.

Charity was obviously afraid, but forced herself to continue on and confront the thing that only the day before she was certain didn't exist.

Derek stood just inside the bedroom door with his DVR camera in hand, documenting every moment of their encounter.

At a certain point during his blessing, Father Francis made an urgent summoning motion to Kerry, bidding him to come forward.

"Mr. Hinton, you're the master of this house. You need to exert your authority as such and command this evil to leave." Father Francis said quickly.

Before Kerry could open his mouth, a growl started which escalated into a roar.

Kerry, Alana and Father Francis were all impacted by an unseen force at the same time. It wasn't enough to knock them off their feet, but all three had to fight to maintain their balance.

"I'm the one who brought you here. Now I'm sending you back." Toni said as she stepped forward, to her father's side.

"Listen to me! I deny you! You can't have any more of my power! I'm cutting you off!" Toni screamed.

"I'm the head of this household! You are not welcome here! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!" Kerry finished with a yell.

As soon as the words were out of Kerry's mouth, Father Francis stood forward and forcefully said, "Exorcizamus te, omnis immunde spiritus, omni satanica potestas, omnis incursoinfernalis adversarii, omnis legio, omnis congregatio et secta diabolica, in nomini etvirtute Domini nostri Jesu Christi, eradicare et effugare a Dei Ecclesia, ab animabusad imaginem Dei conditis ac pretioso divini Agni sanguini redemptis."

An anguished howl filled the room and all present, except Father Francis, covered their ears at the horrific sound.

The sound seemed to go on and on, but one by one the people in the room realized that the sound was becoming more distant.

As soon as it had faded completely, Father Francis jumped into action, performing the cleansing ritual he had done in all the other rooms of the house. As soon as the last syllable left his mouth, he took the holy water from Alana's hand and blessed the windows and door of the room.

Everyone was standing, more or less in shock, when Father Francis finally finished speaking and the room fell into silence.

"Do you feel that?" Lorra asked in a whisper.

"What?" Toni asked as everyone turned to listen with interest.

"Before, it was like being deep in a cave, now it feels... like freedom." Lorra said, obviously having difficulty finding the words.

"Is it over?" Kerry asked cautiously.

Alana thought for a moment, then carefully said, "There's no way that I can promise that it is. But as far as I can tell, and from everything I know, I'd say that we've gotten rid of the thing that we've been calling a demon."

"What about Daniel and Benjamin?" Toni asked with concern.

"I don't know, we'll just have to wait and see if they're still here. But, if they are, do you want them to be?" Alana asked curiously.

Toni looked at her dad uncertainly.

"This is their home, a place where they'll always belong and always be accepted." Kerry said seriously.

Toni smiled at the answer, then said, "You might have trouble getting Mom to go along with it."

"I think that if I talk to Benjamin and get him to stop bumping things around in the dining room, that she'll be fine with the rest, given enough time." Kerry said thoughtfully.

Before Toni could respond, the doorbell rang.

Trick or Treat!

Fallwell Paranormal Research

Book 2: Case#20151204A Jack's Case

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Chapter 1: Investigative Dangers

"Alana, it's Jack. I need your help."

"What can I do for you?"

"We've been doing an investigation and we've hit a wall. I was wondering if you and your team would like to try your hand at it?" Jack asked hopefully.

"Since when do you ask for help?" Alana asked suspiciously.

"Since now." Jack answered a little too quickly.

"Before I agree, what type of thing are we looking at?"

"Alana, this one's got me scared. You know me. I can handle things that go bump in the night and the occasional jump scare. But what we're dealing with here is on a whole other level."

"How do you mean?" Alana asked cautiously.

"I don't want to take the chance of influencing your investigation with our mistaken assumptions. But if you decide to take over the case... Be careful, okay? This one's nasty." Jack said with concern.

"Everyone's supposed to meet here at six. Can you be here to fill us in?" Alana asked carefully.

"I'll bring the case file with the accumulated evidence. But... Kyla and I won't be going with you. We can't go back there." Jack finished regretfully.

"It's okay, Jack. I understand." Alana assured him.

"I'll see you at six." Jack said anxiously before hanging up the phone.

* * * * *

"I brought Max with me, I hope that's okay." Charity said as she walked into the office.

"Of course. But it looks like we may have a case." Alana said frankly.

"Oh? I thought tonight was just to review case files and plan for next week." Charity said honestly, then smiled when her boyfriend walked into the room.

"That was my original plan, but then Jack called and asked if we would take over a case for him." Alana said seriously.

"He *wants* us to take one of his cases? What's up with that?" Charity asked in wonder.

"Who's Jack?" Max asked timidly.

"He runs another paranormal team... well, you can hardly call it a team. It's him and his wife, Kyla." Charity explained.

"Jack is a physicist and an author. He does paranormal investigations in his spare time. Kyla claims to be 'sensitive' to spiritual energies." Alana added.

"Why does Jack want us to take one of his cases?" Charity asked again.

"It must be too big for a two-man team." Alana answered simply.

"Is it okay if Max comes along? If this is a big job, you might need a psychic." Charity asked seriously.

"I'm not a medium. I can just sense things, sometimes." Max cautioned.

Alana smiled at the exchange and couldn't help but comment, "I can remember when, not too long ago, you nearly had a kicking screaming fit at the thought of calling in a psychic."

"Yeah. Well, since then I've figured out that psychics aren't *all* hucksters and charlatans. Some of them are really good people who get flashes of insight." Charity said as she looked lovingly at her boyfriend.

"Max! I didn't expect to see you, tonight. How are you doing?" A voice intruded.

"I'm doing fine. How have you been, Derek?" Max asked with a genuine smile.

"Classes have been kicking my butt this semester, but I think I'm finally getting on top of it." Derek said frankly.

"Let me know if you need any help. I don't remember *everything* from my college days, but I can at least help you reason things out or help you do research." Max said sincerely.

"Thanks, Max. I think I'm alright at the moment, but if things get too crazy, I may give you a call." Derek said gratefully.

"Am I late?" A voice called before a man walked into the room.

Alana glanced at the clock, then smiled as she said, "You made it with five minutes to spare. And I understand that you're driving over here right after a full day of work. There's no way I'd be upset if you *were* late."

"Do we want to go ahead and start?" Derek asked as he looked around.

"We're waiting on Jack. He's got a case for us." Charity told him quietly.

"Why's Jack giving us a case?" Derek asked cautiously.

"If you'll wait for just a few minutes, you can ask him yourself. He should be on his way here." Alana said as she walked into the conference room and took her usual seat.

"Kerry, how are the wife and kids?" Derek asked as they followed.

"They're fine... except that Lorra and Toni are driving me crazy, trying to talk me into letting them do investigations." Kerry said with a grin.

"If they can keep their enthusiasm, I'm sure that they'll get their chance eventually." Derek assured him.

"Hello?" A voice called from the office.

"We're in the conference room." Charity called in return.

Alana smiled at her, then walked to the reception area to greet their guest.

* * * * *

"Jack, you already know Charity and Derek. I'd like for you to meet Max and Kerry." Alana said professionally.

"I didn't realize that your team had grown so much." Jack said honestly as he placed his briefcase on the conference room table.

"Max and Kerry are *part-time* investigators. They join us when they have the spare time." Alana explained simply, then continued, "So, what brings you here?"

"About a month ago we were contacted by the Osmani family to investigate some supernatural occurrences in their home." Jack said darkly.

"What type of occurrences?" Derek asked curiously.

"Let me go ahead and present the evidence that we've collected. We've hit a dead end, so I want to be really careful not to lead you down the same path that we took." Jack said frankly.

"Thank you. I appreciate you thinking of that." Alana said sincerely.

"If I may use your computer for a moment, I'll present the evidence that we've collected so far." Jack said carefully.

"Of course. Derek, would you mind?" Alana asked seriously.

"Yeah. Give me just a minute." Derek said as he went to his work computer to boot it up.

"While he's doing that, can you tell us about the family?" Alana asked curiously.

"Mr. and Mrs. Osmani are naturalized citizens who immigrated here from Pakistan several years ago. I only bring this up because they seem to be a little uncomfortable about it. I'm sure that they're completely justified in their reasons." Jack said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "They have two children. Van is fifteen and Malika is thirteen."

"I'm ready for you, Jack." Derek said as he backed away from the computer.

"Thanks." Jack muttered, then inserted a thumb drive into the USB port.

Everyone waited silently as Jack prepared his presentation.

"The family has been living in their house since 2007. Although they've been experiencing paranormal incidents all along, up to now they've been mostly minor things that could be easily dismissed." Jack said distractedly as he brought the presentation up on the big screen.

Jack turned to face the group as he said, "About two months ago, things began to escalate."

"Do you have any theories as to why?" Alana asked seriously.

Jack froze in thought for a moment, then quietly said, "After our initial investigation and some historical research, we thought that we were dealing with a displaced spirit from the revolutionary war. We were misled. All the conclusions that we reached were wrong. I'll give you our research, in case it has some bearing, but don't make our mistake and give it too much credence."

"We'll keep that in mind." Alana said supportively, then cautiously asked, "So, what evidence were you able to collect?"

"Before you can say it, I'll admit that most of this could have natural explanations. But when you consider all of this at once, I think you'll get an idea of the scale of what we're looking at." Jack said gravely as he advanced to the first slide.

Everyone around the table silently studied the image of an infected wound, about an inch long, on someone's arm.

"Mrs. Osmani claims that she doesn't know where this injury came from and wasn't aware of it until it had reached this highly septic state." Jack said seriously.

Looks went around the table, and their expressions clearly said that none of them could imagine how this could be seen as supernatural in any way.

Without further exposition, Jack advanced to the next slide.

The slideshow that followed was one grotesque example of infection after another. Some were cuts, others were festering boils.

The last of that set of slides was of a foot so badly deformed by infection that it was nearly unrecognizable.

"These people don't need paranormal researchers, they need medical attention." Alana finally declared.

"Mrs. Osmani is a doctor. Trust me, they've been receiving the best medical care that there is, but the wounds and infections just keep happening. Her treatments are minimally effective, at best." Jack said gravely.

"That might mean that it's something in the home. That place must be like a giant petri dish." Charity said frankly.

"We've taken numerous swabs and haven't been able to identify any harmful bacterium in the home." Jack said seriously.

After a long, silent moment, Alana quietly asked what they all were wondering, "Even if you can't find the source of infection, what makes you think that this... event... has a supernatural origin?"

"This." Jack said, then brought up the next slide.

The picture on the screen was of a crudely made antique dagger.

They all looked at the picture for a moment, then Kerry hesitantly asked, "What about it?"

Rather than answer, Jack began to show slide after slide of different bladed weapons. There was a knife stabbed into a mattress, a broken pair of scissors embedded into a door facing, and other less flamboyant examples.

"I'm trying to keep my professional detachment, but this..." Jack said as he advanced to the next slide to show a straight razor sitting before a mutilated photograph. "Kyla and I came home from the Osmani house to find this waiting for us."

"It followed you home?" Derek asked with concern.

"Not only that." Jack responded, then started rolling up his shirt sleeve to reveal a bandage.

As he started to unwrap the bandage, more than one person brought up a hand to their nose to try and evade the putrid odor.

Alana gasped at the sight of the deep, infected gash on Jack's forearm as others turned away.

"Just as the family had stated, I never felt myself being injured. And when I discovered this, it was already massively infected." Jack said as he looked at his arm with fear and disgust vying for control of his expression.

"Jack, you really need to go to a doctor..." Alana began to say when a movement drew her attention.

Everyone in attendance looked on with horror as a maggot wriggled out of the infected wound on Jack's arm and dropped to the table. Jack quickly picked up the maggot with the soiled bandages and crushed it.

"As soon as I'm done here, Kyla's going to try a cleansing ceremony on me, then she's going to drive me to the hospital." Jack said frankly.

"How is she?" Charity asked with concern.

"Terrified." Jack answered simply, then continued, "From the first moment that we walked into the Osmani house, she felt that she was under psychic attack. She's had to keep herself completely closed off through the entire investigation."

"Is there anything else that you *need* to tell us? You really need to get to the hospital." Alana said seriously.

"Let me give you their case file..." Jack began to say as he reached into his briefcase, but then suddenly stopped and withdrew his hand.

"What's wrong?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Just another example of what's been happening." Jack said frankly, then carefully took the hook-like implement from his briefcase.

From the construction, it appeared that the small sickle might be two to three hundred years old.

"It doesn't look like it's torn anything *too* important." Jack said as he set the repeatedly slashed manilla folder on the conference room table.

"Is that everything?" Alana asked to confirm.

"Yes. I hope that you can find some answers and help this family. But, whatever you do, don't take any unnecessary risks. This thing, whatever it is, it's vicious." Jack said seriously.

"Jack, your neck." Alana said in horror.

Right before their eyes, the skin seemed to split open, as though it had been cut with a razor.

"I need to go." Jack said as he took out his handkerchief and held it to the fresh wound.

"You can't go by yourself, not like this." Charity said firmly.

"She's right, Jack. You're in no condition." Alana agreed.

"If you like, you can drive him home, and I can follow you." Max timidly suggested to Charity.

"How does that sound to you, Jack?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Yes. Thank you. I really appreciate that." Jack said with relief.

"Let me help you rebandage that arm, before we go." Charity said decisively.

"I'll get you something for your neck." Kerry added before dashing away to get the first aid kit.

"When you've finished with your blessing and hospital visit, call us and let us know how you're doing." Alana said seriously.

"I will." Jack assured her.

"Here." Kerry said as he handed Charity a fresh roll of gauze.

"We'll be right back as soon as we've dropped him off." Charity said to Alana while carefully beginning to wrap Jack's forearm.

"We'll be waiting for you." Alana said as she picked up the partially shredded case file.

* * * * *

"So, how do you want to tackle this?" Derek asked as soon as they were alone.

After a moment to consider, Alana quietly said, "Kerry, I think that maybe you should sit this one out."

"I know that I haven't had much training, but the only way I'm going to learn is to go on investigations with you." Kerry said frankly.

"It's not that. It looks like we're going to need all the help that we can get on this one, I'm just concerned that you may end up taking something home with you and I wouldn't want to take the chance of hurting you or your family." Alana said honestly.

"If we're careful to do a cleansing and a blessing when we leave, we should be able to minimize the possibility." Derek interjected.

"We can't be sure of how effective that will be. And, of course, there's always the chance that this isn't anything paranormal at all. This could be some kind of super contagion and the paranormal events might not be related." Alana said seriously.

"Thank you for worrying about me, but I remember what it's like to be helpless in the face of something paranormal. There's no way that I'm going to walk away from a family going through something like this." Kerry said firmly.

"Okay, Kerry. If you're sure." Alana finally relented.

"I am." Kerry said definitely.

"But, if at any point you feel like you need to back out to protect yourself or your family, I want you to do it. I want to help this family as much as you do, but not at the expense of your family's wellbeing." Alana said seriously.

"Yes. I'll do that." Kerry assured her.

"What do you want me to do with this?" Derek asked as he gestured toward the sickle that Jack had left on the conference room table.

"Run the standard tests on it, then lock it up in the storeroom. I doubt that it's being used as a conduit, but I'd rather not take the chance." Alana said seriously.

"I can do that, if you'd like." Kerry quickly offered.

"Go ahead and I'll follow behind you." Derek encouraged him.

* * * * *

"So, did we miss anything?" Charity asked as she and Max walked into the conference room.

"No. Kerry and Derek have just been conducting tests on the sickle and I've been reviewing Jack's case notes." Alana said frankly.

"Have you found any indication of what we'll be dealing with?" Charity asked cautiously.

"No. Given the evidence that Jack was able to collect, I probably would have drawn the same conclusions that he did. We'll need to go in there, keeping in mind that we might be dealing with something that's actively *trying* to deceive us." Alana said seriously as Kerry and Derek walked back into the room.

"How do you want to handle it, going in?" Charity asked thoughtfully.

"I was thinking that, assuming that the family gives permission for us to investigate, that Derek can set up tech, Charity can do an environmental sweep, Max can walk around and try to get a sense of the place and identify areas of interest, while I interview the parents and Kerry interviews the children." Alana said professionally.

"Are you sure that you want me to do interviews?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think you're ready. Besides, you already have experience talking with teenagers about this sort of thing." Alana said decisively.

"Kerry, can you help me get everything packed into the van?" Derek asked hopefully.

"I'll help, too." Max said quickly.

Alana looked at her team with pride, then said, "Let's do this."

* * * * *

Alana knocked on the door and waited.

Jack hadn't mentioned if he had told the family that Alana and her group might be stopping by.

"Yes?" A woman asked cautiously as she opened the door, just a crack.

"Dr. Osmani?" Alana ventured hesitantly.

"Yes. Who are you?" The woman asked anxiously.

"I'm Doctor Alana Travago from Fallwell Paranormal Research. Jack Kane contacted my team and asked that we stop by to see if we can help your family." Alana said professionally.

"Oh, yes, he said that he might request the aid of another group. How are he and his wife?" Dr. Osmani asked with concern.

"Jack was planning to go to the hospital after his meeting with us. He said that he'd call later to let us know how he's doing." Alana said seriously.

"Please, come in. I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what else to do." Dr. Osmani said as she stepped back and opened the door wider.

"Do you mind if my team sets up some equipment and takes some readings so that we can try to determine what's happening to your family?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Yes. Please, do whatever you have to. Just make it stop." Dr. Osmani said quickly.

"Thank you. We'll do our best." Alana said seriously, then thought to ask, "Is there an out of the way place where we can set up our equipment?"

"Yes. You may use the dining room, if you like." Dr. Osmani said as she led the way into the house.

Alana was suddenly assaulted by a putrid, rotting odor and reflexively brought her hand up to her nose.

"I can't do this." A voice said from behind her.

Alana turned and saw Max, standing stiff as a board in the doorway and it looked as though every bit of color had washed out of his face.

"I'm sorry, Charity, but I can't go in there." Max said as he stiffly started backing away.

"Go ahead and take the car. I'll ride back with the others in the van." Charity assured him.

"I'm really sorry. I thought I could do it, but I can't." Max said regretfully.

"Thanks for trying. I'll see you when I get home." Charity told him quietly.

"The dining room is just over here." Dr. Osmani said, drawing Alana's attention.

"Sorry about that. Thank you." Alana said, then started walking again.

* * * * *

"Is there anything that you're going to need?" Dr. Osmani asked as she waited just inside the dining room door.

"This will be fine. But is there any way that I can talk to you and your husband about what's been going on? Jack only gave us a general overview and I'd like the opportunity to ask you some questions." Alana asked hopefully.

"Yes. But you will have to go upstairs to speak with him. He is no longer able to walk." Dr. Osmani said gravely.

"That won't be any problem at all." Alana assured her.

* * * * *

As Alana and Dr. Osmani walked out of the dining room, they found the rest of the team standing, waiting for them.

"Dr. Osmani, I'd like to introduce my team. First we have Derek Seaver. He's in charge of our technical equipment." Alana said, then turned to Derek and said more quietly, "You can set up in the dining room."

Derek nodded, then picked up some equipment that he'd already carried in.

"Next, I'd like for you to meet Charity Lessing. She's going to focus mostly on the environmental aspects of your house, trying to rule out any 'natural' explanations for what's been happening." Alana said carefully.

When Dr. Osmani didn't ask for any clarification, Alana continued, "Finally, we have Kerry Hinton. If you wouldn't have any objection, he's going to interview your children."

"Of course. Van is in the living room, just through there, watching television. Malika is probably in her bedroom, talking on her cellphone... Allow me to apologize in advance for her behavior." Dr. Osmani said in a pained voice.

Kerry gave an understanding smile, then said, "Trust me, I have three kids. I know how it is."

Dr. Osmani briefly smiled in response, then looked at Alana anxiously.

"If you'll lead the way, let's get your interview started." Alana said pleasantly, trying to delicately get them on task.

* * * * *

"Do you mind if I talk with you for a few minutes?" Kerry asked cautiously as he walked into the living room.

"Who are you?" The teenage boy asked suspiciously.

"My name is Kerry Hinton. I'm here to try and help to figure out what's going on around here." Kerry said hesitantly.

"Why are you talking to me about it? Do you think I'm the cause of all this?" Van asked defensively.

"I don't think anything. Dr. Travago just asked me to come in here and find out about what's going on from your point of view." Kerry said frankly.

"Oh." Van said with surprise. He raised the remote control and turned off the television, then continued, "The last guy kept asking me questions about black magic and stuff, acting like I made this happen."

"Do you mind if I record our conversation? I'm kind of new at this and I don't want to take the chance of forgetting something important." Kerry asked cautiously.

"No. Go ahead. What did you want to know?" Van asked curiously, sounding to be a lot more at ease.

"Would you just tell me about what's been going on around here? The last guy, his name is Jack, wouldn't tell us much of anything because he didn't want us to make the same mistakes that he did. So I really don't know much except that your family needs help." Kerry said as he took a seat on the far end of the couch.

"You got that part right. All of us have got it some, but my mom and dad got it the worst. Both of them are really sick right now." Van said anxiously.

"How did it start?" Kerry asked with interest.

"We've lived here since I was little. The house has always been kinda haunted..." Van began to say, but was interrupted.

"*Kinda* haunted? How is that?" Kerry asked curiously.

"You know, the normal stuff. You put something down and a few seconds later it's not where you left it. Every now and then you'll see something out of the corner of your eye. But it was never a really big deal. You'd jump and maybe scream a little, then you'd have a good laugh about it." Van said seriously.

"So, when did it all change?" Kerry asked carefully.

"About two months ago." Van said more quietly.

"Tell me about it." Kerry encouraged.

"The first thing that I heard about was my dad. He woke up one morning and found a knife stabbed through his pillow and into the mattress, right beside his head. He thought that I did it... maybe he still does. I don't know." Van finished quietly.

"Even though being accused of doing such a horrible thing must have been difficult for you, I can imagine that your father not believing you, probably hurt worse." Kerry said sympathetically.

"Yeah. He's always looked at me like I'm a disappointment because I don't get perfect grades. Sometimes he's said stuff, like, him and mom went through hell to give me and Malika all kinds of opportunities and we're wasting them. He always kinda acted like I was lazy and stupid, but that was the first time he ever acted like I was *evil*." Van said as he fought to contain his tears.

"Take it from someone who knows, it's very difficult to set aside what you've believed all your life and accept that reality isn't what you thought it was. It's easier to look for the most 'reasonable' answer than to entertain the idea that something happened that's *impossible*." Kerry said soothingly.

"Did something like this happen to you?" Van asked curiously.

"Not *exactly* like this, but my family and I moved into a haunted house." Kerry answered honestly.

"Did you accuse your kids of causing it?" Van asked with interest.

"No." Kerry said immediately, then quietly amended, "But when Alana asked if we had any occult devices in the house, the first thing I did was suspect my son, Mike. Even though I never accused him of anything, for that one minute I actually believed that he might have been the cause of all the trouble we were going through."

Van's intense gaze stayed focused on Kerry, as though he were trying to decide how he felt about the admission.

"Does that make me a bad father?" Kerry eventually asked.

After another long silent moment, Van reluctantly said, "I guess not. If you were trying to make sense of something that makes no sense, I guess I can see how you might at least *consider* if it was true."

"Fortunately, Mike's away at college, so he didn't really get involved in the haunting." Kerry finished with a smile.

"You don't look like you're old enough to have a kid in college." Van said with surprise.

"Well, to be honest, we had Mike when I was sixteen years old. I've never for a minute wished that we didn't have him. But I'll admit that we probably could have planned things a little better." Kerry said timidly.

"My parents went to school, just like they were supposed to. Then they went to college, just like they were supposed to. They got married, like they were supposed to. Then they had us kids, like they were supposed to. Now that they've done all the things that they were supposed to do, they're trying to get me and Malika to do the stuff that *we're* supposed to do. When do I ever get to do what *I* want to do?" Van asked desperately.

"I actually have an answer for that, if you're interested." Kerry said with a smile.

"What is it?" Van asked cautiously.

"First, you decide what it is that you *want* to do. And that's a lot harder than it sounds, by the way. But once you've done that, then you figure out what steps you need to take to accomplish that goal. Your parents might not support you in the beginning, but if you keep your goal in mind and stand up for yourself, I think that they'll eventually get behind you and support you in whatever you choose." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"You don't know *my* parents." Van said frankly.

"That's true. And considering what they're going through right now, it probably would be best if you held back from announcing any life-changing decisions for a little bit. But have mercy on the old folks, they're not trying to ruin your life, they just sometimes don't know any better." Kerry finished with a smile.

"I guess you're right." Van reluctantly agreed, then quietly said, "You act like you don't care that I'm a Paki."

"What's that?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Pakistani." Van explained.

"Oh? Well, I guess I've never really been around anyone who was from Pakistan before. And since my parents never taught me to hate Pakistanis, you're right. I really *don't* care." Kerry said thoughtfully.

Van looked carefully at Kerry's expression for a moment, judging his sincerity, before asking, "What else did you need to ask me about?"

"Oh, yeah." Kerry said distractedly, then asked, "After your dad found the knife in his pillow, what happened next?"

"That was the first time that I *heard* about what was happening. But I think that all of us were having the cuts and sores, for a while before that. None of us really thought anything about it, but since Mom's a doctor, we all went to her when we noticed that we'd been hurt." Van said thoughtfully.

"Is it okay if I come in?" Charity asked from the living room doorway.

"Sure." Kerry responded with a smile at her, then looked to Van and asked, "So, what happened next?"

Van watched as Charity walked around the room, intently watching the K2 meter that she was carrying, and he finally said, "It just kept happening and it kept getting worse. Me and Malika mostly just got

little stuff, but Mom and Dad were getting really nasty infections and stuff. Mom was freaking out about it."

"So, is that when they called Jack to investigate?" Kerry asked curiously.

"No. The next thing that happened is that my mom did this big super-scientific cleaning frenzy. She washed and scrubbed and steam-cleaned everything in the house. She probably used every kind of cleaning stuff that they sell in the stores and she even got some of the medical-grade stuff from her office. For about two weeks, this place smelled like a hospital." Van said with obvious displeasure.

"I take it that that didn't work." Kerry prompted.

"It got worse... and that's when the nightmares started." Van said gravely.

"This is the first that I'm hearing about nightmares. Can you tell me about them?" Kerry asked as he watched Charity leave the living room.

"Well, you never feel like you're completely alone, here. But sometimes at night, it's like you feel someone moving around in the room with you and then you realize that you can't move. Sometimes you feel like you're trapped or even that you're being suffocated. It's got so that I hate going to sleep anymore." Van said honestly.

"Yes. I can understand that." Kerry said sympathetically.

"When my parents decided that they'd had enough, we packed up and moved to a hotel. But the thing is, whatever's happening to us, it followed us there. My dad woke up from a nightmare with a deep infected cut on his chest and a knife laying beside him. The next day, my parents started talking about calling the ghost hunters." Van said seriously.

"I've been in that position before, and it's a very difficult call to make." Kerry said honestly.

"I'm scared, Kerry. I don't know what to do." Van said honestly.

"I'm new to the paranormal thing, so I can't tell you exactly *how* they're going to fix this, but I'm confident that they will." Kerry said as he held Van's gaze.

After a moment, Van quietly said, "Just tell me what I have to do."

Kerry smiled, then said, "I think I should talk to your sister, next. Could you take me to where she is?"

"She's in her room. She's always in her room." Van said with a roll of his eyes.

As Kerry reached to the coffee table, to pick up the voice recorder, he found that it wasn't there.

Van watched for a moment as Kerry looked under the coffee table and at the surrounding floor. Finally, Van quietly said, "Try your pocket. When things disappear around here, they usually go back to where you got them from."

Kerry patted his pocket and, just as Van had said, the voice recorder was there and was turned off.

"It only gets weirder from here." Van said wearily as he stood to lead the way to his sister's room.

Chapter 2: In Dark

"Mellie? Can we come in?" Van asked as he gently knocked on the bedroom door.

"Don't call me that!" A teenage girl's voice screeched in response.

"I've got a doctor here, one of the paranormal researchers. He wants to talk to you." Van called through the door.

"I'm not a doctor. I'm just someone who was haunted, once." Kerry said to Van quietly.

"Go away! Leave me alone!" Malika snarled venomously.

"I don't think she wants to talk to you. I think that she thinks that if she just ignores it, it'll go away." Van said honestly.

Kerry thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "Do you think she might be more willing to talk to someone her own age?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Van said uncertainly.

"Well, since she doesn't want to talk, would you like to give me the grand tour and show me where things have happened?" Kerry asked hopefully.

"You're not going to try and *make* Malika talk to you?" Van asked with surprise.

"If she refuses to talk, there's not much that I can do." Kerry said simply.

"Well, I guess, if you want, I can show you the basement. We don't go down there much, so not too much has happened, that I know of, but there's some really creepy, weird stuff down there, if you'd like to see it." Van offered cautiously.

"That sounds just like the sort of thing that I'm here to see." Kerry said with a smile.

Van returned the smile, then quietly said, "Come on, I'll show you where it is."

* * * * *

"Watch your step." Van said as he led the way down the rickety, uneven wooden stairs.

Kerry took the flashlight off his belt and turned it on. Even though there were bare lightbulbs strung intermittently from the rafters, throughout the basement, the lighting was still dim enough to be a hinderance.

"All the laundry stuff and the furnace is over there, but the creepy stuff is back this way." Van said as he started walking into an even darker part of the basement.

"Are these things that came with the house?" Kerry asked as he cautiously followed, walking in a slight crouch to keep from hitting his head on the rafters.

"Yeah. I was little when we moved here, so I don't remember too much about it. But I think that when we moved in, there was some stuff left in the house, so my parents took everything that they didn't want to use upstairs and put it down here, in case they needed it someday." Van explained as he turned to the left.

One side of the basement seemed to be stacked to the ceiling with boxes and discarded furnishings.

"I guess because my parents grew up poor, they don't like getting rid of things unless they're broken and can't be fixed." Van explained.

"Yes. I can understand that. I suppose that if there had been things left in my house before I moved in, I might have considered doing

the same thing. Not only am I reluctant to get rid of things that I might be able to use later. But there's also the sense of having authentic historical pieces that belong with the house. If you're going to be living in an old New England style home, it should have some touches from that time period." Kerry said thoughtfully as he slowly moved his flashlight to examine the collection of boxes and various other things.

"I don't know how much is from that far back. I think most of this stuff came from the sixties." Van said frankly.

As Kerry continued, he couldn't help but agree with Van's assessment. Most of the things that he was seeing were probably purchased in the past fifty to sixty years.

"The reason I wanted you to see this stuff is because... it's creepy. I mean, yeah, it's old and from another time, but look at how much of it's black and red." Van said cautiously.

"And gold." Kerry said with a slight nod.

"So, was this normal for back then?" Van asked uncertainly.

"I don't know for sure. I was born in 1980." Kerry said frankly, then continued, "But I'm guessing that you're right. I don't know if this has anything to do with the haunting, but it *does* seem strange. With their choice of color scheme, this might have been a Satanic church... or a whorehouse."

"Could be both." Van said frankly.

Kerry smiled at him and said, "I suppose it could be."

"Well, that's all I wanted to show you. There wasn't anything... you know, in your face, like one of those satanic star things or an upside down cross or anything like that. I just thought it was weird, is all." Van said shyly.

"Thank you for showing me, Van. When I have my briefing with the rest of the team, I'll be sure to mention it to them. There's a chance that it might turn out to be significant." Kerry said honestly.

Van was frozen in place, and seemed to be on the verge of speaking.

Thanks to Kerry's experience with his own children, he simply waited for the teenage boy to work up the courage to say whatever was on his mind.

After a long silent moment, Van quietly said, "Thanks for listening to me... no one else really does."

Although a part of Kerry warned him against the action, a greater part of him wanted to do everything in his power to help the boy before him. Kerry stepped forward and put one arm around Van to give him a gentle hug before quietly saying, "I think everyone feels that way at some point in their life and it can be really tough. But if you ever need someone to listen, I'll do my best."

Van returned the hug for a moment, then whispered, "Thanks."

Kerry released the teenager from the hug, then said, "Let's go upstairs and see if Alana and the others have found anything."

"Yeah." Van quietly agreed, then led the way across the basement, back to the stairs.

* * * * *

When Kerry and Van reached the top of the stairs, Kerry led the way to the dining room. No one was in there, but there was quite a bit of equipment set up in the room.

"What is all this stuff?" Van asked in a whisper.

"I really don't know about most of the stuff in here. But if you'd like to try out the K2 meter, we could walk around where things have happened." Kerry said encouragingly.

"Yeah! Sure!" Van said happily.

Kerry took the K2 meter off his belt, then handed it to Van.

"Don't worry about the green readings. They're going to happen now and then, in just about any house. And sometimes you'll get a yellow reading when you get close to an electrical conduit or a motor, you know, like the blower on the furnace. So, if the thing reacts, don't automatically think that it's a ghost." Kerry said instructively.

"Okay. I got that." Van said seriously.

"I'm also carrying an infrared thermometer. If you feel a change in temperature, you can ask me to take a reading or, if you'd rather, just ask for the thermometer and you can take the reading for yourself." Kerry said quietly.

"Yeah. Okay." Van responded in the same quiet tone and seemed to be trying to appear serious and professional.

"I think we're ready. Go slow. If you get an elevated reading, stop and try to isolate it." Kerry said encouragingly.

"Where should we go?" Van asked uncertainly.

"Charity is doing general readings of the whole house, so why don't you take us to where you think we might find some activity?" Kerry asked thoughtfully.

"Stuff happens everywhere around here but, if you don't mind, I'd like to check out my room, first." Van said honestly.

"Lead the way." Kerry said with a smile.

As Kerry walked into the bedroom, he was reminded of when his son had been Van's age. Although the style of the bedroom was significantly more cheerful than Mike's had been, there was enough similarity for Kerry to be able to draw a parallel.

"Look at this." Van said in a whisper from in front of a closed closet door.

Kerry broke out of his mental wandering and hurried to Van's side.

"Does this mean that there's something in there?" Van asked nervously.

Kerry saw the steady 'red' reading on the K2 meter and considered what that might mean.

"Sometimes there's a perfectly natural explanation. If you'll hand me the meter, I'm going to open the door." Kerry said carefully, doing his best to sound calm and assured.

Although there was a part of Van that didn't want to appear to be afraid, there was a greater part that wanted to feel safe. So, after handing Kerry the K2 meter, Van took a few steps back.

Kerry took the K2 meter firmly in hand, then did his best to appear calm as he opened the closet door.

The stench that greeted him was a surprise.

His first impression of the smell was that of rotting flesh. Somehow, he was able to maintain his calm facade and carry on, carefully moving the K2 meter to try and determine if the 'phenomenon' had any definable boundaries.

Although it might have simply been a trick of his eyes, or a product of his overstimulated imagination, Kerry got the sense that the darkness in the closet was darker than it had any right to be.

"Van, would you take the flashlight off my belt and turn it on? I want to see if the readings change if we shine some light in there." Kerry said in a low voice.

"Um, yeah." Van said reluctantly, then moved hesitantly to Kerry's side.

"Go ahead." Kerry encouraged as he divided his attention between the unyielding darkness in the depths of the closet and the still peaking readings on his K2 meter.

As Van turned the beam of the flashlight into the closet, Kerry jumped when he saw movement.

Something small and pitch black, about four feet tall, appeared to have moved out of the flashlight's beam.

He only saw it for an instant, because just as soon as the thing moved, Van let out a yelp of fear as he started backing away, taking the flashlight with him.

In this instance, Kerry felt that discretion was the better part of valor and followed Van out of the room.

* * * * *

"Alana, we've got activity in Van's room." Kerry said quickly into his walkie-talkie.

"*Do you need help?*" Derek immediately responded.

"No." Kerry began to answer, but was interrupted as Alana ran out of another bedroom and into the hall.

"What's going on?" Alana asked seriously. Kerry noticed that Dr. Osmani was standing, stopped in her bedroom doorway, looking on with concern.

"Van and I were taking some readings of the areas where there is known activity. When he approached his closet, he had a sustained 'red' on the K2. I opened the door and there was a rotting smell. Since the closet was dark, I asked Van to shine the flashlight in. When he did, I saw something move." Kerry said carefully.

"Could you identify what you saw?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Not really. I just caught the slightest glimpse of it before it moved out of the light. But from what little I *did* see, I don't think it was a ghost."

"What do you think it was, then?" Van asked indignantly, then added, "I don't have evil midgets living in my closet."

"What I was saying is that I didn't get the sense that what I saw was a revenant, that's to say, the spirit of a person who was once alive. I think that this was... something else." Kerry explained carefully.

"In here?" Alana asked as she motioned toward Van's doorway.

Kerry nodded.

Alana led the way in, followed by Kerry and Van.

After a sweep of the room, with extra attention paid to the closet, Alana finally said, "Whatever was here must have gone."

"It'll be back." Van said with certainty.

Alana keyed her walkie-talkie, then said, "Everyone, let's meet in the dining room. It appears that the house is ready for us to get started."

"Do you mind if Van joins us?" Kerry asked hopefully.

"Sure. No problem." Alana said easily, then turned to Van and asked, "Are you interested in the paranormal?"

"I wasn't before. But I want to know what this thing is and what I can do to stop it." Van said in as brave a voice as he could muster.

"We'll see what we can do to help you with that." Alana assured him, then led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Once everyone had taken seats around the dining room table, Alana asked, "Charity, were you able to come up with anything on the environmental sweep?"

"I encountered elevated EMF readings in every room of the house. Along with that, there were cold spots and rotting smells everywhere." Charity said frankly.

"What about carbon monoxide and radon?" Alana asked carefully.

"No. The EMF was the only environmental factor of concern to us." Charity said seriously.

"What's EMF?" Van asked Kerry quietly.

"Electromagnetic Frequencies. When they're too high, it can make normal people feel like they're being haunted, even when they're not." Kerry explained.

"But it's also been suggested that paranormal entities emit EMF, so we can't be sure if they're the cause or a side effect." Alana added, then asked Kerry, "Did you discover anything in your interviews?"

"Well, Malika didn't want to talk to me. Van told me about the things that Jack already told us, but on top of that, he also said that in the past few months, they've been having terrible nightmares." Kerry said seriously.

"Yes. Dr. Osmani mentioned that, too." Alana said thoughtfully.

"Van also took me down to the basement to show me the furnishings that were left in the house, before they moved in. I don't know if they have anything to do with this, but the color and style of what's down there automatically made me think 'Satanic church'." Kerry said frankly.

"Or whorehouse." Van added quietly.

Kerry smiled at the comment, but didn't dispute it.

"Although I'm ready to get this investigation under way, I suppose that it would be irresponsible of us not to go for the low hanging fruit, first." Alana said simply.

"Excuse me, but what does that mean?" Kerry asked curiously.

"She means that there's a young teenage girl in the house. So the first thing we need to look at is if this is a poltergeist situation." Derek explained.

"If we get her out of the house and the activity stops, then we have our answer." Alana said with a nod.

"Do you really think that all of this could be from a poltergeist?" Kerry asked dubiously.

"The range of poltergeist activity is such that it can mimic other types of hauntings. Although I can't say that I've ever heard of one manifesting in this way before, so far I haven't seen anything that would eliminate that possibility." Alana said carefully.

"What would you think if I invited Lorra and Toni over to talk to Malika and invite her back to my house? They could talk to her about what she's experienced and, at the same time, get her out of here so that we can see if the activity decreases." Kerry suggested thoughtfully.

"Do you think Teresa would mind driving them over here?" Alana asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. She'll probably appreciate having an excuse to get out of the house." Kerry said honestly.

"I think you're right. If she doesn't mind bringing the girls over, this could be a way of killing two birds with one stone." Alana said with a nod.

"Have you had a chance to scout camera locations?" Derek asked cautiously.

"No. The interview went on longer than I expected. But from everything that Mr. and Dr. Osmani told me, as well as from what I've read in Jack's notes, I don't think camera placement should be much of an issue. But whatever else we do, let's make sure to get a camera in Van's room, focused on the closet. That's the first hint in all of this of an *apparition*." Alana said firmly.

"Are you going to want to do EVPs?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Electronic Voice Phenomena." Kerry whispered to Van.

"Yes. But don't take a lot of time with that. So far, there haven't been any reports of anything auditory, it's all been visual and physical." Alana said seriously.

"Do you smell that?" Charity asked as she looked around.

Kerry took the infrared thermometer off his belt, and started taking readings at various points around the room.

"I'm showing a twenty degree drop in temperature in that corner." Kerry said firmly.

Alana was immediately out of her chair, with her K2 meter in hand.

"Derek, start recording." Alana said quickly, then to the corner she asked, "Who are you?"

Van fumbled to get the K2 meter off Kerry's belt, then started moving it around his immediate area.

"What are you doing here?" Alana asked firmly.

"It's reading thirty five degrees fahrenheit." Kerry said in a low, informative tone.

"What do you want?" Alana asked as she zeroed in on the spiking EMF readings.

"Be careful." Charity cautioned.

"What is your name?" Alana demanded as she stopped all movement.

There was a moment of silence, then the door on the other side of the room slammed closed.

"I guess it didn't like being questioned." Alana said as she moved the K2 meter around, not finding any elevated readings at all.

"Derek, did you get anything?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Just give me a minute." Derek said as he worked at lightning speed to get the audio file off the recorder he had used.

"Kerry, go ahead and call your wife. I don't think we can do anything else until Malika is out of here." Alana said frankly.

"Why is that?" Van asked Kerry cautiously.

"Because, we can't really fight it until we know what it is that we're fighting. If it turns out to be related to Malika, then we'll do one thing. If it's not, then we'll do something else." Kerry explained as best he could.

Van nodded slowly, then thought to ask, "You're not going to make me go, too, are you?"

"If you want to get away from this house, you can go to my house with my family. But if you want to stay here and help us out, then no one is going to ask you to leave." Kerry assured him.

"I'll stay. I wanna help." Van said firmly.

Kerry smiled at his decision, then took out his cellphone to call his wife.

* * * * *

"Hi, honey, it's me." Kerry said gently.

"*Are you on your way home? How did your meeting go?*" Teresa asked curiously.

"No. We had to go out on an unexpected investigation." Kerry said carefully, then cautiously asked, "By any chance, is Lorra visiting, tonight?"

Teresa chuckled at the question, then said, "*If she weren't, I'd probably have to call a paranormal team to investigate.*"

Kerry smiled at the response, then cautiously asked, "Would you mind driving the girls over here to the investigation site? We've got a little girl here, close to their age, who doesn't feel comfortable talking with adults. I was thinking that Toni and Lorra might like the chance to contribute to the investigation."

"*It's not too far out is it?*" Teresa asked cautiously.

"We're just on the other side of town. It should be about ten or fifteen minutes away." Kerry assured her.

"*Just give me the address and I'll bring them right over.*" Teresa said easily.

"One more thing. We'll have to wait and see how the girls get along, but if things go well, it would be a really big help if you could

take Malika back to the house with you, maybe for a sleepover." Kerry said seriously.

"Well, since there's no school tomorrow, I don't see a problem with that. In fact, it sounds like the perfect opportunity to start a fire and make s'mores. I'm sure the girls will be able to find a nice scary movie to watch and we'll make a night of it." Teresa said happily.

"That sounds nice. Go ahead and tell Lorra and Toni your plans, so they'll have another good reason to invite Malika to spend the night." Kerry said with a smile.

There was a long moment of silence, then Teresa quietly said, *"I think they might have already heard. I can hear them trying very hard to be quiet, in the next room."*

Kerry laughed, easily able to envision his daughter and her best friend 'trying' to be quiet.

After giving Teresa directions to his current location, he disconnected the call and put away his cell phone.

"Is everything alright?" Van asked cautiously, from his side.

"Yeah. I think it will be." Kerry said with a contented smile at the thought of his family.

* * * * *

"Did you get anything on the audio analysis?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Not a thing. Not even a whisper." Derek told her simply.

"Teresa is on her way over." Kerry said seriously as he realized that the meeting was now back in session.

"Good. Then, if no one has anything else to add, I think it's time for us to get things set up." Alana said decisively.

"Have you decided where you want the cameras stationed?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I'd like one in Van's room, focused on the closet. I'll leave the rest to you. Since there haven't been any significant 'hot spots' indicated, I think we should just go for optimum coverage." Alana said seriously.

"Kerry, would you help me with the cameras?" Derek asked as he got up from his place at the table.

"Do you mind if Van helps?" Kerry asked curiously.

"No problem. In fact, if you show him what to do, we might think about recruiting him the next time we're called out on a big job." Derek said with a smile.

Van looked at Kerry with surprise, not sure if Derek were being serious.

"I don't see any reason why not. When this is all over, if you decide that you'd like to help us investigate the paranormal, I'm sure Alana would appreciate another person that she can call on to help out." Kerry said frankly.

"What do I need to do?" Van asked cautiously.

"Each one of these little messenger bags should have everything you'll need to set up one camera. The bags with red yarn on the handles are wireless. The yellow handles are DVR. Leave the others alone, they're specialty cameras that I'll set up myself. We'll walk through the house and I'll put down a masking tape mark where the cameras are to be located; an 'X' for a remote camera and a square for DVR. When we're done with the walk through, we'll all go back and set them up." Derek explained.

"Do we need to bring anything with us, now?" Van asked cautiously.

"Just masking tape." Derek said, then handed a roll each to Kerry and Van.

* * * * *

After the walkthrough, Kerry and Van lugged multiple messenger bags throughout the house. Kerry demonstrated the setup of the first wireless camera to Van, but stood back and watched, occasionally offering suggestions, with the remainder.

"What do we do now?" Van asked as they walked back toward the dining room.

"That's up to Alana. She's in charge. Sometimes she'll shut off the power to the house, then have everyone go to a different room and try to collect EVPs using the voice recorders. But other times she'll have us investigate as teams, walking through the different areas." Kerry said honestly.

"So I might have to sit alone in the dark?" Van asked hesitantly.

"No, Van. I won't let that happen." Kerry assured him.

An expression of relief crossed Van's face as they walked into the dining room.

* * * * *

"When are we expecting Teresa?" Alana asked Kerry curiously.

"Any minute." Kerry said honestly.

Alana nodded thoughtfully, then said, "Good. That will give Derek a few minutes to get everything tuned and tweaked to his liking. While he's doing that, I think that the rest of us should dig through the research that Jack gave us and see if we can find anything that might have a bearing on this case. I've skimmed through it and I haven't noticed anything, but there still might be some obscure fact that we need to be aware of."

"You up to some studying?" Kerry asked Van with a grin.

"You mean that you still have to study, even after you get out of school?" Van asked anxiously.

Kerry smiled at the question, then said, "I guess that depends on how inquisitive you are. If you're willing to let other people investigate and tell you what *they* think the facts are, I suppose you're free to do that. But if you want to discover things for yourself, then yes, you might have to do some studying. But it's different when it's your choice and not something that you're expected to do."

As Van considered Kerry's response, a knock on the door interrupted them.

"I'll get it. It's probably Teresa and the girls." Kerry said easily, then turned to Van and asked, "Do you want to meet my family?"

"Sure." Van said with surprise at being invited.

* * * * *

"Daddy!" Zoe crowed when Kerry opened the door.

"How are you doing, pumpkin?" Kerry asked as he hugged his youngest daughter.

"I'm sorry that took so long. Trying to herd three excited girls into the car took longer than I thought it would." Teresa chuckled.

"Come on in. Everyone, this is Van, he lives here." Kerry said as he kept one arm around Zoe and guided her inside.

"Van, I'd like to introduce my wife, Teresa, my daughter, Toni, her friend, Lorra and, of course, my youngest, Zoe." Kerry said as he indicated each, in turn.

"It's nice to meet you." Van said shyly.

"How old are you?" Lorra asked Van with obvious interest.

"Fifteen." Van answered cautiously.

"I'm almost fourteen." Lorra said with a grin.

Kerry and Teresa tried to restrain their smiles at Lorra's not too subtle interrogation.

Hoping to get things back on track, Kerry seriously said, "We're doing an investigation, here. Van is helping us. His sister, Malika, hasn't wanted to talk to us about what's going on around here. I was hoping that you girls might be able to help us out."

"What do we have to do?" Toni asked immediately, dutifully trying to ignore Lorra's interest in Van.

"Just talk to Malika and see if you can get her to open up about what's been going on. Then, if you get along, invite her over to our house so that the rest of us can proceed with the investigation." Kerry told his daughter seriously.

"Yeah. Mom said that we might have a sleepover." Toni confirmed.

"If you find out that Malika is interested, make sure that you ask her parents for permission. We haven't talked to them about it, yet." Kerry told her seriously.

Toni nodded that she would.

"Van, would you mind taking the girls up and introducing them to your sister?" Kerry asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Sure." Van said as he glanced uncertainly at Lorra.

Kerry watched as Van led the procession of three girls to the staircase.

* * * * *

"Is it something bad?" Teresa asked her husband, once they were alone.

"Yes. As bad as our situation was, this is much worse." Kerry said frankly.

"Is it going to be safe for you?" Teresa asked with concern.

"I'm confident that Alana and the team will do everything in their power to make sure that we all get through this. I can't really promise much more than that." Kerry said honestly.

"Do they really *need* for you to be here?" Teresa asked anxiously.

"I need for me to be here. After all the help that Alana and the team gave us, I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror if I didn't help another family in need." Kerry said frankly.

After a moment to consider his words, Teresa pulled her husband into her arms and gave him a brief but heartfelt kiss to show her pride in him.

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Kerry asked when he saw Van walking down the stairs, alone.

"She let them in." Van said simply.

"Then they're probably on their way to becoming good friends." Kerry said with a smile.

"That Lorra girl is a little creepy, isn't she?" Van asked hesitantly.

Kerry laughed at the question, then explained, "I think that she thinks you're cute. She's just at that age where she doesn't know how to let you know that she's interested."

Van looked at Kerry with surprise at the revelation.

Teresa smiled at the expression, knowing what it meant, then said, "Don't worry, Van. I think that the most she's likely to do is try to get you to notice her. And at her age, she might not even have the courage to do that much."

"That's right." Kerry said with a loving smile at his wife, then added, "Just don't hold it against her if she's a little goofy around you. Try to think of it as a compliment."

"I've never had a girl interested in me before." Van said uncertainly.

"Then this will be good practice for you." Kerry said with a smile. "You're just about at that age where this is going to become an everyday fact of life."

Van seemed to be overwhelmed by Kerry's words as he stood, frozen in place.

* * * * *

Thundering footsteps on the stairs alerted Kerry, Teresa and Van to the approaching herd of excited girls.

"Malika says that she's afraid here and wants to go to our house. Can we go now?" Zoe asked hopefully.

Kerry fixed his gaze on Malika and cautiously asked, "Did you ask your parents?"

"Yeah. My mom thought it was a good idea." Malika assured him.

Kerry then turned to his wife and asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. I have the feeling that we're about to begin our own adventure." Teresa said with a grin.

"I need to talk to Toni, right now. If you want to go on ahead, she'll be out in a minute." Kerry said seriously.

"Shotgun!" Toni said immediately.

"Aww, man!" Zoe grumbled.

"She called it first." Teresa chuckled, then started guiding the girls toward the front door.

* * * * *

"Did Malika tell you anything about what's been happening here?" Kerry asked his daughter quietly.

Toni glanced at Van uncertainly, then said, "Yeah. She said that they're all getting sick and cut and stuff. And she said that she really wants to go to our house because she's been having really scary dreams, here."

"Okay. If she tells you anything else that you think I need to know about, just call me. Thanks for doing this." Kerry told his daughter sincerely.

"Thanks for letting me help." She said in return, then gave her father a quick hug.

"If anything happens that worries you, call me right away." Kerry told his daughter quietly.

"I will. I love you." Toni whispered in return.

* * * * *

After seeing Toni out, and watching the car pull away, Van turned to Kerry and quietly said, "I'm kind of jealous."

"Of what?" Kerry asked curiously as he guided Van to walk with him, back into the house.

"You and your kids. You're so close. Me and my family was never like that." Van said thoughtfully.

"Although we may express ourselves differently than your family does, I think we probably have the same feelings for each other." Kerry said as they slowly walked toward the dining room.

"Maybe. I guess it'd be nice if they showed it, sometimes." Van quietly muttered.

"When my son was your age, he couldn't *stand* it when I'd hug him or told him that I loved him." Kerry said with a fond smile at the memory, then continued, "Parents don't always know how best to express their feelings. And, in some cases, the only example they have to follow is how *they* were raised. I think you're probably old enough now that you can try to understand that and cut them a little slack."

"Yeah. I'll try." Van said quietly.

As they were walking into the dining room, side by side, Kerry quietly said, "Good. Now, I guess it's time for this investigation to *really* begin."

Chapter 3: Deception and Dark

"Derek, do you have an infrared camera that you can set up in Mr. and Dr. Osmani's bedroom?" Alana asked thoughtfully.

"Yes. I didn't set any cameras up in there before because I felt funny about intruding on them." Derek said quietly.

"They're desperate to see an end to this, so I'm sure that they won't mind. While you're setting that up, also give them each a handheld so that they can document any activity that might occur. I don't know if they'll catch anything, but it might give them a feeling of empowerment to be able to do *something*." Alana finished in a grave tone.

"I'll do that." Derek said firmly.

"Since we haven't had any auditory phenomena, I don't think we'll need to shut off the power. We'll just turn off the lights and take our investigations wherever they lead us. Kerry and Van, would you like to investigate the main floor of the house?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Sure." Kerry answered immediately, then looked at Van with question.

"Yeah." Van said in nearly a whisper.

"Good. Then Charity and I will investigate the bedrooms, upstairs." Alana said decisively.

"Do you need any help, Derek?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"No. I've got it. How about I get you and Van your night vision cameras and you can show him how they work?" Derek asked with a smile.

"Sounds good." Kerry said with a grin at his teenage companion.

* * * * *

Once Derek had finished getting things settled upstairs and returned to the dining room, Kerry and Van walked around the first floor of the house, turning off lights.

"Why does it have to be dark?" Van asked in a timid whisper.

"The spirits are stronger and better able to manifest in the dark. I don't know exactly why that is, but maybe it has something to do with light being energy. Without light, maybe there's less *competing* energy, so they're better able to come into being." Kerry said speculatively.

"What do we do now?" Van asked, since the last of the downstairs lights had been extinguished.

"We just walk around, looking at things through the night vision cameras. If we hear a movement or see something odd, we investigate." Kerry said simply.

"Do you do this a lot?" Van asked quietly, unable to hide his nervousness.

"Just since Halloween." Kerry answered simply as he led the way into the living room.

"What's that?" Van asked suddenly.

"What did you see?" Kerry asked as he moved close to Van's side, so that he could see the video screen on Van's camera.

"I thought I saw a face, there, in the TV." Van said nervously.

Kerry brought up his own video camera and didn't see anything.

"Like I told you before, this is a recorder. If you *did* see something, then it'll be there, in the recording, when we review the evidence." Kerry assured him.

"Maybe I was just seeing things." Van muttered quietly.

"That's possible. It happens to all of us. That's why we're so careful in the evidence review." Kerry said frankly.

* * * * *

After a complete tour of the living room, the pair made their way past the closed dining room door and into the kitchen.

The quiet in the house was eerie.

Neither spoke a word as they slowly made their way around, trying to spot any indication of something out of place.

"Do you want to go down and check out the basement?" Kerry asked quietly.

"Absolutely not." Van said immediately.

Kerry smiled at the reaction, then gently said, "Good. Neither do I."

* * * * *

"How long are we going to do this?" Van asked as they returned to the living room.

"Until Alana calls an end to it. It's possible that we could be doing this all night." Kerry said frankly.

"How long does it usually take before something happens?" Van asked cautiously.

"Honestly, from what I've seen, usually on the first night, *nothing* happens. We roam around in the dark for a few hours, then we get together and review the evidence, and decide that there wasn't anything there." Kerry said frankly.

"So people tell you that they've got ghosts in their house, when they don't?" Van asked curiously.

"Sometimes. But there are other times when the ghosts don't reveal themselves while we're there. On the first night of the investigation, we usually do something like this, to see what the

ghosts are going to do on their own. On the second night, we take steps to encourage or *provoke* a response." Kerry said carefully.

"How..." Van began to ask, then suddenly asked, "Did you see that?"

"What did you see?" Kerry asked quickly.

"Over there, by the front door. I think it was that little black thing from my closet." Van said with more than a little fear sounding in his voice.

Kerry quickly scanned the area with his own night vision camera, but saw nothing out of place.

"Did you see where it went?" Kerry asked quietly.

"Toward the couch, I think. But it couldn't fit behind there." Van said cautiously.

"It may not have any physical substance. It can probably go places that we can't." Kerry said as he started slowly surveying the area around the couch.

As he was about to say something more, a flash of movement caught his attention.

"I think it moved over to the chair, by the fireplace." Kerry said quickly.

"You saw it?" Van asked with surprise.

"I think I saw something." Kerry said honestly as he slowly inched his way toward the winged back chair.

A sudden **::CRACK!::** sounded behind them, causing both to jump.

Van and Kerry turned and were shocked to see a two foot long machete embedded in the coffee table, just a few feet away.

"Screw this!" Kerry declared, then grabbed Van by the arm and pulled him toward the door.

When he reached the doorway, he let go of Van long enough to turn on the overhead light.

It seemed that the switch not only turned on the light, but also chaos itself.

Just as suddenly as the light came on, things all around the room erupted, launching themselves in every direction. A deafening wind seemed to rise up out of nowhere.

Couch cushions and decorative figurines took to the air, seeming to have no apparent destination. Then the couch and chairs started sliding, moving closer and closer to Kerry and Van at the door.

Kerry once again took hold of Van's upper arm and dragged him out of the room, moving as fast as he could toward the assumed safety of the dining room.

* * * * *

When Kerry opened the door, he was shocked at the sight of Derek, hovering about three feet above the dining room table, flailing his arms and legs, and in an absolute panic.

Various pieces of equipment that had been neatly organized on the dining room table were now on the floor around the periphery of the room.

"Alana! Derek is being attacked in the dining room!" Kerry called into his walkie-talkie.

"What can we do to make it stop?!" Van screamed to be heard over the rushing wind.

As Kerry was about to answer, one of the pieces of equipment that had once been on the table, launched itself from its new position on the floor and impacted the wall, right beside Kerry's head.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name!" Kerry bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Derek dropped heavily, landing on the dining room table with an 'oof!'

"What happened?" Alana asked as she rushed into the room with Charity and Dr. Osmani following a step behind.

"I don't even know." Kerry said honestly, then added, "This is a whole lot worse than anything I've ever seen before."

"This thing is bad." Derek said weakly as he fought to bring himself to a kneeling stance on the dining room table.

"I need to get upstairs and make sure that Qaiser isn't being attacked." Dr. Osmani said fearfully.

"You've got your walkie-talkie, right? Just call us if anything at all happens." Alana told her reassuringly.

Dr. Osmani absently held up the walkie-talkie in her hand, then dashed out of the room.

Kerry turned suddenly as he noticed the presence of a weapon embedded in the table, right beside Derek. He was certain that it hadn't been there a moment before. It was old and crudely made, but Kerry couldn't decide if it were a large meat cleaver or a small axe.

"Alana, this is too big for us. We need to call in the reinforcements." Derek said as he tried to gather his emotions.

"Agreed. But I won't know who to call until we've determined what this is." Alana said frankly.

"What I saw on the monitor from the living room screamed out 'poltergeist' to me. It was textbook." Derek said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Kerry reluctantly said, "He's right. I don't know as much about it as you all do, but from the research

I've done since joining you, that was *exactly* what a poltergeist haunting looks like."

"But when Jack and Kyla were here, everything they encountered pointed to a textbook active haunting..." Alana said consideringly.

"Derek, check your leg." Charity said suddenly.

There was a moment when Derek fought to understand her words, but once they finally registered, he followed her gaze and found a blood stain on his lower pants leg.

Everyone watched as Derek carefully rolled his pants leg up to expose a two inch long gash in his leg, which by all appearances, seemed to be inflamed and massively infected.

"I'm going to get Dr. Osmani. Everyone, check yourselves." Alana said decisively before dashing out of the room.

"Are you alright?" Van asked as he started patting himself, up and down his arms and legs.

"I think so." Kerry said, as he started to do the same.

"Would you check my back?" Van asked quietly as he finished his self-inspection.

"Of course." Kerry said as he also finished.

Van turned away and pulled up the oversized tee shirt that he was wearing.

"You've got a cut here, but it doesn't look fresh, like Derek's." Kerry said cautiously.

"Yeah. I've had that for a few days. I've got another one like it, on my thigh. But that's it? There's no new ones?" Van asked to confirm.

"No. That's all." Kerry assured him.

"Okay. Turn around and I'll check you." Van said as he lowered his shirt.

It took a moment for Kerry to get his button up shirt and his undershirt untucked, but finally he was able to get them pulled up so that Van could inspect his back.

After a moment, Van said, "I don't see anything."

"I do." Kerry said, then turned to reveal a patch of festering boils on his upper belly, just below his sternum.

"Malika's been getting those, too. Mom has something that works on that. Don't worry." Van said reassuringly.

"Look at this mess. This is going to cost thousands of dollars to replace." Derek said as he looked around the dining room in despair.

"Focus on what's important. The equipment can be replaced. You can't." Charity said firmly.

"I'll be fine. A little antiseptic and I'll be as good as new." Derek assured her.

* * * * *

Dr. Osmani rushed into the room and went immediately to Derek.

"Yes. This looks much like one of the injuries that my husband has sustained. Just give me a moment to disinfect it." Dr. Osmani said carefully as she opened her medical bag.

"Kerry's going to need some of that salve that you use on Malika." Van told his mother seriously.

"It will just take a matter of minutes for me to attend to this young man's wound." Dr. Osmani said, obviously trying to maintain her professionalism.

Alana saw a movement out of the corner of her eye and turned suddenly.

"You can't be in here!" A woman said angrily. She appeared to be a nurse, but her clothing suggested that she was a nurse from a time long past, perhaps from the 1940s.

"Who are you?" Alana asked the woman seriously.

The woman turned and angrily stalked away.

Alana followed immediately behind, but when she entered the hallway outside the dining room, there was no one there.

She returned to the dining room, wearing a puzzled expression.

"Was that a residual?" Charity asked cautiously.

"I don't know." Alana said honestly.

"Ouch! That hurts!" Derek said as Dr. Osmani applied an antiseptic salve to his wound.

"It will hurt far worse if you get blood poisoning." Dr. Osmani said firmly.

"Mom. If you'll give me the salve, I can help Kerry." Van said urgently.

Dr. Osmani pulled a tube of ointment from her medical bag and thrust it in Van's direction as she said, "Here."

Van took the tube from his mother, then quietly said, "Just put this on and you should be okay."

"Thank you, Van." Kerry said appreciatively.

"So, what do you want to do next?" Charity asked in the ensuing silence.

Alana thought about the question for a moment, then reluctantly said, "What I'd really like to do is call in a psychic to see if maybe

they can get some insight into what this *is*. Until we've figured that out, there's not much more that we *can* do."

"Can't you just get Father Francis to come over and do like he did for us?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Try thinking of it like this, if you're having an electrical problem in your house, you wouldn't call a plumber to try and fix it, right? It's the same idea. We've got something powerful and devious, here. But until we have a better idea of just what it is, we can't call on a 'specialist' to deal with it." Alana said firmly.

"So, you're calling a psychic?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Unless you have a better idea." Alana said anxiously.

A knock on the front door caused all in attendance to look up.

"I'll get it." Van said automatically.

"I'll go with you." Kerry said immediately.

* * * * *

"Mr. Hinton. How good to see you again."

"Mrs. Batton?" Kerry asked with surprise.

"I asked Aunt Felicia if she'd come over. I hope you don't mind." Max said timidly from behind her.

"No! Not at all. I'm sure Alana is going to be happy to see you." Kerry said with a relieved smile, then thought to add, "Mrs. Batton and Max, I'd like for you to meet Van. This is his house."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Irfan, is it?" Mrs. Batton asked cautiously.

"Yes, Ma'am. That's my *real* name... but you can call me Van, if you want." Van said with surprise.

"Please, come in." Kerry said as he guided Van to stand aside.

"I see what you mean about this place, Dear." Mrs. Batton said in a low voice as she passed through the door.

"It's too much." Max said past gritted teeth.

"Remember what I told you, draw in the light, let it surround you." Mrs. Batton told her nephew carefully.

"I'm trying." Max said as he forced himself to walk into the house.

"This isn't right." Mrs. Batton said distantly as she slowly surveyed her surroundings.

"I think everyone in this house would agree with you." Kerry said honestly, then added, "They're all in the dining room, right over here."

Mrs. Batton stood still for a moment, then turned to Max and said, "What you're sensing is false. It's a lie. It's being projected to keep sensitives from digging and finding what's underneath."

"It's too much for me, Aunt Felicia. I can't see past it." Max said anxiously.

"Give yourself a few minutes to acclimate, and you may have better luck." Mrs. Batton suggested, then started walking toward the dining room that Kerry had indicated before.

* * * * *

"Look who decided to stop by." Kerry said with a smile as he led Mrs. Batton and Max into the dining room.

"You came back!" Charity said happily and ran across the room to greet Max.

"Whatever's going on here is too powerful for me to handle on my own. But I thought you might need help, so I asked Aunt Felicia to come back here with me." Max explained as he happily returned her hug.

"It's good to see you, Charity. I hope that you are doing well." Mrs. Batton said with a gentle smile, directed at her.

"Yeah. I'm alright. Thanks." Charity said as she continued to hold Max.

"Mrs. Batton, I'm glad that you're here. I think you know everyone else, allow me to introduce Dr. Osmani." Alana said carefully.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor. And please call me Felicia." Mrs. Batton said amiably.

"Yes. And you may call me Zuny, if you like." Dr. Osmani said distractedly as she gathered her supplies back into her medical bag.

"Felicia, Is there any way that you could do a walkthrough and give us your opinion of what's going on here?" Alana asked hopefully.

"No. At least, not just yet. You've got a nasty one, here. Let me sit down and take a few minutes to collect myself, then I'll tell you as much as I can." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

Kerry immediately picked up one of the fallen chairs in the room and checked to see that it was unbroken before setting it up and offering it to Mrs. Batton.

"If you will excuse me, I need to get back to my husband." Dr. Osmani said reluctantly.

"Make sure that you keep your walkie-talkie with you and call us if you have any problem at all." Alana said seriously.

"Yes. Thank you." Dr. Osmani said before rushing out of the room.

* * * * *

Everyone in the room was silent as they waited for Mrs. Batton to sort through what she was sensing.

The sound of a cellphone ringing made most of the people in the room jump.

Alana took the phone from its carrier, on her belt and looked at the caller ID.

"It's Jack." Alana said with a smile, then accepted the call.

"YOU'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!!" Sounded from the phone, then it exploded in her hand.

Fortunately, she hadn't brought the phone near her face, yet. So the damage was only superficial.

Everyone was silent for a moment, allowing what had just happened to register. Finally, Derek cautiously asked, "Wrong number?"

Apparently, that had been just the right thing to say to break the tension. Alana chuckled slightly, then said, "Yeah. Wrong number."

"I think I'm ready." Mrs. Batton said quietly.

"Do you know what it is?" Alana asked hopefully.

"No. Not precisely. But I *think* that I've attuned myself enough to be able to see past what it's projecting for me to see. If I walk around the house now, I believe that I *should* be able to get a sense of what's *real*." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

"Just tell us if there's anything we can do." Alana said quietly.

"I'm going to need for Max to walk with me. I'm somewhat vulnerable in this state, and his 'light' can help protect me without obscuring my vision." Mrs Batton said as she slowly made her way to standing.

"Derek, can you walk?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Derek assured her.

"Come with us. We're not leaving anyone alone in this house."
Alana said firmly.

"You'll get no argument from me." Derek said honestly.

Kerry looked to Van, to see how he was doing. Van gave him a brief smile, then fell in at his side as they left the dining room, following Mrs. Batton.

* * * * *

The living room was in the same state of chaos as when Kerry and Van had left it earlier.

The furniture was scattered haphazardly around the room and there was still a machete embedded in the coffee table.

"It's here." Mrs. Batton said absently as her distant gaze seemed to look *past* the room, to something beyond.

"*What's* here?" Alana asked cautiously.

"It's old..." Mrs. Batton trailed off, as though she were about to say more, but instead, she turned and walked past those who were following her and out of the living room.

* * * * *

"Do you smell that?" Max asked from Mrs. Batton's side.

"Yes. With all the other falsehoods facing us, that is one of the few things here that is 'real'." Mrs. Batton said carefully as she and Max led the way up the stairs

"What does that mean?" Van asked cautiously.

"I don't know." Kerry whispered in response.

"It means that it might be a significant clue as to what we're really facing." Mrs. Batton said instructively, although Kerry was ready to swear that she had been too far ahead of them to possibly hear Van's question.

* * * * *

The sound of a child crying drew the attention of everyone in the group as they crested the flight of stairs.

At the opposite end of the hallway, there was a young girl, dressed in late nineteenth hundreds attire, sobbing inconsolably.

"That's false. Ignore it." Mrs. Batton said a bit irritably.

The child's crying became louder as the group approached.

"There is no child's spirit trapped in this house. This is theater, appearing solely for the purpose of deceiving us." Mrs. Batton warned.

Following her words, the child's crying escalated again.

"Shut up!" Mrs. Batton snapped.

The child ghost looked at Mrs. Batton with a sneer, then evaporated into nothing.

"I never could stand sniveling whiney children. I'm certainly not going to put up with one that never existed!" Mrs. Batton said as she walked directly toward Malika's bedroom.

Van looked at Kerry anxiously, afraid of what Mrs. Batton might be about to discover.

* * * * *

After a moment of looking around the bedroom, Mrs. Batton finally said, "Another false trail."

"We've had poltergeist activity, and this bedroom belongs to a young teenage girl." Alana explained.

"The girl was convenient, an easy scapegoat. Had things unfolded differently, she most certainly would have been blamed." Mrs. Batton said before retreating from the room.

Van's look of apprehension increased when she left Malika's room and continued on to his.

"Plans within plans. No wonder they call it being 'devilish'." Mrs. Batton commented absently as she entered the bedroom.

"What do you see?" Alana asked carefully.

Kerry could tell that Van was anxious and draped an arm around his shoulders to help reassure him.

"I see lies." Mrs. Batton said simply, then turned and left.

* * * * *

"Have you found anything?" Dr. Osmani asked hopefully from her husband's bedside as Mrs. Batton led the way into the room.

"Very little that's real." Mrs. Batton said simply, then gestured toward Mr. Osmani's feet and asked, "May I see?"

"If you think it will help." Dr. Osmani said cautiously as she moved to the foot of the bed.

"I don't think it will hurt. And it might serve to give me more insight into what we're dealing with." Mrs. Batton said frankly.

When Dr. Osmani drew the blanket away from her husband's feet, she revealed a grotesque twisted mass of infection.

"I'm so sorry." Mrs. Batton said sincerely.

"Is there anything you can do to help?" Dr. Osmani asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. This gives me an idea, but there's a chance that it's yet another falsehood that's being presented to me." Mrs. Batton said wearily.

* * * * *

When they returned to the dining room, Mrs. Batton took her previous seat and pondered what she had been able to discover.

"Do you know what we're dealing with?" Alana asked cautiously.

"No. Not precisely. But I think that I may be able to point you in the right direction." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

"Any help you can give us would be appreciated." Alana said honestly.

"Irfan, would you come here?" Mrs. Batton asked hopefully.

Van cautiously took the three steps to stand before her.

"You have an injury on your back, don't you?" Mrs. Batton asked knowingly.

"Yes. How did you know?" Van asked cautiously.

Mrs. Batton smiled at the question, then motioned for him to lean down so that she could whisper, "I'm psychic."

Van smiled at the admission as he returned to standing.

"May I see your injury?" Mrs. Batton asked hopefully.

Van turned and lifted his shirt so that Mrs. Batton could see.

"Max, come over here." Mrs. Batton said as she carefully inspected the wound.

"What did you need me to do?" Max asked as he approached.

"Open yourself up and tell me if you can sense anything from Irfan's wound." Mrs. Batton said seriously.

Max looked at his aunt uncertainly for a moment, then focused on the wound on Van's back before closing his eyes.

"Let go of what you *expect* and tell me what you *sense*." Mrs. Batton said in a low, coaxing voice.

"Wait. This doesn't make sense." Max said as he took a step back.

"What is that, Dear?" Mrs. Batton asked in a leading tone.

"He's inhuman. How can he be here, like this with us, if he's an inhuman?" Max asked anxiously.

"Look again, but this time pull back a little." Mrs. Batton urged him.

It took a moment for Max to work up his courage, but finally he approached Van again and did his best to focus his second sight on the wound.

"Pull back and look at the whole being, not just the injury." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

"Oh! I see. It's just the injury that's inhuman, but it's inhabiting a human being." Max said in a voice of wonder.

"Yes. That's exactly right." Mrs. Batton said with approval.

"What does that mean?" Kerry asked anxiously, worried on Van's behalf.

"It means that each of these injuries is a form of low level possession. The... entity... that inhabits this place seems to derive its power in this manner." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

"We're possessed?" Derek asked in panic.

"Technically, yes. But more in the sense of a parasitic infection than anything else. I don't think it could influence your thoughts or control your actions until it had gained a more significant foothold." Mrs. Batton said seriously.

"But eventually, it will." Alana said thoughtfully.

"Yes. If left untreated." Mrs. Batton agreed.

"What's the treatment?" Kerry asked anxiously.

"What is the treatment for any form of possession?" Mrs. Batton asked simply.

"We're going to have to perform an exorcism?" Derek asked dubiously.

"Yes and no." Mrs. Batton said carefully.

She looked around to find that everyone was waiting expectantly for her explanation.

"Yes, an exorcism will need to be performed, but no, I don't think you should go about doing it yourselves. In this instance, I believe it would be best to call on the services of a professional." Mrs. Batton said seriously.

"Is there *anything* else that you can tell us about what's inhabiting this house?" Alana asked hopefully.

"It's old." Mrs. Batton said thoughtfully.

Although she had said that earlier, in the living room, anxious looks still flashed around the room.

Many of those present were aware that the existence of inhumans tended to be nothing less than 'survival of the fittest'. For an inhuman to achieve advanced age usually meant that they were that much more dangerous.

"It's powerful." She said as she seemed to be looking off into a distant place.

"How powerful?" Charity asked cautiously.

"What you've seen so far isn't even a flicker of its true power. It's just been playing with you." Mrs. Batton said gravely.

"Do you know what kind of demon it is?" Derek asked carefully.

"No. It's too vast and disbursed for me to be able to label it. I get the sense that it's more 'there' than 'here'." Mrs. Batton said with difficulty.

Everyone waited for long silent minutes as Mrs. Batton seemed to be trying to focus in on something more.

Finally, she took a deep breath, then slumped slightly in the chair as she let her concentration go.

"I think Max and I should be leaving. We can't shield ourselves from something like this for very long." Mrs. Batton said wearily.

"Is there anything else you can tell us? Anything at all?" Alana asked hopefully.

Mrs. Batton stopped for a moment, then looked Alana in the eyes as she said, "This didn't happen by chance. It was summoned."

Chapter 4: Retreat

"So, Malika, have the girls told you about what we've been planning for tonight?" Teresa asked as they started their drive across town.

"Yeah. It sounds like fun. Well, except for the scary movies... I'm living in one, so I really don't feel like watching someone else go through that stuff." Malika said honestly.

"I'm sure that we'll be able to find something that you'll all enjoy." Teresa assured her.

"Just as long as it's not another one of Lorra's tear jerker romances." Toni said with a crinkled nose.

"Okay. If Malika can veto horror movies and Toni can veto romances, then I get to veto something, too." Lorra said firmly.

"That sounds fair to me." Teresa said with a smile.

"No movies made from comic books... or cartoons... or where there's more CGI explosions than acting." Lorra said thoughtfully.

"*That's* going to narrow it down." Teresa said consideringly.

"We may end up watching 'Love Boat' reruns on TV." Toni said slowly.

"What's that?" Malika asked curiously.

"Believe me, you don't want to know." Lorra told her gravely.

"Don't I get to not pick something, too?" Zoe asked loudly. Being the youngest, it was apparent that she was feeling a little bit overlooked.

"Sure, honey, what kind of movie do you not want to watch." Teresa asked her daughter indulgently.

"I don't wanna watch any stars or rings. They're boring." Zoe said firmly.

"What was that?" Teresa asked curiously.

"No movies with the words 'Star' or 'Ring' anywhere in them." Zoe said seriously.

Teresa thought about it for a moment, then broke into a smile before saying, "I think that narrows it down a lot more."

"What about Harry Potter?" Toni suggested hopefully.

"Which one?" Malika asked with interest.

"Since we're having a sleepover, let's start with the first one and see how many we can watch before we fall asleep." Toni said happily.

"Yeah. Okay. I haven't watched them for a while." Malika said consideringly.

"What about you, Lorra?" Toni asked cautiously.

"Daniel Radcliffe? Are you kidding? I'm in!" Lorra said with a grin.

"Is that okay with you, Zoe?" Teresa gently asked her youngest.

"Yeah. I like Harry Potter." Zoe said happily.

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There were a few silent minutes as the drive continued, until Lorra finally asked, "What school do you go to?"

"The Christian Academy." Malika answered in a somewhat grim tone.

"Oh. I've heard of that place. Do they make you pray all the time, or anything like that?" Lorra asked curiously.

"No. It's just a name. I guess if they called it 'The Muslim Academy', no one would send their kids there." Malika said frankly.

"You're probably right about that." Teresa chuckled.

"So, it's just a regular school?" Lorra asked to confirm.

"Yeah. I guess. I've always gone there, so I don't know what other schools are like." Malika said honestly.

"Is there anything special that you girls would like to snack on, tonight? I can stop by the store on the way home." Teresa asked casually.

"Can we have pizza?" Toni asked hopefully.

"We just had dinner before we left the house." Teresa said cautiously.

"Yeah. So?" Toni said simply, obviously not seeing a connection.

"Let me know when everyone's hungry and I'll call for delivery." Teresa said with amusement.

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When Teresa pulled into the driveway, the girls piled out of the SUV and rushed to the front door.

Teresa smiled at their enthusiasm to get the sleepover underway.

* * * * *

"Wow. Your house is really nice!" Malika said as they walked in the front door.

"Mom and Dad have been remodeling it since we moved in." Toni said simply as she took off her coat.

"Give me your coat." Lorra said as she hung her coat in the entry closet.

"Do you wanna see my room?" Zoe asked excitedly.

Malika looked at Toni and Lorra, not knowing if there were a right answer to the question.

"We're going to start the fire, first." Toni told her sister, then looked to her mother and asked, "Can I?"

"Go ahead. Just remember to open the flue." Teresa cautioned.

"This fireplace is really really old. It's awesome." Lorra said as she led the way into the living room.

Malika looked around the living room carefully and her gaze stopped on the Christmas tree. "It's so pretty."

"Oh, yeah. You don't have a Christmas tree at your house, do you?" Lorra asked cautiously.

"No. With everything going on this year, with everyone being sick and scared, we just... didn't." Malika said quietly.

"You can't let the bad guys win." Toni said firmly as she carefully positioned the wood in the firebox.

"Yeah. If you act all miserable, you're playing into their hands." Lorra agreed, then thought to add, "Being sad and afraid is a lot like giving up, and when you don't fight back, they win."

"So, being happy is a way of fighting... it?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Not giving up is a way of fighting them. Being happy is a way of not giving up." Toni said seriously, then lit the fireplace lighter and moved the flame to the edge of the kindling.

"What you said before, back at my house, was that true? Was your house really haunted?" Malika asked curiously.

"Yeah." Toni said easily as she kept the majority of her attention on lighting the fire.

"Well, to be honest, it still is. But now it's haunted the good way." Lorra interjected.

"The *good* way? *Is* there a good way?" Malika asked dubiously.

"Yeah. The ghosts that we have now are really nice. In fact, Benjamin helps us out around here all the time." Toni said as she looked away from the fire with a smile.

"How can a ghost *help* you?" Malika asked dubiously.

"When Benjamin was alive, he used to work taking care of this house, you know, cleaning and keeping things nice and neat. Now, he still does that. I mean, we still have to clean up after ourselves, but after that, Benjamin kind of follows along behind us and makes sure that everything's *just right*." Toni finished with a smile.

"Can I see him?" Malika asked cautiously.

"We usually see Daniel more than Benjamin, but neither one of them will show up when you call them. If you *do* see them, it'll be when one of them walks past the door or you'll see them out of the corner of your eye or something like that." Toni said seriously.

"They don't try to scare you or anything. They're nice." Zoe interjected.

"What about your ghost? How is it?" Toni asked cautiously.

"All I can really tell you about it is that it's not nice." Malika said quietly.

"Don't worry. My dad and the team will figure out how to make things right." Toni assured her.

"Yeah. They're really great. They even let us help them, when they were here." Lorra said happily.

"How did you help?" Malika asked curiously.

"They let me take readings when they first got here, then later, they let us help them with the evidence review." Lorra said happily.

"Yeah. It was really something. And from what they said, they might ask us to help them again if they've got a really big job to do, sometime." Toni added with a smile.

"I don't know. I think I'd be scared if I did something like that." Malika said cautiously.

"Sometimes it's scary. But I know that Alana wouldn't let anything bad happen to us, so it's okay." Lorra said honestly.

"My dad's over at your house trying to figure out what's haunting you. Can you think of anything that I could tell him that might help?" Toni asked hopefully.

"Did your dad ask you to ask me that? Is that what he said to you when we went out to the car?" Malika asked suspiciously.

"He told me to call him if there was something that he needed to know. But it's not like he's spying on you, or anything. He's just trying to help your family. So if there's something that you know that might help him, I can go ahead and tell him about it." Toni said honestly.

"All I know is that it's scary. For some reason, I feel safer when I'm in my room, so I stay in there a lot." Malika said quietly.

"Toni and I have been studying all kinds of things so that we can help if the team ever needs us to. If it wouldn't freak you out too much, we could investigate what's been happening to you." Lorra said hopefully.

"How? What do you want to do?" Malika asked cautiously.

"We just want to ask you some questions, just like the regular interviews that Alana and the team do. Maybe, if we do that, we can figure some things out that'll help." Toni explained cautiously.

"Okay. I guess." Malika said reluctantly, then asked, "What do you want to know?"

"Just tell us what it's like. How are things 'not normal' at your house." Lorra said simply.

"Well, I guess that sometimes, when I look in the mirror, there's sometimes someone else there, just for a second." Malika said anxiously, obviously disturbed by the memory.

"Yeah. That happens a lot. Mirrors are easy portals, weak spots in reality where ghosts and stuff can peek through." Lorra said with a nod.

"That's right. And usually when you see something in the mirror, it's something that's trapped on the other side. It can't hurt you. If it's showing itself to you, it's probably just to make you scared, because when you're scared, you kind of give it a boost of energy." Toni said carefully.

"If that's what it's been trying to do, it worked." Malika said quietly.

"Does it happen in all the mirrors, every now and then? Or does it happen in the same one, almost every time you look in it?" Lorra asked seriously.

"Um... all of them, I guess. I use the one in the bathroom the most, so that's where I usually see it, but it's not every time and it's happened in the others, too." Malika said thoughtfully.

"Good. Then that probably means that you don't have a haunted mirror. Sometimes, mirrors can be used as conduits, and you have to get rid of the mirror or bind it to stop the haunting. But it sounds like the mirrors in your house are just regular mirrors and the ghosts, or whatever, use them to terrorize you when they get the chance." Lorra said, then looked at Toni with question.

"Yeah. Just try to ignore them. And if you feel like they're watching you, then tell them to get out and give you some privacy or cover the mirror so that they can't watch." Toni said with a nod.

"They're always watching. I can feel them, even when I'm not anywhere close to a mirror." Malika said anxiously.

"Oh, yeah. That's normal." Toni said easily.

"That might just be the EMF." Lorra added simply.

"What's that?" Malika asked curiously.

"Electromagnetic fields. Ghosts give them off and we can track them with our K2 meters. Whenever you're around high EMFs, you get the creeps and feel like someone's watching you." Lorra said informatively.

"Is there some way to stop that?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Yeah. There's a couple ways." Toni said assuringly, then continued, "The first thing is to try and figure out where the EMF is coming from. Sometimes it's from a ghost, and there's not much you can do about that. But sometimes it's from bad wiring or an electrical transformer or junction box or something like that. If you can track it down and either move it or get it fixed right, then you can make it go away."

"There's also some kinds of paints and plants that can shield you from EMF or absorb it." Lorra added helpfully.

"What about when I'm sleeping? Sometimes it feels like there's someone else in my room, and when I feel that, I'm scared and I can't move." Malika whispered fearfully at the memory.

"That can be caused by high EMF, too." Lorra said with a nod.

"Yeah. It's called 'sleep paralysis' and it happens to lots of people. That's another one of those things that can happen even when you're not 'really' haunted. If it's a real problem, I think that you can go to a doctor and they can give you something for it. I don't know a lot about it, but it happens enough that you should be able to look it up and find out what you can do about it." Toni said consideringly.

"My mom's a doctor. Wouldn't she already know about that?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Maybe." Toni said simply, then added, "But unless your mom works with sleep disorders, she might not. Do the research and you can show her what you figured out and she might be able to help you with it."

"Yeah. I guess I never thought that there might be something that you could 'do' to stop the nightmares." Malika said thoughtfully.

"Oh, yeah. There's tons of stuff that you can do that don't have anything to do with haunting. Once you've got all that stuff out of the way, then there's a whole lot less that you have to deal with that actually 'is' from the ghosts." Toni said seriously.

"What about when I see someone moving in my closet, or under my bed, even when I'm completely awake?" Malika asked anxiously.

"That *could* be ghosts." Lorra said speculatively.

"Or... it could be high EMF giving you a feeling of paranoia and your mind automatically 'matrixing' to make you see something that isn't really there." Toni countered.

"What's 'matrixing'?" Malika asked curiously.

"That's a thing your mind does to fill in the blanks when something's missing. Like when your mind automatically fills in a missing letter in a word or the missing word in a sentence." Toni explained easily.

"It's also how your mind can see things in a picture that's an optical illusion. Your mind picks up on the clues and fills in the blanks to show you something that's not really there. And when you've got a lot of EMF hitting you, then your mind is hyped up looking for something creepy and weird that it's expecting to see." Lorra added thoughtfully.

"What about the smells?" Malika asked cautiously.

"What smells?" Toni asked curiously.

"In my house, sometimes... a lot of times, you smell things... like rotting... or blood." Malika said anxiously.

"I don't know. I don't think I've read anything about any *smelly* ghosts. But I suppose that you could matrix a smell just the same as something that you saw." Toni said consideringly.

"It's not all in my head! Look at this." Malika said, then raised up the side of her blouse to expose three separate patches of boils starting under her arm and wrapping around to cover about half of her stomach.

"No. We weren't saying that it's *all* in your head. We're saying that whatever's haunting your house may be using your body's natural reactions to scare you and make you think that it's a lot worse than it really is." Toni said assuringly.

"Does it hurt?" Zoe asked in a whisper.

Malika looked at the younger girl with surprise, having briefly forgotten that she was there.

"Sometimes it feels like there's something moving, right under my skin. But since my mom started putting cream on it, it doesn't hurt very much." Malika said frankly.

"Toni, can you fix it?" Zoe asked hopefully.

"Malika's mom is a doctor. I probably can't do anything that she hasn't already tried." Toni said seriously.

"But if a ghost hurt Malika like this, can't you undo what the ghost did to her?" Zoe asked cautiously, obviously trying very hard to understand.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt anything to try." Toni said uncertainly.

"What are you talking about doing?" Malika asked uneasily.

"Well, I don't know if it'll do anything. But I guess what Zoe's saying kinda makes sense. If a ghost or whatever 'marked' you or 'cursed' you with this, then maybe it would help if we did a basic protection ritual." Toni said carefully, then looked at Lorra with question.

"I've got my kit upstairs, with my things." Lorra said simply.

"Your 'kit'?" Malika asked cautiously.

"It's just the really basic things that ghost hunters and priests and people like that use to protect themselves." Lorra said assuringly.

"Are you talking about doing magic?" Malika asked anxiously.

After a moment to consider, Toni slowly said, "That's kind of hard to answer. I think that the way Alana would say it is that even though we don't know 'why' it works, this is something that was done in the past that we've seen 'does' work. So, whether you want to call it 'magic' or not, this is a proven answer to the question we're asking."

"What are you going to do?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Um, I guess we'll draw a protection circle, so nothing can get in from the outside and try to interfere with us. Then we'll do the cleansing ritual to try and get rid of any curses or marks. After that, we'll do a basic blessing to try and keep you from getting cursed or marked again." Toni said thoughtfully.

"Do you think it will help?" Malika asked in a whisper.

"I don't know. You may just have some kind of a nasty skin fungus or something. But what we're doing won't hurt you. If you want to call what we're doing 'magic', then this is 'good-guy magic'. It's all protection, cleansing and blessing. None of it will hurt you. So the worst that will happen is *nothing*." Toni said frankly.

Malika thought about it for a moment, then quietly asked, "What do we have to do?"

"We're going to have to draw on the floor with chalk, so we should probably do it in my old room, that's being remodeled. The carpet's been torn up and the room's cleared out." Toni said thoughtfully, then looked at Lorra to confirm that she wasn't missing anything.

"Are you girls ready for pizza?" Teresa asked as she walked into the living room.

"Yeah. We've got some stuff to do upstairs for a few minutes, but we should be done before it gets here." Toni said with a smile at her mother.

"Is pepperoni alright with everyone?" Teresa asked as she looked around.

"Yeah!" Lorra answered hungrily.

The looks of anticipation on the other girls' faces was all the answer she needed.

"Make sure you put the screen in front of the fire before you go upstairs." Teresa cautioned her oldest daughter.

"We will." Toni assured her, then quickly stood.

* * * * *

"Just stand back and let Lorra work. Even though I've read through this, I haven't memorized it like Lorra has." Toni said quietly.

"Why is this happening to me?" Malika asked anxiously.

"Probably, because you're a girl... and a teenager. For some reason, ghosts really *really* like us. Maybe we give them extra energy or something." Toni said honestly.

"Or maybe they're just a bunch of perverts." Lorra said without looking up from her work, drawing a chalk circle in the center of the floor.

Toni smiled at the comment, then continued, "For whatever reason, ghosts like to show up where there's a young teenage girl. Sometimes, it's like our natural psychic energy draws them. If there's already a weak spot between the worlds, we can draw them through. Of course, if it's something that's already here, then it sees us as food and starts getting stronger and acting up more."

"Then, there are poltergeists, which are spirits that latch onto just you. If what you've got is one of those, then right now Alana and my dad are probably bored out of their minds, because all the paranormal activity would have followed you here." Lorra said seriously as she continued to work.

"It's cold in here." Zoe grumbled.

"Go get a sweater. We won't start without you." Toni assured her sister.

Zoe looked at Toni dubiously for a moment, but finally hurried out of the room.

"Is it really okay for you to let her see what we're going to do?" Malika asked cautiously.

"In a few years, Zoe's going to be a teenager and might have to face something like this. And by that time, I might be away at college. So, for as long as she wants to learn about it, I'm willing to show her the things that she needs to know to protect herself." Toni said seriously.

Malika thought about that for a moment, then slowly nodded her agreement to the reasoning.

* * * * *

"You didn't start, did you?" Zoe asked as she hurried into the room.

"No. Lorra's still casting the circle." Toni said patiently.

"What's that that she's writing?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Each segment in the circle is a request for protection from a different saint, angel or deity. It's one of those things that we don't know *why* it works, but some or all of them do *something* because it's always worked in the past." Toni said carefully.

"So you don't believe in magic?" Malika asked to confirm.

"I think that some of this stuff works if you believe in it. I don't know if that's the placebo effect or the power of positive thinking. But there's other stuff that actually works no matter what you believe. It's like there's some kind of science at work, but no one knows what it *really* is. Because of that, we use the things that we know have worked in the past, even if we don't believe in them or completely understand them."

"Everyone, get into the circle." Lorra said as she carefully looked over her handywork.

"Is your mom going to get upset because you drew all over the floor?" Malika asked cautiously as they all relocated.

"Maybe a little. But they're going to be sanding down the floors anyway, so I don't think it'll be a big deal." Toni said frankly.

"This is Toni's room. She's just staying in her brother's room until they're done fixing this one up." Lorra said as she walked around the circle, dribbling water outside the chalk outline.

"What are you doing?" Malika asked curiously.

"Reinforcing the circle with holy water." Lorra said simply.

"Do you want me to do the salt?" Toni asked her cautiously.

"Yeah. It's in my backpack, right there." Lorra said absently.

Malika watched as Toni took a generic cylindrical container of cooking salt out and started pouring it just outside the circle.

"You just use regular salt?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's possible to get 'Holy Salt' that's been blessed, for when you need it. But for something like this, any salt will do." Toni said casually as she crawled around the perimeter of the circle, pouring the salt, and being careful not to smudge Lorra's chalk diagrams.

"I guess we're ready." Lorra said as she looked over the circle one more time.

"What do we have to do?" Malika asked nervously.

"Not much, really. If it's okay, I'm going to put some holy water on each spot where you're hurt, to spiritually cleanse them. Then we'll just say a really quick little prayer of protection, so that if we actually got rid of something, that it can't come back." Lorra said frankly.

Malika looked from Lorra to Toni, then cautiously asked, "So, it's not a big deal?"

"Nope. The hardest part is done. I've been studying that circle diagram forever, trying to memorize it." Lorra said frankly.

"Show us where you're hurt and we'll go ahead and bless it." Toni said seriously.

Malika once again lifted her blouse to expose the angry boils.

"Zoe, come over here and watch, so you'll know how to do this." Toni said firmly.

The expression on Zoe's face was cautious, but Malika could easily see that she was doing her best to remain calm and collected. Malika got the sense that it meant the world to Zoe that her older sister was including her and sharing this forbidden knowledge.

In a low voice, Toni quietly said, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I beg that you intercede on our behalf."

"Lord, hear our prayer." Lorra automatically said at the pause.

"Almighty God, we beg you to keep the evil spirit from further molesting this servant of yours, and to keep him far away, never to return. At your command, O Lord, may the goodness and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, take possession of Malika. May we no longer fear any evil since the Lord is with us; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever." Toni said reverently as she sprinkled holy water on the scabs and boils.

Malika gasped at the sudden cold.

"Do you have anymore spots like this? We need to get all of them." Lorra asked seriously.

"Yeah. On both my legs." Malika said as she tried to understand what she was feeling on her stomach. It was almost icy and she couldn't tell if it were spreading over her skin or moving underneath.

"Can you roll up your pants legs?" Toni asked cautiously.

"No. Not enough. I'll have to take them off." Malika said nervously.

"Go ahead. We've got to do this right now or we'll have to start over." Toni said frankly.

After a moment of hesitation, Malika wriggled out of her pants to expose two large gauze pads, taped into place. She carefully removed the bandages to reveal a horrible infected gash on one of her thighs and another patch of festering boils on the other.

"Zoe, do you want to do it?" Toni asked her sister cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Zoe firmly shook her head.

Toni smiled at her sister, then held up the holy water as she said, "Lord, we beg you to keep the evil spirit from further molesting this servant of yours."

When Toni applied the holy water to the infected gash, Malika once again felt the icy sensation moving not only over, but through the wound on her thigh.

Toni quickly applied the holy water to the patch of boils, then asked, "Zoe, would you go to the bathroom and get the first aid kit? We need to bandage these back up."

"Can I leave the circle?" Zoe asked cautiously.

"Sure. Daniel will make sure nothing happens to you." Toni assured her sister with a smile.

Zoe hurried out of the room to do as she was asked.

Malika looked around quickly and for just an instant, she saw the vague outline of a teenage boy, standing by the door with his arms folded across his chest.

She gasped and quickly grabbed her pants to cover herself as a blush rose up her cheeks.

It took a moment for Toni to understand what Malika's sudden problem was, but once she figured it out, she quietly said, "Daniel's not looking at you, I promise. He's not like that."

"Not like what?" Malika asked as she continued to try and fight down her embarrassment.

"He doesn't like girls." Lorra said frankly.

Toni glanced at Lorra disapprovingly, then carefully said, "I'm saying that he's a *gentleman*. He won't look. And, if he *accidentally* sees something he shouldn't, he will look away."

Lorra flashed Toni an incredulous 'whatever' look, then started gathering her supplies back into her backpack as she asked, "So, Malika, do you feel any different?"

"I don't know." Malika said honestly.

"Well, like we told you before, this might not help anything, but it shouldn't hurt anything, either. It was just something to try." Toni assured her.

"Thank you for doing it." Malika said quietly.

Zoe hurried back into the room with a large first aid kit.

"Let's hurry and get these bandaged. The pizza should be here any minute." Toni said with a smile of anticipation.

At the invocation of the word 'pizza', all matters ghostly, demonic or supernatural were immediately abandoned.

* * * * *

As they were walking downstairs, Toni quietly said, "If you think of anything that I need to tell my dad, just let me know."

"Yeah. I will." Malika assured her.

The sound of a knock on the front door caused all the girls to stop.

"Are you guys ready to watch some movies?" Lorra asked with a grin.

Malika suddenly realized that for the first time in longer than she could remember, she felt completely at ease. She wasn't afraid. She wasn't alone. She wasn't expecting some horrific thing to pop out and scare her at any moment.

So, as they walked down the hallway, toward the living room, Malika quietly said, "Yeah. I think I am."

Chapter 5: Lost in Dark

A low growling sound made Van jump. He looked around cautiously to see if there were some demon about to attack them.

"Sorry. I didn't have a chance to eat dinner." Kerry said timidly.

Van looked at him with surprise, then broke into a grin as he said, "We should have some leftovers in the kitchen, if that's okay."

"You don't need to bother. I'll be fine. I should have thought to drive through somewhere on the way to the team meeting. I just didn't know that we were going to have a case tonight." Kerry said honestly.

"It's no trouble. Besides, if you eat the leftovers, then Mom will have to make us new food tomorrow. I'm ready for new food. So you'll be helping me out." Van said with a grin.

"Well... I *am* here to help." Kerry said reluctantly.

"Come on." Van said warmly as he led the way out of the dining room.

* * * * *

"Oh, there you are." Alana said as she walked into the kitchen.

"Van's fixing me something to eat." Kerry said timidly.

"Would you like some? There's enough for one more plate." Van offered pleasantly.

"Thank you, no. But could I use your phone? As you saw, mine had an unfortunate accident, earlier." Alana asked hopefully.

"Sure. It's right over..." Van began to say, then looked strangely at the wall by the kitchen door.

"What's wrong?" Kerry asked with concern.

"The phone. It's not there." Van said with surprise.

"What do you mean?" Alana asked cautiously.

"There should be a phone on the wall, right there by the door." Van said as he slowly walked to the wall and felt around where the phone was usually located.

"This isn't good." Alana said anxiously.

The sudden sound of a high pitched **::beep::** caused Kerry to jump about a foot in the air.

"Your food's ready." Van said absently as he continued to inspect the wall where the phone had always been.

Kerry slowly walked to the microwave, then thought to say, "You can use my cellphone, if you like."

"Um, no. I need to talk to Derek, right now. This isn't good." Alana said distractedly, then hurried out the kitchen door, toward the dining room.

"How could the phone just disappear, like that?" Van asked disbelievingly.

"I don't know." Kerry said as he took the plate out of the microwave.

"Whatever it was seems like it really bothered her." Van said seriously as he walked back to Kerry's side.

"It's not making me too happy, either." Kerry said frankly as he picked up a fork.

"Stop!" Van said abruptly and reached out to put his hand on Kerry's wrist.

"What?" Kerry asked as he froze in place.

"Look." Van whispered.

Kerry followed Van's gaze to the plate of food, which was alive with maggots and flies.

From there, Kerry looked at the fork, inches from his mouth, and found the food there was also infested.

"I think I lost my appetite." Kerry said as he slowly set the plate and fork on the kitchen counter.

"Me, too." Van said anxiously.

"Let's go into the dining room and see what Alana came up with." Kerry said as he started toward the door.

"Yeah." Van said, following a step behind.

* * * * *

"Where's Alana?" Kerry asked as he and Van walked into the dining room.

"Upstairs, with the doctor and her husband, as far as I know." Derek said as he worked on trying to salvage what he could of their equipment.

"She was just with us in the kitchen and said that she was going to come in here and talk to you." Kerry said anxiously.

"Alana? What's your location?" Derek asked into the walkie-talkie.

"*I'm in the basement.*" Alana said cautiously.

"Is something going on, down there?" Derek asked slowly.

"*Not that I can tell. But the funny thing is, when I walked through the door into the dining room, I somehow ended up down here.*" Alana said in puzzlement.

"Um... guys." Van said as he moved closer to Kerry's side.

Kerry followed Van's amazed wide-eyed stare at the blank wall where the door had been moments before.

"On a related topic, it appears that the dining room door is missing." Derek said slowly into the walkie-talkie.

"So are the basement stairs. And the basement seems to have become an endless labyrinthine maze." Alana said in frustration, then thought to ask, "Is everyone else there with you?"

"I have Charity, Kerry and Van here with me." Derek said cautiously.

"Good. Stay together." Alana said seriously, then thought to ask, "Dr. Osmani? Are you and your husband alright?"

"Yes. We are well. We have remained in our bedroom. Is there anything that we can do to help you?" Dr. Osmani asked cautiously.

"The best thing you can do right now is to stay together. One of us will come and get you once we've figured this thing out." Alana said confidently.

"Please, just let us know if there is any way that we can be of help." Dr. Osmani said grimly.

"Yes. And you call us if there's anything we can do for you." Alana said seriously.

* * * * *

"What do we do, now?" Van asked in a whisper.

"I don't know what we *can* do." Derek answered honestly.

"The door's back." Charity said cautiously.

"What's it doing over there?" Van asked anxiously.

After a long moment of silence, Derek quietly said, "It's teasing us."

"Should we open it and see where it goes?" Kerry asked quietly.

"On the list of really stupid, bad ideas, I think that's probably pretty close to the top." Derek said frankly.

"Our only other choice is to stay here." Kerry said frankly.

"Actually, I have no problem with that." Derek said honestly.

"It's gone." Van said suddenly.

Everyone turned in unison to see that the door that had been there a moment before was now conspicuously absent.

"What kind of a funhouse have we gotten ourselves into, here?" Charity asked as she cautiously looked around.

"Why? Are you having fun?" Derek asked with weak humor.

"One of these days I'm going to hurt you. You know that, don't you?" Charity asked dryly.

"Mrs. Batton kept saying how everything she was seeing was lies." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. She said that the smell was the truth, but the ghosts and most of everything else was lies." Van confirmed.

"What are you thinking, Kerry?" Charity asked curiously.

"I think that Alana must have been onto something. She must have been getting too close to the truth, so the demon, or whatever it is, started switching things up to stop her... or maybe to distract us." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"Alana. Kerry thinks that all of this is happening to distract us." Derek said seriously into the walkie-talkie.

Everyone waited for a moment for the response, but there was none.

"Guys." Van said in a shaky voice, then held up his hand, which was now holding a walkie-talkie.

Kerry checked his belt and found that his own walkie-talkie was still there.

"Alana was about to call someone. Do you know who that might have been?" Kerry asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know. I guess it depends on what she was trying to do."
Derek said frankly.

"Alana. Kerry thinks that all of this is happening to distract us." Derek's voice said from Van's walkie-talkie.

Van stared at it for a moment, then cautiously walked to set the walkie-talkie on the dining room table.

"Don't let yourselves get distracted. If we weren't close to figuring something out, it probably wouldn't be going to all this trouble."
Kerry said firmly.

"Yeah. Well, I guess if Alana were going to call someone, it would probably be either an exorcist or a demonologist." Derek said thoughtfully.

"Right. If we can figure out which one, then maybe we can find a way to contact them ourselves." Charity said slowly.

"Why not just call them both?" Van asked curiously.

Derek and Charity looked at him with surprise at the suggestion.

"I'm sure my parents wouldn't mind paying extra for whichever one we don't need. In fact, I'm okay with dipping into my college fund if it'll make this stop." Van said frankly.

"It won't come to that, but thanks." Derek said as he started typing on the laptop before him.

After a few seconds, he stopped and said, "Imagine that, the battery is dead."

"We'll find a power cord for you." Kerry said as he walked to the nearest pile of computer equipment debris along the wall and started digging.

Derek nodded, then started working his way through other pieces of equipment, searching for cords, batteries or a working laptop.

"The door's back." Van said slowly.

"Ignore it. This is where we need to be, right now." Kerry said as he continued to dig.

"Um, I need to go to the bathroom." Van said shyly.

"Actually, if there's a bathroom on the other side of that door, I could really stand to go, too." Charity said regretfully.

Kerry let out a slight indignant huff, then said, "Do you see that ficus over there? *That's* our bathroom. If neither of you can hold it... you'll do what you have to do."

Charity and Van looked at Kerry with matching looks of horror at the suggestion.

"The only way anyone is walking through that door is if we *all* walk through it with you." Kerry said firmly.

"*Alana. Kerry thinks that all of this is happening to distract us.*" Derek's voice sounded from the walkie-talkie on the dining room table, again.

"That's really disturbing." Derek said anxiously.

"I'm sure that's the point." Kerry said flatly.

Suddenly, from the dead laptop on the table, a gruff voice said, "*I'll see you in hell, little girl. Wear something nasty.*"

As everyone watched, a little puff of smoke wafted up from the keyboard.

Derek looked to Charity and seemed to be about to say something, but before he could, she pointed at him and said, "Don't."

Derek broke into a smile, then went back to work, digging through the computer salvage at the edge of the room.

"Do you think we should chance trying my cellphone?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"I have mine. But after what happened with Alana's, I'm a little hesitant to do that." Derek said honestly.

"But think about it. That was incoming. This will be outgoing, so it might work. Besides, the cellphones aren't doing us any good if we're afraid to use them." Kerry said frankly.

"Okay." Derek said, then added, "But I'm using speaker."

"Good call." Kerry said with a nod.

* * * * *

Everyone gathered around as Derek selected the proper number from his list of contacts.

"Hello?"

"Christoph, it's Derek. Listen, we're at 13th and Elm and we've got a really nasty..." Derek was saying when the smoke started rising from the cellphone. A moment later, the back of the phone was beginning to melt to the table.

"Do you think he got the message?" Charity asked nervously.

"We can hope." Derek said frankly.

"What else can we do?" Van asked quietly.

"How many phones do we have left?" Derek asked seriously.

"I've got one." Kerry said immediately.

"Me, too." Charity said firmly.

"Good. Let's give Christoph some time and if he doesn't show up in... let's say, an hour, then we can try calling someone else." Derek said decisively.

"But what do we do when he gets here? How do we answer the front door?" Van asked cautiously.

"If there even *is* a front door." Kerry added.

"Good point." Derek said simply, then continued, "And I guess, with the way things are, that one room is pretty much like another."

"So do you want to try door number one, or door number two?" Charity asked seriously.

Everyone turned to find that there were now two doors on the same wall at opposite ends of the room.

"Maybe we should split up." Derek said cautiously.

"Absolutely not." Kerry and Van said in unison, then looked at each other and grinned.

"Go ahead and grab anything you think that we might need, because there's a good chance that we won't be coming back here." Derek said seriously.

"*Alana. Kerry thinks that all of this is happening to distract us.*" Derek's voice said from the walkie-talkie sitting on the table.

Kerry looked at Van and quietly said, "Leave that here."

Van nodded his wholehearted agreement.

* * * * *

"Here we go." Derek said as he opened the door that he had initially used to enter the room.

"What room is this?" Charity asked as she stepped through.

"This is my room." Van said with surprise.

"Where's the camera?" Derek asked cautiously.

"What do you mean?" Van asked curiously.

"I set a camera up in here, focused on the closet. It's gone." Derek said carefully.

"Is there some kind of a timeslip going on, maybe?" Kerry asked uncertainly.

"So this might be earlier or later in the night?" Derek asked uncertainly.

"Or it might all be some kind of illusion." Charity offered.

"It doesn't matter. This isn't getting us any closer to the front door. If there's any kind of logic to this, then our only chance is to keep moving." Kerry said seriously.

"Right. I guess there's only one choice of door, this time." Derek said with resignation.

"There's the closet, too." Charity offered.

"No." Kerry and Van both said firmly.

"Just asking." Charity said as she raised her hands in surrender.

"Come on." Derek said with a grin, then opened the bedroom door.

* * * * *

"I'm guessing from the decor that this is Malika's room." Kerry said as he looked around.

"Yeah." Van said anxiously.

"The camera's missing from in here, too." Derek said absently.

"So, what are our options?" Charity asked as she looked around.

"Go back through the door, or don't." Kerry said frankly.

"Stay together or don't." Derek added.

"I can't see any advantage to splitting up, or to staying here." Kerry said honestly.

"I can't really see much advantage to us continuing on, either." Charity said frankly.

"There's always the chance that when we go back through that we'll end up at the front door." Derek said weakly, obviously not believing it himself.

"There really isn't a choice." Kerry said as he walked back to the door that they had entered through.

* * * * *

"Not good." Kerry said as soon as he recognized their surroundings.

"Basement, huh?" Derek asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. And Alana already said that the stairway was missing." Kerry said nervously.

"If the door's still there, we might still be able to find a way to make it work." Derek said cautiously.

"Let's try over here." Van said quietly.

"What's over there?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Well, if it's the same as it was, there should be a door." Van said seriously.

"Lead the way." Kerry said decisively, then thought to ask, "Where does *this* door go?"

"Nowhere. It's like a little closet thing, where they kept canning jars." Van said quietly.

"Alana! Are you down here?" Charity called out.

"I think it's safe to say that she isn't." Derek said frankly.

"This is wrong." Van said as he stopped.

"What's that?" Kerry asked with concern.

"This is where the door should be. It's gone." Van said frankly.

"Then I guess that we should keep moving." Kerry said uncertainly.

"No." Derek said firmly.

"Why not?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Because, when we stayed in one place, back in the dining room, the doors kept coming and going. If there's 'supposed' to be a door here, then maybe we should just wait here for a few minutes for it to show up." Derek said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I guess that makes sense." Kerry said cautiously.

"And there it is." Charity said with a smile.

"Let's get it before it takes off again." Derek said as he led the way.

"Stick close, Van." Kerry said before following.

* * * * *

"What the actual FUCK is going on here?" Derek asked indignantly as he stepped back into the dining room.

Every bit of equipment that had been broken and battered, laying around the room, was now back in it's proper place, seemingly in pristine condition.

"Check to see if you have an Internet connection and if the camera feeds are working." Kerry said quickly.

"Yeah." Derek said with distraction as he moved around the table and sat down.

"Don't we need to be searching for the front door?" Charity asked quietly.

"Let me see what we've got here." Derek said carefully, then froze in place.

"What is it?" Kerry asked with immediate concern.

"It's us. This is the live feed and I can see us walking in the upstairs hall." Derek said distantly.

"Alana, this is Kerry. What's your location?" Kerry asked firmly.

"*I'm in Mr. and Dr. Osmani's room. Is something wrong?*" Alana asked cautiously.

"Yes. Something's very wrong. There's too much to explain on the radio." Kerry said honestly.

"*Are you in the command center?*" Alana asked carefully.

"Yes. Derek, Charity and Van are with me." Kerry said seriously.

"*I'll be right down.*" Alana said firmly.

"This isn't right." Kerry said quietly.

"Gee whiz, Captain Obvious, do ya think so?" Derek asked with a roll of his eyes.

"What about the Internet, did you have any luck with that?" Kerry asked thoughtfully.

"No. No connection." Derek answered simply.

"What about the computer time? Is it right?" Kerry asked curiously.

Derek looked at his watch, then at the laptop before saying, "It seems to be."

"*Alana. Kerry thinks that all of this is happening to distract us.*" Derek's voice sounded from the walkie-talkie in Van's hand.

"When did you pick that back up?" Kerry asked curiously.

"I didn't. I just all of a sudden... had it... again." Van said as he set the walkie-talkie on the dining room table.

"We're being misled. This different time or dimension or illusion or whatever it is seems to be trying to divert us from reaching the front door." Kerry said honestly.

"But we have to stay here in case Alana can find her way back here." Derek said in a conflicted tone.

"Which Alana? And which here?" Kerry asked with frustration.

"Who's up for trying door number two?" Charity asked seriously.

"Let's do it." Derek said as he got up from behind the computers.

Charity and Derek walked through the door, side by side, followed immediately by Kerry and Van.

* * * * *

"Welcome back." Charity said tiredly as she looked around Van's room, yet again.

"We're just going around in circles." Van said wearily.

"Does anyone want to try the closet door, this time?" Derek asked unenthusiastically.

"What do you say, Van? Are you up to it?" Kerry asked quietly.

"Yeah. Why not?" Van answered tiredly.

Derek opened the closet door, then as a group, they stepped into darkness.

* * * * *

"Ow! Someone turn a light on!" Kerry said quickly as he rubbed his head.

Two different flashlights turned on at the same time.

"Where are we?" Derek asked as he looked around the stuffy, confined space.

"I think this is the attic." Van said uncertainly.

"Do you know the way out?" Kerry asked hopefully.

"Um, let me see. I'm turned around, here. Um, yeah. I think there's a door over there that leads to a stairway." Van said as he pointed.

"Go ahead. We're right behind you." Kerry said encouragingly.

"Everyone. Watch your step. If you fall through this floor, I can't imagine where you might end up." Derek said frankly.

No one seemed to have the will to dispute his words as they followed Van on the walkway of wooden planks.

* * * * *

"Well, it was *supposed* to lead to the stairs." Van said as he looked around the kitchen.

"This is progress. We have an external exit and a phone." Kerry said as he quickly surveyed their surroundings.

Charity walked to the phone and picked it up.

Rather than receiving a dial tone, an angry man's voice bellowed, "YOU'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!!"

"Yeah. You already said that. Do you think you could either let us out or at least give us a door that leads to a bathroom?" Charity asked hopefully.

She listened for a moment, careful not to bring the phone too close to her ear, and heard no response.

After clicking the cradle a few times and receiving no dial tone, she finally gave up.

"Does anyone want to give the back door a try?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"I'm all for jumping out a window, at this point." Derek said honestly.

"Maybe on our next pass through the kitchen." Kerry said wearily.

"Kerry, your food. It's not here." Van said suddenly.

"Check the refrigerator. See if the food that you took out is missing." Kerry said quickly.

Van cautiously walked to the refrigerator and peeked inside before saying, "No. It's still there, just like it was before."

"Let's just stop for a minute. This is getting us nowhere." Kerry said seriously.

"I doubt that stopping will get us anywhere, either." Derek said frankly.

"Van, when we were in your room, the camera was missing. Did you notice anything else being out of place?" Kerry asked thoughtfully.

"No. It was the same as it always is." Van said cautiously.

"Derek, when we went to the dining room the last time, did *you* notice anything missing or out of place?"

"You mean, besides the doors?"

"Yeah. Besides that." Kerry confirmed.

"No. I think everything was there." Derek said slowly.

"And when we talked to Alana on the radio the last time, she had no idea what we were talking about." Kerry said slowly.

"Yeah. So?" Derek asked impatiently.

"To us, it looks like something's wrong with reality. But I think whatever's going on is really happening to us. Maybe we're unconscious or asleep or in a trance or something. We might even be physically here, but that would mean that 'here' is an alternate reality, and whenever it changes, it resets back to a point in 'real' reality." Kerry said carefully.

"As crazy as that sounds, it's not even in the top ten craziest things that have happened today. Go on." Charity said seriously.

"If we're trapped inside this thing, how do we end the illusion, break the spell, or get back to our own plane of existence?" Kerry asked as he looked around.

There was a long moment of silence, until Van quietly said, "Mrs. Batton kept saying that everything was false. All of it was a lie. The only thing she talked about being real was the smell."

"Draw in the light. Let it surround you." Kerry said distantly.

"What?" Charity asked slowly.

"When Mrs. Batton and Max got here, that's what she told Max to do to protect himself. She said something about 'attuning' or 'acclimating' so that they could see past the lies." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"It sounds like a bunch of hippie crap to me, but, what the hell, I'll give it a try. What do we have to do?" Charity asked casually.

"Close your eyes and draw in the light. Gather it around you. Let it surround you and protect you." Kerry said calmly.

"Are you going to try to uncramp my chakras and smooth out my aura, while you're at it?" Charity asked with a grin.

"Just close your eyes and pretend you're a glowstick." Kerry said with playful aggravation, then looked around the table and said, "Let's join hands and all try this together."

They were silent for a moment, then Charity quietly began singing, "Kumbaya my Lord, kumbaya."

Derek released her hand long enough to swat her playfully on the shoulder.

"Draw in the light. Let it surround you and protect you. Let the lies fade in the light of truth..."

* * * * *

"What do you mean? Who summoned what?" Alana asked quickly.

"It's impossible to say, at this point. There's too much darkness, too many lies." Mrs. Batton said seriously, then glanced at Derek, Charity, Kerry and Van as she continued, "But I'm sure that you'll be able to see past the lies, to what's beneath."

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Batton. I can't tell you how much we appreciate it." Alana said sincerely.

"That's alright, Dear. I think I know." Mrs. Batton said with a smile as she and Max walked out of the house and to her car.

After seeing them off, Alana walked back into the house and said, "If you'll wait down here for me, I need to go upstairs and talk to Mr. and Dr. Osmani about bringing in an exorcist to release their possessions so that the medicine will have a chance to work. Normally I'd wait for the second night of the investigation to call in a professional, after we had completed the evidence review. But this time, I don't think that we can afford to wait."

"We'll see you in the dining room, when you're done." Kerry said quietly.

* * * * *

"You guys remember the same thing I do, don't you?" Charity asked when they were alone in the dining room.

"Doorways moving and disappearing?" Kerry asked cautiously.

Charity slowly nodded, as she looked at Kerry and Van anxiously.

"Alana. Kerry thinks that all of this is happening to distract us." Derek's voice sounded from a walkie-talkie on the dining room table.

The room fell silent.

Charity looked around anxiously as a shiver of dread ran up her spine. Then she spotted Derek on the far side of the room with

another walkie-talkie in his hands and nearly doubled over with laughter.

"You asshole!" Charity screamed.

"Everything's okay." Kerry chuckled as he walked to Van and put an arm around him.

"Yeah. I think it's going to be." Van said as he enjoyed the show of affection.

Chapter 6: The Time of Need

"Mr. and Dr. Osmani have given their approval for us to call an exorcist." Alana announced as she walked into the dining room.

Looks went from person to person. Everyone was silently asking if they should tell Alana about what they'd just been through.

Finally it was Charity who said, "The four of us have just been through a mass delusion."

Alana was startled by the announcement, and cautiously asked, "What are you talking about?"

Derek looked up from his work, trying to salvage what he could of their equipment and said, "We've been wandering around this house for hours, lost in a maze of rooms that didn't connect and doorways that went to the wrong places."

"When we finally snapped out of it, we were back in the entry hall, talking with you and Mrs. Batton." Kerry added.

"So this entity was able to put you into a shared dream state?" Alana asked slowly.

"Yes. It wasn't until Kerry remembered what Mrs. Batton had said about seeing past the lies that we were able to throw off the illusion." Charity said seriously.

Alana thought about that for a moment, then shook her head dismissively.

"We can't let that distract us. Time is too precious for us to be wasting it." Alana said firmly, then turned to Derek and said, "I need for you to call Merryl and ask her to come over as quickly as possible."

"I think we should call Christoph and Father Francis, too. This thing is too big and nasty for us to deal with on our own." Derek said frankly.

"I'd really like for us to pin down what we're dealing with before calling in anymore outside help." Alana said honestly.

"I'd like that, too." Charity said seriously, then added, "But this thing is too big and powerful for that. We should call for the help that we might need while we still can."

"Alana, please think about it. This thing just swept four of us up into an illusion and we were barely able to break out of it. If it gathers its strength and does that again, we might not be strong enough to find our way back." Kerry urged her to understand.

After a moment to consider, Alana turned to Derek and quietly said, "Call them."

Derek immediately took out his cellphone, relieved to find that it wasn't melted, as he remembered.

"While we're waiting on them to arrive, I suppose that we should do our best to gather whatever evidence that we've been able to collect so that we can present it to them. Even if we don't have *all* the answers, we can still do our best to provide as many clues for them as possible." Alana said thoughtfully.

A sudden **::thunk::** caused everyone to turn at once to find a small hatchet embedded in the table, right beside Charity.

"Check yourself." Kerry said immediately.

When she looked at Kerry with question, he explained, "Just about every time we've seen one of these weapons appear, it's been followed by one of us getting a fresh wound."

"Oh, no." Charity gasped as she began patting herself down, searching for any sign of injury.

"I'll help you." Alana said in a weak voice.

"We should check, too." Van said from Kerry's side.

"Right." Kerry agreed.

Charity gasped as she located a freshly opened wound on her hip, just above her waistline.

"Let me check your back." Van said in a rush.

"Thanks." Kerry said as he raised his shirt.

"You're clear." Van said seriously.

Kerry turned to find Van turning away and raising his shirt.

After a brief inspection, Kerry said, "You're fine, too."

"It's trying to distract us." Charity said in a warning tone.

"Yeah. It's doing a pretty good job of it." Derek said frankly, then turned his attention back to his cellphone, "Oh, hi Ash, is Merryl available? We're on a case and it looks like we're going to need her services."

"I need to get Dr. Osmani to look at this." Alana said anxiously.

"I think she needs to be with her husband right now. I'll get the first aid kit and take care of it." Kerry said decisively.

Alana seemed to be about to object, but finally nodded in his direction.

"Do you want to come with me?" Kerry asked Van with a quick smile.

"Yeah." Van whispered, then with one last concerned look back at Charity, followed Kerry out of the dining room.

* * * * *

"It sure is nice to have the dining room connecting to the hallway again." Kerry said with a smile as they hurried toward the front door.

"I think I'm more scared than I've ever been." Van whispered nervously.

"If it's too much, I can call my wife and she can come and get you. You've been incredible and helped us out a lot, but you don't have to stay. Alana's calling in the experts, so there's probably not going to be much for the rest of us to do." Kerry was saying as they walked out the front door.

"No. I'll stay. As long as I'm here with you, I know that I'll be okay. Besides, I want to see how they get rid of this thing." Van said honestly.

Kerry walked to the curb, then stopped when he realized what he'd forgotten.

"What's wrong?" Van asked cautiously.

"I forgot to get the keys from Alana." Kerry quietly admitted.

"I'll go get them." Van said immediately.

"No. None of us goes anywhere alone." Kerry said firmly.

Van looked back at him with question.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you." Kerry said as he looked into Van's eyes, then continued, "Let's go."

* * * * *

As Kerry and Van walked into the dining room, they found Derek talking on his cellphone while Alana was kneeling beside Charity, carefully inspecting the wound on her hip.

"I forgot the keys." Kerry quietly admitted.

Alana fished in her pocket, then tossed her set of keys at Kerry.

"Is she okay?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Get the first aid kit." Alana said as she spared Kerry an anxious glance.

"On its way." Kerry assured her, then hurried out of the room with Van at his side.

* * * * *

Once Kerry and Van had collected the first aid kit and delivered it to Alana, they stood back while Alana disinfected and dressed Charity's injury.

Derek had been on the phone the whole time, but neither paid attention to what he was saying on his side of the conversation.

"Good news." Derek finally said as he put his cellphone away.

"We could use some." Charity said frankly.

"I talked to Meryll, Christoph, and Father Francis. They're all on their way over here." Derek said happily.

"Thank you." Alana said with a smile of weary relief.

"I guess we'd better get this place cleaned up, if we're going to be having company." Derek said as he looked around at the chaotic mess of electronics.

"If you'll tell us what to do, we'll help." Kerry said immediately.

"I was hoping you'd say that." Derek said with a smile, then pointed at a stack of damaged equipment and said, "All of that can go in the back of the van."

"You up to it?" Kerry asked the teenager at his side.

"Let's do it." Van said seriously.

* * * * *

"Are you okay to continue? We can call Max to come and get you if you don't feel like going on." Alana asked Charity cautiously.

"No. I'm good." Charity assured her, then added, "Besides, I want to be here, just in case there's a chance for me to get some payback."

"That's the Charity we all know and love." Derek said from his place at the dining room table, a few feet away.

"How are things going with the tech?" Alana asked as she reluctantly left Charity's side.

"I've been able to get the wireless feeds back up. Nothing seems to be going on, out there." Derek said as he gestured toward the monitor, then added, "We lost two of the external hard drives. I won't know until we get back to the office if they're a total loss, but either way, it looks like the internal drives on the laptops have a copy of everything we need."

"Good." Alana said with an approving nod.

"Unless you have some plan that I don't know about, we should probably start breaking down the cameras and collecting the DVRs. Depending on how things go, there might not be a good time to do it later." Derek said frankly.

"Yes. Let's do that. We don't have much time." Alana said decisively.

"Do you want to wait here while we get the cameras?" Derek asked Charity cautiously.

"You're not leaving me here, alone." Charity said firmly.

Derek smiled at the response, then said, "Good idea."

* * * * *

Alana, Charity and Derek went about the business of gathering cameras upstairs while Kerry and Van retrieved those on the ground floor.

"Do you know what's about to happen?" Van asked quietly as they worked together to put one of the cameras back into its messenger bag.

"Are you asking me if I'm clairvoyant?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"No! I'm asking about the people that they called in. What are they going to do?" Van asked with a smile.

"Oh? I really don't know." Kerry said honestly, then added, "I know Father Francis. He helped out at my house, when we were having a problem. He's a priest. He does blessings and stuff like that."

"Do you think that'll help?" Van asked cautiously.

Kerry looked around, verifying that they'd collected everything that they needed to, then motioned for them to start walking before responding, "From the way Alana and the others talked about it, I get the feeling that Father Francis is kind of a 'jack of all trades' for spiritual stuff. He's good at a lot of things and is able to help a lot of people. But when it's something really big and complicated, we need an 'expert' to deal with it."

"Look." Van whispered as he pointed at a weapon that looked like a cross between an axe and a spear, deeply imbedded in the floor of the hallway, just outside the dining room door.

"Ignore it." Kerry said as he continued past it, toward the front door.

* * * * *

"Your ghost is really starting to piss me off." Kerry said frankly as they stood outside the van.

"What's wrong?" Van asked with concern.

"The keys are missing." Kerry said frankly.

Van patted his pockets and was surprised to find Alana's ring of keys.

"I really hope that we can get things put right for you and your family. I hate things being like this." Kerry said honestly as he opened the back of the van and started loading the messenger bags inside.

"I guess it's been going bad for a long time. But until it got so bad that we couldn't ignore it, that's just the way we lived." Van said frankly.

Kerry slammed the back door, then checked to verify that it was locked before starting to walk back toward the house.

"Do you think Malika's okay?" Van asked cautiously.

"She's fine. If there were any problem at all, Toni or Lorra would have called me right away." Kerry assured him.

"It's good that you trust your daughter, like that." Van said quietly.

"She's a good kid. But she's also been studying like crazy trying to learn everything she can about the paranormal so that she can join the team when she's old enough." Kerry said proudly.

"Are you okay with that?" Van asked cautiously.

"Not entirely, but she has to be free to make her own decisions. And, if she's determined to do paranormal research, I'd rather that she take the time and put in the effort to learn everything that she can about it." Kerry said as they walked into the house, then added, "I'd have a lot more of a problem with it if she were just dabbling and not putting in the work to do it right."

"She's lucky to have you as a dad." Van said thoughtfully.

Kerry slung a casual arm around Van's shoulders as he said, "I may not be your dad, but I can still help you and be there for you when you need me."

"Yeah." Van said quietly as he timidly put his arm around Kerry's waist and briefly returned the hug.

* * * * *

When they walked into the dining room, Kerry patted his pockets, then held out his hand, palm up, to Van.

"What?" Van asked curiously.

"Do you have the keys, again?" Kerry asked with a smile.

Van quickly patted his pockets, then retrieved the keys and handed them to Kerry.

"Here are your keys. But if they turn up missing, check Van's pockets. They seem to like to hide there." Kerry said playfully as he handed the ring of keys to Alana.

"What do you mean? Are you talking about apportionment?" Alana asked cautiously.

"What's that?" Van asked curiously.

"That's things disappearing from one place and appearing in another." Kerry explained to Van, then turned to Alana and answered, "Yes. Things have been disappearing around here since we first walked into this house."

"I haven't seen any instances of that." Alana said thoughtfully.

"I just naturally assumed that that was what was happening with all the weapons." Kerry said frankly.

"I suppose that it could be apportionment." Alana said thoughtfully, then continued, "But that begs the question, where are they coming from?"

"The basement." Van said simply.

"What do you mean?" Alana asked suddenly.

"I guess that when we moved in, there was one wall in the living room covered with all kinds of weapons. I don't know where my parents put them when they took them down, but I always figured

that that's where the weapons were coming from." Van said honestly.

"Do you want us to go to the basement to see if we can find them?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Let's wait for everyone to show up. I'm not sure what difference it would make, and there may be other things that need to be done first." Alana said consideringly.

"Good. I didn't want to go down there, anyway." Van said honestly.

Kerry smiled at the statement and gave Van another quick hug around the shoulders.

* * * * *

Van and Kerry ended up carrying the remaining equipment out to the van, leaving only the first aid kit and the things they might need to present their collected evidence to their guests.

A gray SUV pulled up in front of the van and came to a stop.

Two older women and a teenage boy got out and started looking around.

"Is Alana here?" One of the women asked cautiously as she approached.

"Yes. I'm Kerry Hinton and this young man is Van, he lives here. Alana's inside, we'll show you where." Kerry said pleasantly as he led the way.

"I'm Merryl Huntsman and this is my wife, Ashley. *This* young man is our son, Kyle." Merryl said with a smile at the boy.

"Hunter." The boy corrected firmly.

"Kyle's a perfectly good name, but he refuses to use it." Merryl said dramatically.

"My name's really Irfan, but I go by Van. The name Irfan just doesn't *feel* like who I am." Van explained.

"Yeah! That's it! That's how I feel, too!" Hunter said with a smile at Van.

Kerry led the way into the house as he smiled at the fact that Hunter and Van seemed to have already found some common ground.

* * * * *

"What have you got for us, Alana? From the way Derek was talking, it sounds like you've got a bad one, here." Merryl asked as she walked into the dining room.

"We do." Alana confirmed, then added, "And I'll understand if you want Ash and Hunter to leave before we begin. This one is nasty."

"You've got my attention. What are we looking at?" Merryl asked firmly.

"We're still waiting on Christoph and Father Francis. But I think we can give you a little hint of what we've been facing." Alana said, then rolled up her sleeve to reveal a deeply infected wound starting at her wrist and running halfway up the inside of her arm.

"Alana! Why didn't you tell me about that?" Kerry asked disbelievingly as he automatically picked up the first aid kit.

"It just happened a few minutes ago, while you were out at the van." Alana said frankly, then looked to Merryl and Ash and continued, "Whatever we're dealing with seems to expand its power by infecting its victims with these injuries. Mrs. Batton suggested that each injury is its own low level possession, sort of linking us to the... entity, feeding it our spiritual energy."

"Hold still." Kerry said as he worked to disinfect the deep gash on her arm.

"So, that's why you're calling on an exorcist?" Merryl speculated.

"Yes. Mrs. Batton also suggested that we shouldn't try to do this ourselves, that we should call in a professional." Alana confirmed as Kerry started wrapping her forearm with a bandage.

"Yes. Probably a very good idea. If you were being somehow influenced by the possession, the demon might be able to cause you to interrupt the exorcism at a crucial point." Merryl said seriously.

A loud **::whump::** sounded as a dagger appeared, sticking out of the wall, right beside Van.

"It's been doing that, a lot. And usually one of us has a fresh injury right after that happens." Derek explained.

Most of the members of their group started doing self-inspections to see if they'd received any new wounds.

"It's me." Kerry finally said as a bloody spot appeared on the upper arm of his shirt, near the shoulder.

"Let me help you." Van said as he hurried immediately to Kerry's side.

"Where do you want to start?" Merryl asked seriously.

"I think we should begin with Mr. Osmani, upstairs. His feet are so infected that he can't walk, anymore." Alana said decisively.

"Shouldn't we do one of us, first? Just so we can see how it works?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Yeah. If this thing puts up a fight, we don't want it to attack the weakest one of us. We need to know what to expect." Derek interjected as he watched Van helping Kerry to remove his shirt.

"That might be best." Merryl said consideringly.

"You can do me, if you want. Mine's fresh, so it shouldn't be too deeply rooted. And if it knocks me out or something, you guys can keep on going without me." Charity said bravely.

Ash stared at Kerry as his undershirt was raised. The patch of angry boils on his stomach were emitting a putrid odor and appeared to be ready to burst.

"Ash, Hunter, we need to get the supplies in from the car." Merryl said decisively.

Both Ashley and Hunter had to fight to look away from the fresh horror being revealed as Van pulled the tee shirt off over Kerry's head.

"This isn't too bad." Van said as he inspected the wound.

"We're almost out of antiseptic." Kerry warned Van as he picked up the tube from the first aid kit.

"Don't worry. Mom's got a truckload of that stuff, upstairs." Van assured him as he applied the ointment.

* * * * *

"Are we ready to begin?" Merryl asked as she looked around the dining room.

"Just tell me what I need to do." Charity said bravely.

"If this truly is a form of demonic possession, then I'll need to exorcise and inviolate each of the wounds in turn. Do you have any other incursions?" Merryl asked carefully.

"Um... No. I don't think so." Charity said uncertainly.

"We need to be sure." Merryl said firmly.

"I can help her with that." Alana said as she knelt at Charity's side.

* * * * *

"There. I think that's it." Van said as he taped the gauze bandage into place.

"Thank you, Van." Kerry said appreciatively.

"Let me help you put this back on." Van said as he picked up Kerry's tee shirt.

"Leave that off. It's been rubbing my stomach." Kerry said frankly.

Van set the tee shirt aside, then helped Kerry put on his button up shirt.

"I think we got everything." Hunter said as he led the way into the dining room, carrying an armload of boxes.

"I've just realized that some of what I might have to do may be embarrassing for Charity. When I begin, I'm going to ask all the men to leave the room." Merryl said firmly as she took the first box from Hunter and opened it.

"Where do you want us to go?" Hunter asked his mother cautiously.

"Do you want for us to go to the basement to see if we can find where the weapons are coming from?" Van cautiously suggested.

Alana thought for a moment, then carefully said, "Only if all of you go. And at the first sign of trouble, I want you to drop everything and come right back up here."

"Are you alright to go?" Van asked Kerry quietly.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Kerry assured him.

"Everybody, make sure that you've got your walkie-talkies." Alana said firmly.

"Except Van. We had enough of that, earlier." Kerry said with a gentle, teasing smile at him.

"It wasn't my idea! The radio just kept appearing in my hand." Van said in his defense.

"Call us if there's any problem." Derek said as he moved toward the door.

"Count on it." Alana assured him.

::Whoomp!::

"Ow!" Derek exclaimed as he grabbed his side.

"What happened?" Van asked as he grabbed Derek to steady him, since he looked like he was about to pass out.

"Mom?" Hunter asked in a trembling voice as he looked at the bush axe embedded in the floor, inches from his left foot.

"I think that means that it doesn't want you to go." Meryll said frankly, then looked her son in the eyes and added, "You're sixteen. You decide what you're going to do next. Whatever you decide, I'll support you."

"You know, sometimes it'd be great if you just *told* me what to do." Hunter said indignantly as he continued to stare at the weapon.

"Get out of here so that I can work." Meryll said with a smile at her son.

Kerry picked up the first aid kit, then walked with Van, Derek and Hunter, out of the room.

* * * * *

"Are you alright?" Kerry asked as he examined the infected tear on Derek's side.

"Honestly, I've been better." Derek said in a pained voice.

"Do you want us to go downstairs and start while you're doing that?" Van asked cautiously.

"Absolutely not." Kerry said without diverting his attention from his work for an instant.

Van smiled at the answer, then looked to Hunter and said, "You don't have to do this. You can leave, if you want to."

"The only way I'll leave is if you guys leave, too." Hunter said seriously.

"I probably would, but my mom and dad are both upstairs. They're really sick, and getting worse. This is the only thing that I can think of that might help them, so I've got to do it." Van said honestly.

"Then I'll help you to help them." Hunter said confidently.

"How's that?" Kerry asked as he stepped back.

"I'll be okay. It's not too deep." Derek said consideringly.

"We'd better get this over with, soon. The first aid kit is out of bandages, gauze pads, tape and antiseptic." Kerry said as he set the mostly empty first aid kit aside.

"My mom's got all that stuff, if you need it." Van assured him.

"So, are we all okay with going to the basement, now?" Kerry asked cautiously as he looked around.

"To be honest, I can think of a few things that I'd rather be doing." Derek said wearily, then continued, "But, since we're here..."

Kerry smiled at the words, then bravely took the first steps toward the basement doorway.

* * * * *

"If something happens that doors start disappearing or the rooms start rearranging themselves, just close your eyes and surround yourself with light. When you do that, you can see through the lies that this thing puts out." Van told Hunter as they walked down the stairs.

"You mean, it really did that? It moved the doors and switched around the rooms?" Hunter asked in amazement.

"Yeah. It was freaky. But now we know how to break out of it, if it does that." Van assured him.

"What's that smell?" Hunter asked as he covered his nose.

"Rotting. Disease. Death... something like that." Van said frankly.

"You'll get used to it." Derek added.

"I've seen a lot of freaky stuff, tagging along with my moms on exorcisms and stuff, but I don't think any of them were as bad as this." Hunter said frankly.

"Welcome to my life." Van said wearily as he turned left, toward where the majority of the discarded furnishings were stored.

* * * * *

"What are we looking for?" Hunter asked as everyone started digging through boxes.

"Weapons, like that thing that almost chopped your toe off." Van answered frankly.

"You think they're down here?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I mean, I guess we could ask my dad, but I really don't want to bother him and besides, I doubt that he'd remember where he put one box of things from seven or eight years ago." Van said honestly.

"Uh, oh. This isn't good." Derek said as he backed away from a box.

"What'd you find?" Kerry asked with concern.

"A body... I think." Derek said as he covered his mouth and nose.

"Ooh, that's ripe!" Kerry said with a wince at the smell.

"How come no one ever noticed that smell before?" Hunter asked as he backed away, fighting the urge to gag.

"It didn't start smelling... until I unwrapped... the altar cloth." Derek said between fits of choking.

"Wrap it back up!" Hunter said from several feet away.

"No. Wait. If this was a sacrifice or something, it might be what we need to end this." Kerry said in an urging tone.

"How do you figure that?" Derek asked as he took a step forward and tried to put the altar cloth back the way he had found it.

"From the research that I've done, there's been a constant theme. If there's something from another world that's intruding on this one, then there's a 'thing' that's making it possible. It can be like a gateway, a conduit or an anchor. If we can find out what that thing is and destroy it or bind it, then we might send whatever's in this house back to where it came from with no path for it to return." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"Well, we've got a demonologist on the way over here. If this... whatever... is what he needs to make this stop, then he's welcome to it. But, for me, I need to get out of here and get some fresh air or I'm going to throw up." Derek said seriously.

"I'm with you." Hunter said immediately.

"Yeah, let's go." Kerry said, then looked at Van to be sure that he was coming along.

* * * * *

"Do you think that was something really important, or another distraction?" Van asked as they stepped out the front door.

"I have no idea, but either way, we're going to need to go back down there and see if we can find anything else." Kerry said frankly.

"Why would your father put something like that in your basement?" Hunter asked Van curiously.

"He wouldn't. Either he never opened the altar cloth to see what was inside, or maybe that's something that wasn't there before. It could be that the ghost created the illusion of it, to mess with us, or he could have moved it there for us to find, so that we'd stop looking." Van said thoughtfully.

"Do you think a ghost would really do that?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"This one, yes. He's really good at distracting us. He's done all kinds of things to throw us off the track." Van said frankly.

"If that's the case, then why do you think that he's always using the weapons when he hurts us? Isn't that giving us clues about how to stop him?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Maybe he doesn't have a choice." Kerry said thoughtfully.

Derek looked at him with question.

"I'm not sure how it works, but the evidence suggests that for him to hurt one of us, he has to pop a weapon in at the same time. The injuries don't seem to be related to the weapons, but maybe the... apportionment, that Alana is talking about is required for him to infect us with his possession." Kerry said speculatively.

"Then what about the radio and the keys... and your audio recorder?" Van asked as he looked at Kerry uncertainly.

"I think that because you're already infected, that he's already here, with us, in a sense. So he can do little apportionments to mess with us. But to infect someone fresh, he can't go through you, he has to do a new apportionment that sort of draws a direct line from him to the person he's infecting." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"How do you know that?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I don't. I'm just trying to put together all the pieces that I've seen and find some scenario that makes sense of them." Kerry said frankly.

Derek took in a deep breath of the chilly winter air, then slowly asked, "Van, how sure are you that the weapons that we're looking for are in the basement?"

Van thought about it for a moment, then quietly admitted, "I'm not sure at all. When we moved in, Dad stored stuff in the basement, the attic and out in the garage. I guess it could be any of those places."

"What are you thinking, Derek?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Just that this all might still be part of the misdirection. It's showing us things that we're expecting to see so that we'll go on a wild goose chase." Derek said frankly.

"If I get a vote, I say we check the garage. It sounds like the least spooky place to start." Hunter interjected.

"I'll have to get the key from my dad. He keeps it locked." Van said quietly.

"I have no problem with that. Let's do it." Kerry said simply.

"Is everyone okay with that?" Derek asked as he looked around.

After receiving nods from the others, Derek led the way back into the house.

* * * * *

"Dad?" Van asked cautiously as he walked into his parents' bedroom.

"He's asleep. What did you need?" Dr. Osmani asked quietly.

"The key to the garage. We've figured out that what's happening might be from some of the stuff that was here when we moved in. You remember all those weapons on the walls, don't you?" Van asked carefully.

"Yes. I hadn't thought about that... why didn't I think about that?" Dr. Osmani asked confusedly.

"What's happening may be messing with your mind, making you not think about things that might help us." Van said frankly.

"Demonic oppression." Derek said suddenly.

"What's that?" Dr. Osmani asked curiously.

"What Van's saying, he could be right. When a demon gets a hold on you, he can influence your mind to notice or disregard things. That might be what happened." Derek said thoughtfully.

"What did you need, again?" Dr. Osmani asked distractedly.

"The key to the garage." Van said with concern at his mother's mental state.

Dr. Osmani walked to the dresser and picked up a ring of keys. As she handed them to her son, she quietly said, "I don't know which one it is."

"We'll figure it out." Van assured her then, on impulse, gave his mother a quick hug.

She gasped in pain as his arms went around her.

"Are you alright?" Van asked as he quickly backed away.

"No." Dr. Osmani said simply, then went back to her husband's bedside.

* * * * *

"Do we want to stop in and check on the girls before we do this?" Derek asked as they walked down the stairs.

"They haven't given the 'all clear', yet. I wouldn't want to interrupt." Kerry said frankly.

"Good point." Derek said simply, then turned to Van and asked, "Which way?"

"Let's go out the kitchen door." Van said as they approached the bottom of the stairs.

"Which way is that?" Derek asked as he stopped and looked around.

"Over... I don't know." Van said in puzzlement.

"Guys. What's wrong?" Hunter asked with concern.

"I can't remember where the kitchen is." Van said helplessly.

"We were just there a little while ago." Kerry said as he was obviously also struggling.

"It sounds like the demon is confusing you, like you were talking about before. How do you stop it?" Hunter asked anxiously.

"Draw in the light. Let it surround you and protect you. Let the lies fade in the light of truth." Kerry said distantly.

Hunter looked at the people gathered around him and could see their expressions ease as the confusion melted away.

"It's over here." Van finally said.

"Thanks, Kerry." Derek said gratefully.

"Let's just get this done." Kerry said tiredly as he followed.

"Thanks, Hunter." Van said in nearly a whisper.

"Yeah." Hunter responded with a smile at Van's acknowledgment as he followed the group through the kitchen.

Chapter 7: Chains and Garters

"Wow, Van. Your parents never throw ANYTHING away, do they?" Derek asked as they walked into the garage.

"No. Not really." Van admitted shyly.

"It could take us a month to go through all of this." Derek said as he looked at the boxes stacked nearly to the ceiling.

"There's more storage space up in the rafters, too." Van reluctantly admitted.

"Has your family EVER been able to park their car in here?" Derek asked curiously.

"No. Not that I can remember." Van said reluctantly.

"Where do we start?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"Van, do you happen to know which boxes were put in here first?" Kerry asked hopefully.

"No. My dad never lets me come in here." Van said quietly.

"We should probably start with what's upstairs, then check the boxes that are farthest back and most hidden. What's toward the front is probably the newest." Derek said decisively.

"Where's the ladder?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Back there, I think. I haven't been in here since I was little." Van said as he pointed.

* * * * *

The lighting in the garage was somewhat dim to begin with. But the stacks of boxes served to block the light and make the small pathways between the boxes virtually impossible to navigate.

Kerry and Derek both took out their flashlights and started meandering through the boxes to find their way to the back.

"Do you think that this is another illusion, or is it really this much of a maze?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I think it's just this bad." Kerry answered honestly.

"There it is." Van said as he pointed.

From their vantage point, they could just barely see the ladder between two stacks of boxes.

"How do we want to do this? Do we want to split up?" Kerry asked as they fought to work their way toward their destination.

"Absolutely not." Van said firmly.

"Right." Kerry agreed, then added, "Good thinking."

* * * * *

Once they arrived at the ladder, Kerry was the first to work up the courage to begin the climb upward.

When he reached the top of the ladder, Van started up next, handing the flashlight to Kerry as soon as he was within reach.

Derek and Hunter followed in short order.

Kerry turned the flashlight beam to survey his surroundings and was happy to find a light hanging from the rafters. When he reached it, he was able to find the pull string to turn it on.

"Where do we want to start?" Derek asked cautiously.

"At the beginning, which I suppose would be the farthest point from the ladder." Kerry said frankly.

"Why am I doing this?" Derek asked himself rhetorically.

"Because, if you don't, the demon that's already marked you will probably completely consume you." Kerry said seriously.

"Oh, yeah. That's why." Derek said, then started crawling down the walkway to begin his search.

* * * * *

"Derek. What's your location?" Alana's voice called over the radio.

"We're in the garage, looking for the weapons stash." Derek answered immediately.

"We've finished with Charity. She's doing fine. We're moving up to Mr. and Dr. Osmani's room to start on them." Alana said seriously.

"We haven't found anything out here, so we'll probably be going back inside in a few minutes." Derek said frankly.

After a moment, Derek keyed the walkie-talkie again and cautiously asked, "Charity, are you there?"

"Yes. And I'm fine." Charity responded.

"If you guys get lost, remember to surround yourselves with light and let it melt away the lies." Derek said carefully.

"What are you talking about?" Charity asked slowly.

"I'm talking about demonic confusion. Remember what we did before. If you get lost, it helps." Derek said firmly.

"Got it." Charity said seriously, then added a moment later, "Thanks."

"I don't think there's anything here. I'm not finding anything that looks like it came from inside the house." Kerry said seriously.

"Yeah. If I were to guess, I would say that all of this is stuff that they brought with them when they moved in." Derek said honestly.

"Does that mean that we can get out of here, now? My fingers are frozen." Hunter asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Let's go inside and warm up, then we can decide if we want to try the basement again, or the attic." Derek said decisively.

* * * * *

As they slowly climbed down the ladder, Kerry quietly asked, "Did you notice that we haven't had any distractions? Nothing's been trying to divert our attention."

"Yeah. I was thinking the same thing. If we were on to something, then the demon would probably be messing with us." Derek said honestly.

As the group walked out the side door of the garage, they noticed a car parked in front of the Osmani house with someone sitting inside.

"That's Christoph." Derek said suddenly, then led the way toward the curb.

* * * * *

"I was just trying to call Alana, but she isn't answering." Christoph said as he got out of his car.

"Yeah. Her phone got slagged by a demon, earlier tonight." Derek said frankly.

"It sounds rather aggressive."

"Christoph, I think you've met Hunter before, I'd like for you to meet Kerry Hinton, he works part-time with our team and Van, this is his house. I'm working on trying to recruit him, but this demon might end up scaring him off."

"What can you tell me about what we'll be facing?" Christoph asked seriously as they started walking toward the house.

"It seems to spread its influence by infecting and injuring the members of the household. Mrs. Batton said that it was a form of low-level possession, which also keeps them from healing." Derek said seriously.

"It sounds like a root." Christoph said slowly.

"Mrs. Batton also believes that it's old and that it was summoned." Kerry added, hoping that the information would be helpful.

"What manifestations have you experienced?" Christoph asked cautiously as they walked into the house.

"Psychic oppression. Apportation of small objects. Apportation of weapons when it infects someone. There was a group delusion that included four of us. Demonic confusion. Kerry and Van witnessed an apparition." Derek said thoughtfully as he led the way into the dining room.

"Where is Alana?" Christoph asked as he looked around.

"The last I heard, she was upstairs with Merryl, trying to exorcise the demonic possessions from Mr. Osmani's wounds." Derek said seriously.

"Is there anything else I should know before I begin?" Christoph asked quietly.

"The four of us have been trying to track down a cache of weapons that were on display in the house when the Osmani family moved in. We've been distracted and diverted a few times already, but we were just about ready to get back to it." Derek said carefully.

"You said that the demon apport a weapon when it inflicts its demonic infection on a person, correct?" Christoph asked slowly.

"Yes. Here's one, still stuck in the wall." Derek said frankly.

"Then, very likely, you are on the right track, trying to discover the cache of weapons. It's very likely that one of those weapons was used to form the conduit, and in so doing, the demon has been forced to utilize the properties of that conduit to channel his power." Christoph said thoughtfully.

"Then we'd probably better get back to looking." Derek said frankly.

"If you will tell me where Alana is, I'll speak with her for a moment before I begin." Christoph said solemnly.

"I'll show you." Van said immediately.

"Thank you, young man." Christoph said with a smile.

"Hunter, will you go with them. I don't want anyone traipsing around this house alone." Kerry asked hopefully.

"Sure." Hunter quickly agreed, then followed Christoph and Van out the door.

"Attic or basement?" Derek asked Kerry quietly.

"I can think of a thousand things that I would rather do than return to that basement, but I really think that's where the answer is." Kerry said honestly.

"I was afraid you were going to say that." Derek said with dread.

* * * * *

"You waited for us!" Van said with surprise as he and Hunter walked down the stairs.

"We're a team." Kerry said simply.

Van smiled at the answer as he walked to Kerry's side.

"Is everyone ready for this?" Derek asked hesitantly.

"No." Hunter said honestly, then added, "But I'll still do it."

"Your mothers have taught you well." Derek said with a smile as he led the way to the basement stairs.

* * * * *

"It's gone." Derek said cautiously.

"What's that?" Kerry asked curiously.

"The alter cloth. I left it right there and there's no sign of it." Derek said cautiously as he looked around.

"The smell is definitely gone. I can't say that I'm sorry about that." Kerry said frankly.

"You don't think that anyone came down while we were out in the garage, do you?" Derek asked as he finally gave up and stopped looking.

"I very seriously doubt it. I think that it's more likely that the demon either moved it someplace else, or it never existed in the first place." Kerry said honestly.

"I'm sick of this. Let's just find the weapons." Derek growled in frustration.

* * * * *

"Oh, gross! Man, your parents really need to get rid of this stuff." Hunter said disgustedly.

"What did you find?" Van asked with concern.

"Nineteen seventies decorating stuff. There's a blown glass bedpan looking thing, some avocado green ceramic tiles with fish handpainted on them... who needs a demon when you've got stuff like this in your house?" Hunter said as he continued to search through boxes.

"When everything's all better around here, maybe I'll talk to them about getting rid of this stuff." Van said with a smile.

"What school do you go to? I haven't seen you around." Hunter thought to ask, since he had Van's attention.

"The Christian Academy." Van said simply.

"Oh, that's why. My moms wouldn't want me going someplace like that." Hunter said honestly.

"Why's that?" Van asked curiously.

"They're Wiccans, so they don't have anything to do with the guy on the stick." Hunter said frankly.

"You said that *they're* Wiccans. What about you?" Van asked curiously.

"I don't know, yet. My moms say that there's no rush for me to decide things and to take my time. But from all that I've seen when I help them out... I don't know. I believe in *something*, I'm just not sure what, yet." Hunter said thoughtfully.

"I don't know, either. Let me know when you figure it out." Van said with a smile.

"Yeah." Hunter said with a grin.

* * * * *

"Is anyone on the main floor?" Alana asked over the walkie-talkie.

"No. We're all in the basement. Did you need something?" Derek asked cautiously.

"There's a knock at the door. I was just wondering if anyone was close to it." Alana said simply.

"Do you want us to get it?" Derek asked cautiously.

"No. Charity and I are on our way." Alana answered easily.

"How is Mr. Osmani doing?" Derek asked carefully.

"It's too early to tell. It's not going as easily as it did with Charity, but that stands to reason. His should be the most difficult." Alana said seriously, then quickly added, *"Father Francis is here. Call if you need anything."*

"We will." Derek said before putting the walkie-talkie back on his belt.

* * * * *

"I think I've got something. Can you help me, here?" Kerry called out.

"I will if I can find you. Where are you?" Derek asked cautiously.

"I'm behind these stacked sofas. I just found a large steamer chest. This *could* be it." Kerry said frankly.

"Boys! Come over here and help me! Kerry might have found it." Derek called as he tried to work his way around the end of the sofas.

* * * * *

"Where are you?" Van asked as he stopped where he thought Derek's voice had come from.

"Back here." Derek answered.

Hunter walked to Van's side and looked around curiously.

Finally, Van reluctantly said, "I can't see you."

"I can't see you either. But maybe, if you guys can move these sofas out of the way, we'll be able to dig down to this chest that Kerry found." Derek said seriously.

"I think it's a trick." Hunter said simply.

"Yeah. It's probably a trap." Van agreed.

Derek stretched around the edge of the stacked sofas and asked, "Are you guys going to help or not?"

"Do you think the demon is using his corpse as a hand puppet to lure us in?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"Could be." Van said slowly.

Derek rolled his eyes, then started climbing.

"I guess we should help him." Hunter finally relented.

"Yeah." Van agreed. They worked their way across stacks of boxes and furnishings to help Derek, who was struggling to find his footing.

* * * * *

Once the couches had been relocated a few feet further away, the group began to work to move the strange configuration of stacked boxes out of their way so that there wouldn't be an avalanche.

"How did you find this one all the way down here under everything else?" Van asked cautiously.

"I was looking for boxes big enough to hold the size of weapons that we've been seeing." Kerry said simply.

Van and Hunter looked at each other with surprise at the statement.

"What's wrong?" Kerry asked curiously.

"You might have said something about the *size* of the box that we were looking for, before now." Van said slowly.

"I just thought that you'd figure it out like I did." Kerry said simply.

"He has way too much faith in us." Hunter told Van frankly.

Van nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

When they finally cleared away the last of the other boxes, Kerry looked to Derek and quietly asked, "Should we open it?"

"Yeah." Derek said reluctantly, then turned to Van and Hunter before continuing, "You guys should probably stand back. We don't know what this thing's going to do."

"This thing got my dad in his bed at the hotel. I don't think it matters how close we are." Van said frankly.

"Why do you think it's not trying to distract us or mislead us?" Kerry asked Derek cautiously.

"Either we've got the wrong box, or maybe it's got all its attention focused on what's happening upstairs." Derek said honestly.

"Do you want *me* to open it?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"No. I've got it." Kerry said quietly, then reluctantly reached down and began to open the lid.

"Oh geeze!" Hunter said as he stepped back.

"Yeah. *That's* the smell." Van said as he fought not to back away.

Once the lid was fully open, everyone stepped forward to see what was inside.

Stacks upon stacks of weapons were piled in a heap inside the giant wooden chest.

"Did your dad put these in here?" Hunter asked curiously.

"Yeah. I guess so." Van confirmed.

"This is no way to treat weapons. Some of these things are *ancient!*" Hunter said seriously.

"I guess he thought that they were just junk." Van said frankly.

"Well, if he doesn't want them, give me a few days on ebay and I bet that I'll be able to make a bundle off of them. There's a few of my moms' witchy friends who'd jump at the chance to own some real antique weapons." Hunter said seriously.

"Except for whichever one of these is the conduit that the demon's using to access this plane of existence. You don't want to be selling *that* on ebay." Derek said frankly.

"We'll just be sure to include a disclaimer." Hunter said simply.

At the combined looks from the others, Hunter said, "Fine! We won't sell the demon possessed weapon. But I'm serious about the rest. We could make some serious money."

"You can talk to Van's parents about that, once we've got everything else settled." Kerry said assuringly.

"So, how can we tell which one of these is the *bad* one?" Van asked curiously.

"I have no idea." Kerry said honestly, then looked at Derek with question.

"We might be able to pick up something with a K2, but since all of these are metal, they've probably all got a pretty good dose by this point." Derek said honestly.

"Maybe we should get Christoph down here. He might know some kind of a trick." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. That's probably best. None of us have done a full blessing or protection, so we aren't prepared to be handling something like this." Derek said decisively.

"I am." Hunter said seriously.

When they all looked at him, he explained, "My moms always make sure that we're all blessed and protected before we go into any job. I drank so much holy water before we got here that my piss is holy."

"Good to know." Derek said weakly, then continued, "Let's go get Christoph."

"If he's with Alana, we can call him." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"We'll go get him. He'd never be able to find us behind this wall of junk, anyway." Hunter said frankly.

"Be careful." Kerry said with an anxious look at Van.

"You, too." Van said with a smile, warmed to the depths of his soul at Kerry's concern for him.

* * * * *

As Van and Hunter approached the bedroom, they could hear voices talking.

Hunter held his hand up and listened for a moment, then whispered, "They're only about halfway done."

Van nodded that he had heard.

Hunter carefully stepped through the doorway. When he spotted Christoph standing with the others, surrounding the bed, he made a motion to catch his attention, then gestured for him to follow.

"Is there a problem?" Christoph asked in a whisper, so as not to disturb the ritual.

"We might have found something. Do you have time to look at it?" Hunter asked hopefully as he guided Christoph into the hall.

"I don't often get the chance to witness a pagan exorcism, but I suppose that if you've found something, that I should have a look." Christoph said cautiously.

"Everyone in this house is probably going to need to get exorcised, so you should have plenty of chances." Van said seriously.

"Very well. Then would you like to show me what you've found?" Christoph asked calmly.

"Yeah. It's in the basement." Hunter said as he led the way.

* * * * *

"How are things down here?" Van asked as he approached the wall of furniture.

"Be careful. Stay back. I think it's noticed us." Kerry warned.

"What happened?" Van asked with concern as he started forging a path around the barrier.

"More of the same." Derek said weakly.

When Van saw him, he gasped at the gaping infected wound on Derek's neck.

"You might want to stay back." Kerry warned him.

Van did a quick visual inspection of Kerry and realized that he was keeping one of his hands hidden behind his back.

"What happened? Are you hurt really bad?" Van asked as he hurried to Kerry's side.

"No worse than anyone else." Kerry demurred.

"Let me see." Van said firmly.

When Kerry finally took his hand from behind his back, he revealed that it was nearly unrecognizable, grotesquely deformed with putrid, festering boils.

"Where is it?" Christoph asked as he climbed around the furniture.

"That box." Van said as he absently gestured in that direction.

"We wanted to know if you can figure out which one is the one that we're looking for." Hunter explained.

"What am I looking at?" Christoph asked as he approached the large steamer trunk.

"Like I told you before, we sort of figured out that since the demon apports weapons whenever it infects someone, that it's probably using a weapon as a portal or a conduit. Van said that there were a bunch of weapons down here in the basement somewhere. This *could* be what we're looking for." Derek said as he tried to stem the flow of blood and infectious fluids leaking from his neck.

"That's if this thing is really a demon at all. It's been using all kinds of tricks to throw us off the track." Kerry said seriously, then added, "We could still be totally wrong."

"No. It's a demon. I recognize the smell." Christoph said slowly.

"What do we need to do? How can we stop it before it attacks someone else?" Kerry asked desperately.

"We're going to need to get these weapons out of the chest. Once we've determined which one it is, then I can bind it, rendering it harmless." Christoph said seriously.

"Do you want us to start taking them out?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"No. Just see if you can clear some space for me, so that we'll have a place to lay them out." Christoph said as he kept his gaze focused on the collection of weapons.

"Help me." Van said as he climbed over some boxes to one end of the couches.

"Yeah." Hunter agreed, then moved to the other end.

Kerry and Derek did their best to move as many of the smaller things as they could, but they were both weak and in pain from their injuries.

"Stop." Christoph commanded.

Everyone froze in place.

"I can feel the power building. It's about to take some type of action. We need to stop it before it can react." Christoph said thoughtfully.

"What can we do?" Van asked helplessly.

"Pray. Call upon whatever deity you believe in and entreat it to protect you and those in this household. Ask it to bind the demon and prevent it from causing further harm." Christoph said firmly.

"I don't know what I believe in!" Hunter yelled in panic.

"It doesn't matter! Just pick one!" Christoph snapped in response.

"Great Mother, hear my prayer..." Hunter said reverently.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name..." Kerry began to recite.

Finally, Van bowed his head and quietly began to say, "O Blessed One, Shakyamuni Buddha, precious treasury of compassion, bestower of supreme inner peace..."

Derek looked around the group, then quietly began to say, "We thank Thee, O Thou Great Eloheim, that Thou didst raise up Thy servant..."

"Hear our prayers. Bind this demon. Prevent him from causing further harm." Christoph said firmly as the sounds of muttered prayers rang up from all around him.

* * * * *

There were long minutes as the others in the basement continued to pray, but finally, Christoph wilted with relief and quietly said, "The immediate threat has passed. You can stop."

Everyone fell silent then, as one, they looked at Christoph with question.

"The demon fought against our combined blessings and seems to have exhausted himself. We need to act quickly before he has time to attack again." Christoph said decisively.

"Watch out, this thing is sneaky. I wouldn't put it past him to be 'playing dead' so you'll let your guard down." Derek said frankly.

"I won't be letting my guard down. But *now* is the time to act." Christoph said firmly.

"Let's finish clearing this out." Hunter said urgently.

"What do you need us to do?" Kerry asked quickly.

"Just take each weapon as I hand it to you and set it aside. It's possible that it will be able to mask itself from me, so lay them out where I can see them individually, don't stack them. That way I'll be able to look back over them when I'm finished." Christoph said seriously as he took hold of an axe that was near the top of the stack.

Van and Hunter worked and strained to not only get the furniture out of their way, but also to provide a decent walking path out of the area.

"Kerry, are you at a point where you can break away? We've just finished with Mr. and Dr. Osmani, and I'd like to do you next." Alana asked over the radio.

After a moment to get the radio off his belt, Kerry quickly said, "Do Van first. He's been here the longest."

"Agreed. Send him up. We'll meet him in his room." Alana responded.

Van looked at Kerry apprehensively at the announcement.

"Hunter, will you take over here for me?" Kerry asked hopefully.

The smile of relief on Van's face told Hunter all that he needed to know.

"Yeah. I got this. Go on." Hunter assured Kerry as he stepped forward to take his place.

* * * * *

"When they're done with me, we'll get them to do you." Van said firmly.

"It's not bad. I can stand to wait for a while." Kerry assured him.

"Well, I can't stand it!" Van said seriously.

Kerry glanced at the teenager at his side, then threw an arm around his shoulders as he said, "Okay, Van. I'll do it."

* * * * *

When they walked into Van's bedroom, Father Francis smiled and said, "It's so good to see you again, Mr. Hinton."

"It's nice to see you, too, Father." Kerry responded warmly, then said, "And I'd like to introduce Van, Mr. and Dr. Osmani's son."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, young man." Father Francis said sincerely.

"Yeah. It's nice to meet you, too." Van said shyly.

"We're going to need access to all of your injuries. So if you could please remove any clothing that is covering them, we'll be able to proceed." Merryl said seriously.

"Oh, um... yeah. I'm going to need to put on some shorts or something." Van said nervously.

"When you do, make sure to check that there aren't any injuries that you weren't aware of. We need to get them all." Merryl warned.

"Don't worry. I'll help you." Kerry assured him, then said, "Grab what you need and let's get this over with."

* * * * *

Once they were alone in the bathroom, Van nervously said, "This is weird."

"You'll get no argument from me." Kerry said with a smile, then continued, "Just remember that I've got a son. This is one of those things that parents sometimes have to do."

"Check your kid for demon bites?" Van asked incredulously.

Kerry laughed, then said, "You help your children, sometimes in situations that might be uncomfortable or embarrassing."

Van nodded, then slowly started to undress himself.

Kerry remained silent, but took note of each of the injuries that Van had sustained.

After completely disrobing, Van picked up the shorts and was about to pull them on when Kerry quietly said, "Before you do that, would you

raise your arms and turn around. I want to be sure that there aren't any injuries hiding from us."

Although Van wanted to protest, he held himself back and did as Kerry had asked. It occurred to him in that moment that there was no one else, including his own father, that he would rather have helping him.

"Good. Go ahead." Kerry said quietly.

Van quickly pulled on the shorts, then looked at the rest of his clothes uncertainly.

"You'll be able to put more things on when they're done. Let's just go ahead and get this over with." Kerry said seriously.

* * * * *

When Kerry and Van walked back into Van's bedroom, Merryl instructed Van to lie down on the bed and relax.

The incredulous look on Van's face when she said 'relax' brought a smile to Kerry's lips.

The long and involved ceremony that followed seemed to be mostly gibberish to Kerry's ears.

When Merryl applied the blessed water to each of the wounds, Van reacted with a little gasp or he would wriggle. But at no point during the ceremony did he exhibit any signs of discomfort except for those of embarrassment.

When the ceremony was finally finished, Van announced that it was Kerry's turn next.

"I'll borrow something of my dad's so that you can change." Van said as he pulled on a tee shirt.

Kerry wanted to protest, but in the light of what had already happened, he felt that he didn't have the right.

* * * * *

Once Van had secured a pair of shorts from his father's room, he returned to find Kerry looking apprehensive.

"Just remember that I've got a father..." Van said, trying to hide his smile, "...kids sometimes have to do things like this."

"Check their fathers for demon bites?" Kerry said with a smile as he played along.

"No. But sometimes you have to help them with something embarrassing." Van said with an impish grin, then added, "Of course, that's usually right before you ship them off to the old folks home."

Kerry laughed as he stepped out of his underpants.

"Okay. Turn around." Van said in a mock impatient tone.

Kerry turned and the expression of amusement fell away from Van's face.

"Go ahead and get your shorts on. That looks bad." Van said with concern.

"Yeah." Kerry said soberly, then did as he was told.

* * * * *

The exorcism and blessing ended up being much the same as Van's had been, although a little more extensive, due to his greater number of injuries.

"Do you want us to send Derek up, next?" Kerry asked as he got off the bed.

"Yes. I think that would be a good idea." Alana said thoughtfully.

"Please send Hunter up, too. Although he probably hasn't been infected, I'd rather be on the safe side." Ashley said seriously.

MerryI nodded her agreement to the request.

"Alright. I'm just going to stop by the bathroom to get dressed, then we'll send him right up." Kerry said seriously.

"Hang on. Let me grab a few things. I'm going to need to put on some more clothes before I go down to the basement." Van said seriously.

Kerry waited in the doorway as Van gathered what he would need, then they both walked across the hall to the bathroom.

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Derek asked when Kerry and Van approached.

"We've been exorcised and blessed. They're ready for you, next." Kerry said frankly.

Derek nodded his acceptance.

"You, too, Hunter." Van added.

"There's nothing wrong with me." Hunter objected.

"Your moms just want to be safe." Van told him simply.

"You think it's bad having an overprotective mother? Try having two of them..." Hunter muttered as he walked away, at Derek's side.

"How's it going down here?" Kerry asked Christoph curiously.

"I was afraid of this. It's hiding itself. I think it's one of these." Christoph said as he pointed to a selection of less than a dozen knives and swords before him.

"That one." Van said as he pointed.

"Why do you think that?" Christoph asked curiously.

"Just look at it. That thing's oozing *bad*." Van said frankly.

"I suppose that there's one way to find out." Christoph said as he carefully picked up the crude dagger and placed it on a white satin cloth.

"Is this something dangerous? Should we get back?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"No." Christoph said simply, then took a vial out of his pocket.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I command you to leave this realm, never to return. All invitations and entreaties that have been made, I now declare with holy authority, have been rescinded. What was opened is now closed." Christoph said firmly, then sprinkled a few drops from the vial onto the blade of the dagger.

After setting the vial aside, he then carefully folded the cloth around the dagger.

As he began to tie the bundle closed with string, he continued, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I bind thee."

"Do you feel that?" Kerry asked as he looked around curiously.

"What?" Van asked cautiously.

"I don't know. It just feels... different." Kerry said uncertainly.

"Do you need for us to stay down here for anything?" Van asked Christoph cautiously.

"Not unless this wasn't the right one." Christoph said frankly.

"It was. I'm sure of it." Van said with certainty.

"Then let's go upstairs and see how everyone else is doing. If this really worked, then they should also be able to feel the difference." Christoph said as he picked up the wrapped dagger and carried it with him.

"Do you want to leave that down here?" Van asked cautiously.

"This thing isn't leaving my hands until I have it safely neutralized and under lock and key." Christoph said as he began to walk.

"Do you mean that it's not safe?" Van asked curiously.

"I have it bound, but all you'd have to do is untie or cut this string to release it. This is a temporary measure to sever the link between the demon and its fragments that it's spawned in your family." Christoph said frankly.

"Are you going to destroy it?" Van asked cautiously.

"No. That can cause a whole other set of problems. When I get it back to my office, I'm going to do a more permanent binding ceremony on it, then I'm going to lock it away where it can never be used again."

"Good." Van said seriously, then thought to ask, "What about the evil midget?"

"What was that?" Christoph asked curiously.

"Van and I spotted a small black... something, in his closet. When we shined a light on it, it moved away." Kerry explained.

"Did it have substance?" Christoph asked carefully.

"What do you mean by that?" Van asked cautiously.

"Did you ever see it pick up anything or move anything? Was it able to interact with anything on our plane of existence?" Christoph asked seriously.

"No." Kerry said firmly, then reminded Van, "You remember when it ducked behind the couch? It couldn't have fit back there. It was like a shadow, except that it didn't disappear when you shined a light on it."

"Good. That's the perfect description of a shadow demon." Christoph said with relief. "I think what you had was something being manifested and controlled from the other side. If we hadn't been able to shut down the conduit, then it would have eventually been able to gain a physical form, here. But since it never manifested as more than a shadow, closing the conduit would cause it to dissipate. Keep an eye open for it, just in case, but chances are that it won't be back."

"Good." Van said with a relieved smile.

"Let's go see how everyone's doing." Kerry said with a glance at the teenager at his side.

* * * * *

"How are things going up here?" Kerry asked as he led the way into Van's bedroom.

"Extremely well. Can I assume that you were able to locate the conduit and bind it?" Alana asked curiously.

Christoph held up the cloth covered bundle.

"Even though I wasn't aware of it, I think that I was experiencing a form of demonic oppression. When you did the binding, all of a sudden, it's like I felt my energy and vitality returning. The bond that was sapping me was broken." Alana quietly explained.

"Yeah. I guess I didn't think about it, but I felt that way when the exorcism was finished." Kerry said thoughtfully, then looked at Van with question.

"Yeah." Van said simply.

"So, is that it? Is everything resolved?" Kerry asked Alana curiously.

"No." Christoph answered for her.

"What still needs to be done?" Alana asked cautiously.

"I suspect that this demon is what is known as a 'root'. It slowly infects its victims and saps their strength. But, when the link to the demon is severed, the spawned pieces don't die away, they continue to grow. Until every last bit of the 'root' has been eradicated, this matter won't be completely resolved." Christoph said firmly.

"Oh. I thought because I stopped feeling it sapping my strength that it was over." Alana said thoughtfully.

"No. Every last trace has to be exorcised or it will grow within you, sometimes for years, and it will eventually seek to either infect others or reconnect to the mother root." Christoph said grimly.

"So, what do we do next?" Alana asked cautiously.

"First, we make sure that everyone that's been infected has completed the exorcism ritual. After that, we need to check back to be sure that some trace doesn't re emerge." Christoph said seriously.

"It looks like we're going to have to stay in touch." Kerry said to Van with a smile.

"Yeah." Van said with a grin.

* * * * *

"How are things with the family?" Derek asked Kerry curiously, as he drove.

"Fine. They're having a Harry Potter marathon at my house." Kerry said with a warm smile.

"What about Malika? Did she have any reaction when Christoph sealed the conduit?" Alana asked curiously.

"Actually, from the sound of it, Toni and Lorra figured out what kind of demon we were dealing with a long time before we did. They had already done a basic exorcism and blessing long before we ever thought of it." Kerry said proudly.

"So Malika's alright?" Alana asked cautiously.

"She's as happy as she can be." Kerry assured her.

"Still, we should probably keep an eye on her, just to make sure what they did continues to be effective." Alana said thoughtfully.

"Between Van and Toni, I'm sure that I'll hear about it if Malika's having any problems." Kerry said confidently.

"Kerry, here's your car. If you want to hop out, Derek and I have another stop to make. Thanks for everything you did tonight." Alana said sincerely.

"Yeah. You were amazing." Derek said honestly.

"Next Friday?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We'll see you then." Alana said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Do you think you're up to having a few visitors?"

"Alana! How did everything go? Is the Osmani family alright?" Jack asked hopefully.

"Everything worked out, they're all fine." Alana assured him.

"So, was it a demon?" Kyla asked curiously.

"Actually, it was a demon summoned through a conduit manifesting itself in this world by way of the diabolic infections that it causes." Alana said frankly.

"Manifesting itself... you mean, like possession?" Jack asked hesitantly.

"Yes. Exactly. However, a standard exorcism can get rid of it. I assume that Kyla can do that for you, but if you'd rather have a professional, I'm sure you know who to call." Alana finished with a smile.

"How much time do we have? I mean, if I'm possessed..." Jack trailed off as he looked at Kyla anxiously.

"I called in Christoph and he closed the conduit. That means that you don't have any outside demonic influence fueling its growth, now. You can take the time to do this right." Alana assured him, then thought to ask, "What did the doctor say?"

"Once she got the maggots out from under my skin and got her nurse to stop puking, she said that she wanted to keep me overnight for evaluation." Jack said frankly.

"Well, enjoy the rest. With the demon sealed away, you should be able to heal up in no time." Alana said happily.

The End

Fallwell Paranormal Research

Book 3: Case# 20160127A The Winchell Hotel

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Chapter 1: The Gathering

"Windermere Paranormal Research."

"Charity?"

"Yes. Alana?"

"How are you doing? What's it like heading your own paranormal team?"

"To be honest, it's not as much fun as it looks from the lower echelons."

"I'd love to chat with you for a while about that, but I've got a really big case and I was wondering if you'd like to help me out."

"Sure. Things have been slow around here. What do you need for me to do?"

"We've been asked to investigate the Winchell Hotel, outside of Ballard, Vermont. From what little they've told me, the paranormal activity isn't so bad that there should be much danger. But the location is so large, that I feel that I'm going to need as many investigators as I can gather."

"You're going to travel all the way to Vermont for a job?"

"Yes. They've offered to pay for our travel expenses and they've also offered all of us accommodations at their hotel for the duration

of the investigation. It seems that the paranormal activity is costing them customers, so they have plenty of room."

"So, it's not too dangerous, they're paying our expenses AND we get to stay in a grand hotel in Vermont? I'll have to talk to Max about it, but I'm pretty sure that he'll be able to get away."

"Good. It will be nice to have some time to catch up on things."

"Yeah. Go ahead and count us in and let us know where and when you need us."

"I'll get back with you as soon as I've talked to everyone else, so I can give you the details."

"Thanks for thinking of us, Alana."

"I think about you every day. I'll be calling back soon."

* * * * *

"Hello?"

"Toni?"

"Oh! Hi, Alana. Did you need to talk to my dad?"

"Yes. But be sure to stay close. This might end up involving you... is Lorra there?"

"Yeah! Lorra and Malika are both here! Do you have a job for us?!"

"Let me talk to your dad."

* * * * *

"I'm guessing from the excited chattering girls surrounding me that you might have a case for us." Kerry chuckled.

"There's a case, but I don't know if it's going to be practical for you, with your job."

"Since I transferred in, I didn't lose my vacation time, so I can take a few days off, if I need to." Kerry said frankly.

"I'd hate for you to give up your vacation time to work for me."

"I can think of four girls, right off the top of my head, who would look upon this as the PERFECT vacation."

"Let me just lay it out for you, and you can make your own decision." Alana said in prelude, then continued, "I've been contacted by the owner of a grand hotel in Vermont that dates back to the early 1800's. They've been having a little ghost problem and, from the sound of it, they stumbled across a paper that I wrote a few years ago and wanted to know if I'd like to do a serious investigation. They're willing to pay for our travel expenses and provide room and board, while we're there. The hotel is enormous, so I thought that I'd try to get as many investigators as possible, to cover the most ground."

"Would it cause a problem if I brought a few 'non-investigators' along?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Are you thinking of bringing Teresa and Zoe?" Alana asked curiously.

"I have a feeling that Zoe might be tagging along with the older girls. I was actually thinking of Teresa and Mike. He's been having some trouble at college and decided to take a semester off." Kerry said gravely.

"That explains your mood at our last few meetings." Alana said knowingly.

"Yeah. Things have been a little bit tense around here." Kerry reluctantly admitted.

"Bring him along. Who knows? Maybe he'll get interested and join in." Alana said casually.

"I wouldn't count on it. He's been depressed and withdrawn since he arrived. But... go ahead and count us in. Even if there are a few hoops to jump through, I'm pretty sure that we'll end up going."

"Let me know if you run into any obstacles." Alana said with a smile.

"Are you going to call Qaiser and Zuny, or would you like me to?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"This is going to involve the kids missing a few days of school, so I think it's best that I talk to them. And that way I'll be able to answer any questions that they might have."

"Yeah. That's probably best. But if anyone asks, be sure to tell them that I requested that Van be allowed to go with us. He's still a little insecure and I wouldn't want for him to feel like he's only being included out of a sense of obligation."

"I'll be sure to let it be known that he's essential to our plans."

"Thank you, Alana. I hope that Qaiser and Zuny will be willing to go along with it." Kerry said seriously.

"They will or they won't. We have no real say in the matter. We'll go ahead and make our plans once they've made their decision." Alana said thoughtfully.

"Will you call me back when you know?" Kerry asked hopefully, then explained, *"I'm not going to talk to the girls about it until we know what we can do."*

"I know that all the girls are going to be hounding you until you tell them what we've talked about, so I'll be sure to call you back as soon as I have an answer." Alana chuckled.

"Thank you." Kerry said gratefully, then whispered, *"Hurry."*

* * * * *

"Good afternoon. Osmani residence."

"Qaiser? It's Alana. Do you have a minute to talk?" Alana asked hopefully.

"I have more minutes than I know what to do with, to be honest. It will be a great relief when I am recovered to the point that I can walk, again." Qaiser said honestly.

"So, is it for certain? You *are* going to completely recover?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Yes. Zuny has been applying every treatment with the greatest of care, and I have no doubt that it is due to her diligence and determination that one day soon I am going to walk again." Qaiser said sincerely.

"That's wonderful, Qaiser." Alana said happily, then hurried to continue, "The reason I'm calling is to ask if it would be possible to borrow your children for a few days."

"Would this have to do with your paranormal research?" Qaiser asked cautiously.

"Yes, but from all accounts, it's not anything dangerous. The reason that I'm asking is that we're going to be investigating a hotel in Vermont. The location is so big that I'm going to need as many people as I can gather to investigate it. So I thought that your children might enjoy going on a little trip." Alana said honestly.

"When would this be?" Qaiser asked cautiously, having the feeling that Alana was leading up to something.

"This weekend." Alana said quickly, then cautiously added, "Well, we'd leave here Thursday and investigate Friday, Saturday and Sunday."

"Does this mean that Irfan and Malika will be missing school on Friday and Monday?" Qaiser asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'm afraid so." Alana reluctantly admitted, then quickly added, "But it would be a great chance for the kids to get away for a few

days and do something that they enjoy. Opportunities like this don't come along every day."

"I suppose that's true. I regret that I wasn't able to provide more of a holiday for my children this year. If it weren't for the efforts of Toni and Lorra, I doubt that we would have acknowledged Christmas at all." Qaiser said distantly.

"From what I saw, your kids ended up making some new friends. I get the feeling that that means more to them than any present that you might put under a tree." Alana said frankly.

"Yes. And I know that they would both enjoy going with you. Let me know the dates when you're certain of them and I'll get things arranged with their school." Qaiser finished seriously.

"They'll only be missing Friday the 29th and Monday, the 1st. We should be back in plenty of time for them to be rested and ready for school on Tuesday." Alana assured him.

"Would you like for me to call Irfan to talk with you?" Qaiser asked with a smile in his voice.

"No. I'm sure that Kerry would like to be the one to invite him." Alana said honestly.

"Should I be concerned about the way that my son seems to have adopted Kerry as a surrogate father?" Qaiser asked quietly.

"I think that Van is a teenager who's trying to work some things out and Kerry is willing to help him. I'm sure that once Van has found his answers that things will be better than ever between you." Alana said reassuringly.

"I suppose that I should be grateful that he's found someone to help him. I don't even know what questions he has, much less the answers he needs." Qaiser said frankly.

"Don't worry. Van and Malika are wonderful children and all of us will work together to see that they have everything they need to grow into wonderful adults. But for right now, you and Zuny should

focus on recovering and let the rest of us help out with the kids." Alana said seriously.

"Yes. Thank you, Alana. We will do that." Qaiser said calmly.

* * * * *

"Kane Paranormal."

"Kyla?"

"Yes."

"This is Alana. How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Do you need to talk to Jack?"

"In a minute. I haven't talked to you since the Osmani investigation. How are you two doing?" Alana asked with concern.

"We're doing fine. Thank you for sending over your case notes. I don't think there's been a night in the past month that I haven't caught Jack reviewing them." Kyla said happily.

"It was his case to begin with, so he deserved to be included in the resolution." Alana said frankly, then continued, "But I thought that since you guys dropped that investigation on me, that I might take the opportunity to return the favor."

"Do you have something bad?" Kyla asked anxiously.

"No. Not at all. Just something big. We've been asked to investigate a hotel in Vermont, but from the size of it, I'm going to need to call in some extra people to cover all the different locations." Alana said frankly, then asked, "Are you interested?"

"Vermont? That's quite a way to go..." Kyla said uncertainly.

"The client is willing to pay our travel expenses and provide room and board for everyone while we're there." Alana added seriously.

"When would this be?" Kyla asked cautiously.

"This weekend. We're planning on leaving Thursday afternoon and returning Monday morning." Alana said simply.

"*We don't have any jobs lined up for this weekend and it would probably do Jack some good to work with a team again.*" Kyla said consideringly.

"Even though I'll still be in charge of the overall investigation, I understand that he's used to being his own boss, so I'll do my best not to step on his toes." Alana said seriously.

"*Thank you. He can be a little pig headed, but he really **is** a good investigator.*" Kyla said quietly.

"I know." Alana said with a smile, then added, "I have some other calls to make. Be sure to call me back if he flips out or has any questions. If I don't hear back from you by tomorrow, I'll send you an email with all the details."

"*I'll keep an eye out for it.*" Kyla assured her.

* * * * *

"*Hello? Alana?*"

"Have the girls driven you crazy, yet?" Alana chuckled.

"*Yes! Please tell me that Qaiser and Zuny said that it was okay, so that I can go ahead and fill them in.*" Kerry begged.

"Yes. And just to bring you up to date, I'm expecting Charity and Max, you and the girls, Jack and Kyla, and of course, Derek and Marsha." Alana said seriously.

"*Are we going to be driving up in a caravan?*" Kerry asked curiously.

"Let me do some investigation into our options. At first glance, it looks like we're going to ship the bulk of our equipment and travel by train. But it's too early for me to say for sure. Once I have everything pinned down, I'll send a mass email to everyone with all the details."

"Sounds good." Kerry said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "I'm about to have a revolt here if I don't hurry up and tell them what's going on."

"Could you do me a quick favor before you go?" Alana asked suddenly.

"Sure. What?" Kerry asked seriously.

"I still have a few more calls to make. Would you call Van and invite him along?" Alana asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'd be happy to."

* * * * *

"Hello, Marsha?"

"Alana? We didn't have a meeting tonight, did we?"

"No. But I got a call about a job in Vermont, this weekend. So I'm calling everyone to make sure that they're available." Alana said frankly.

"Vermont? In January? We aren't doing a reenactment of 'The Shining' are we?" Marsha asked cautiously.

"No. At least, I hope not. The owners of the hotel are having some ghost problems and were hoping that our team could investigate. I've already called Jack and Charity's teams to ask if they'd join us. Apparently, the place is huge, so we're going to need every able bodied person with a K2 meter in hand." Alana said seriously.

"What's the name of the place? I'll do what research I can before we get there." Marsha said seriously.

"It's the Winchell Hotel outside of Ballard, Vermont." Alana said immediately.

"When will we be leaving?" Marsha asked slowly.

"I'm intending on us leaving Thursday afternoon, but I still have to look into the arrangements. Once I've got it all ironed out, I'll email you the details." Alana said professionally.

"*That will work.*" Marsha said seriously.

"Good. Call me if you have any problems with the arrangements." Alana said quickly.

"*I will.*"

* * * * *

"*Hello?*"

"Hi, Derek. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Alana asked cautiously.

"*Mario Kart. I was losing, anyway. What's up?*" Derek asked pleasantly.

"There's been a request for us to do a job in Vermont. We'd leave Thursday afternoon and return Monday afternoon. How does that work around your schedule?" Alana asked carefully.

"*Friday's no problem at all, and I think that if I talk to my professor in the morning, I can probably get my work for Monday ahead of time. What's the job?*" Derek asked curiously.

"A hotel in Vermont is having some ghost problems, so they asked us to investigate. The place is so big and the hauntings are so spread out, that I've called in a few extra people to help us." Alana said frankly.

"*Is Charity coming?*" Derek asked hopefully.

"Yes. She already said that she would." Alana said with a smile.

"*What about 'Giganta'?*"

"Derek! Be nice!" Alana warned.

After a moment, Derek reluctantly said, "I'll try. But there are things in my paleontology class more interesting than her, and they've been dead for two hundred million years."

"She was the most qualified candidate to take Charity's place. That's why I hired her." Alana said seriously.

"Well, how about next time, you find people that you **like**, then hire the most qualified one of **them**?" Derek suggested.

There was a moment of silence, then Alana quietly said, "I may just do that."

"So, is she being a heinous bitch to you, too?" Derek asked with surprise.

"No." Alana said simply, then quietly added, "She's just not Charity."

"Yeah." Derek said in resignation, then thought to add, "When you've got everything pinned down, why don't you give me a yell and I'll arrange for the equipment to be shipped."

"I thought about asking, but I didn't want to put you to the extra trouble." Alana said carefully.

"It's worth a little extra trouble for us to have everything we need, when we need it." Derek said frankly.

"Thank you, Derek." Alana said sincerely.

* * * * *

"Good afternoon. Osmani residence."

"Hello, Qaiser. This is Kerry. I take it that Alana already talked to you about the kids coming with us to Vermont for the weekend. Is it really alright with you?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Considering that you're going for the purpose of seeking out ghosts, I feel that I should be a bit concerned. But after all that you and your team have

done for us, I can't imagine them being in better hands. Besides, I think that both of them could do with a change of scenery." Qaiser said carefully.

"Do you think it will cause any problem with their school?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"No. I've already spoken with them. They'll both have some work to make up when they get back, but I've been assured that since it's so early in the semester, they shouldn't have any difficulty making it up." Qaiser said seriously.

"Good. I've already told Malika, since she's here. Would it be possible for me to speak with Van for a moment, so that I can invite him, too?" Kerry asked hopefully.

"Before you do that, I was wanting to ask you something." Qaiser said cautiously.

"Sure. What can I do for you, Qaiser?"

"I get the sense that my son has formed quite an attachment to you. As you may know, my relationship with my son has been a bit strained, for some time now. I was curious to know if you might have any advice about how I might be able to rectify things with him." Qaiser asked hopefully.

"Well, yes. For some reason it seems that Van has determined that he can trust me. While he's never said much to me about you or his relationship with you, I can tell you from my own experience as a father that a boy his age needs acknowledgement and approval." Kerry said carefully.

"Approval of what? He hasn't achieved anything worthy of note and he seems to do his best to avoid contact with me whenever he can." Qaiser said frankly.

"I'm not saying that you've done anything wrong. I'm saying that a time will come when Van will come to you and present some sort of an accomplishment for your approval. I just want to be sure that you understand how much it will mean to him if he gets it." Kerry said imploringly.

"I've done nothing wrong?" Qaiser asked cautiously.

"Well, you're a father. So of course you've done something wrong. We all have. And if you haven't, then Van would probably be all bent out of shape because you're 'too perfect'. You want to know what's wrong with your relationship? He's fifteen. That's it. But the good news is that sooner or later, he's going to snap out of it. I just want to be sure that when he does, you're ready to give him what he needs most."

"My approval." Qaiser said quietly.

"Right. And that's something *I* can't give him. When the time comes, he'll go to you and either ask for your approval or he'll demand it." Kerry said frankly.

"If I may ask, how did you handle it when your own son got past this phase?" Qaiser asked cautiously.

"I'll let you know when he gets there." Kerry said honestly.

"I wish you good luck, when that time comes." Qaiser said sincerely.

"You, too." Kerry said with a smile.

"I'm going to put you on hold for just a moment and call Irfan to the phone, so that you may extend your invitation."

"Thank you, Qaiser. And remember to call me if there's anything I can do to help. I may not have all the answers, but I should be able to commiserate with you over the questions."

"I will keep that in mind. I'm putting you on hold, now."

* * * * *

"Hello?"

"Van, it's Kerry."

"Oh! Hi! What's going on? Do you have a case? Do you need my help?" Van asked hopefully.

"Actually, yes, we have a case. And, yes, we need your help." Kerry said with a smile.

"Really?!" Van asked disbelievingly.

"Yes, really." Kerry said warmly.

"Do I need to come over? Should I call a cab?" Van asked quickly.

Kerry laughed, then said, "No. It's not an emergency. Calm down and I'll fill you in on as much as I know about the case."

"Okay. Just tell me what I have to do." Van said quickly.

"Alana was asked to do an investigation at a hotel in Vermont. Apparently it's a big place and she's going to need all the help that she can gather. Alana and I have already talked to your father about this, and he's said that you and your sister can come along, if you want to." Kerry said carefully.

"Yes! This is going to be awesome!" Van said happily.

"Alana is making the arrangements right now. As soon as she fills me in on exactly what's going on, I'll get back with you so that we'll know when you have to pack and where I'm picking you up from." Kerry said seriously.

"When are we going? How long are we going to be gone?" Van asked excitedly.

"We'll leave Thursday afternoon and we'll return the following Monday." Kerry said slowly.

"Wow! We're really going to do an investigation for the *WHOLE* weekend?!" Van asked happily.

"That's the plan." Kerry said warmly.

"What about Hunter? Can he come with us, too?" Van asked hopefully.

"I don't know. If you want, you can call Hunter and get him to talk to his moms about it and I can call Alana. That way, when they talk

to each other, they all will have had time to think about it." Kerry said frankly.

"Yeah. I'll call him now. Thanks again, Kerry! We'll do a good job! I promise!" Van said joyfully.

"I'll talk to you later, Van. And I'll see you on Thursday."

* * * * *

"Fallwell Paranormal Research."

"Alana, this is Kerry. I just talked to Van and he asked if Hunter could join us this weekend. Do you see any problem with that?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"I don't know how his mothers will feel about him missing school. But I suppose that it wouldn't hurt to ask. In fact, I'll even invite them along, too. I don't think that we'll need an exorcist on this job, but they might enjoy getting away for a weekend." Alana said thoughtfully.

"I told Van to talk to Hunter about it and to tell him to ask his parents, so that way they'll have a chance to think about it before you contact them." Kerry said seriously.

"Good idea. I'll go ahead and give them a call." Alana said warmly, then thought to ask, "Have you talked to Teresa and Mike about going, yet?"

"Yes. Teresa's excited about getting away for the weekend and Mike... well, he said that he'll go." Kerry finished quietly.

"Maybe a change of scenery will do him good." Alana said assuringly.

"I hope so. I'm running out of things to try with him." Kerry said honestly.

"Just remember that while we're there, you'll be with friends. We'll all help you." Alana assured him.

"I'll try to keep that in mind." Kerry said gratefully.

"I'd better call Merryl. Hang in there." Alana said warmly.

"You, too. Goodbye."

* * * * *

"Hello?"

"Ash? It's Alana."

"Hunter was just telling us that you're going to be doing an investigation in Vermont." Ashley said frankly.

"Yes. It sounds like a standard haunting, but apparently the hotel is enormous, so I'm trying to gather as many investigators as I can. When we asked Van, he wanted to know if Hunter could be included, as well." Alana said honestly.

"I get the impression that he's interested." Ashley said with amusement.

"If you or Merryll would like to go along, that would be fine, too. The client is paying for travel expenses and providing room and board." Alana said seriously.

"When would this be?" Ashley asked cautiously.

"We'll be leaving Thursday afternoon and returning Monday afternoon."

"I have to work, but I'll ask Merryll." Ashley said frankly.

"Will there be any problem with Hunter missing two days of school?" Alana asked cautiously.

There was a long pause, then Ashley slowly said, "Well, his grades have been reasonably good. I suppose that if he promises to make up any work that he's going to miss, that I could probably..."

Alana took the phone away from her ear at the sound of a clatter.

It took a moment, but Ashley finally came back on the line and said, "Hunter would like to accept your invitation."

Alana laughed, then said, "Good. That's going to make Van very happy. As soon as you've talked to Merryl, call me or send me an email. I'm making travel arrangements for everyone."

"Yes. She should be home in a few minutes. I'll have her call you back."

"Good. As soon as everything's finalized, I'll send a mass email with all the details." Alana said with a smile.

"We'll be waiting." Ashley said warmly.

"Goodbye, Ash. Say goodbye to Hunter for me."

"Goodbye."

* * * * *

"Fallwell Paranormal Research."

"Alana? It's Merryl. Ashley was saying that you needed me for a job this weekend."

"No. It's nothing like that. We're going to be doing an investigation at a hotel in Vermont and I wanted to invite Hunter to go with us. I just thought that if you were interested, you might enjoy coming along." Alana said simply.

"Oh? Is it just a simple haunting?" Merryl asked curiously.

"Yes. That's what it sounds like. But the hotel is large enough that I need to call in a few extra people to cover it all." Alana confirmed.

"Is there any reason for you to believe that there's going to be anything dangerous?" Merryl asked cautiously.

"There haven't been any reports of anyone being harmed, it's mostly just auditory and the occasional vague apparition." Alana said seriously.

There was a long silence, then Merryl finally said, "Every motherly instinct that I have is telling me not to let Kyle out of my sight. But I suppose that it's just about time for me to start loosening the apron strings. As much

as I would like to go, just to keep an eye on him, I think that it will probably be best for him if I stay home this weekend."

"I promise that we'll take very good care of him and make sure that he comes back to you safely." Alana said warmly.

"I'd appreciate that." Merryl said frankly.

"I'll be sending out a mass email with all the details once everything has been arranged." Alana said seriously.

"We'll keep a lookout for it." Merryl assured her.

"And, just so you know, the address of the hotel will be in the email. If it turns out that you feel that you need to join us at some point during the weekend, for whatever reason, it wouldn't be a problem." Alana said more quietly.

"It may not be a problem for you, but it probably would be for Kyle. He needs his freedom." Merryl said reluctantly.

"Everything's not always about what *he* needs." Alana said simply, then added, "The offer's open. Just keep it in mind."

"I will. Thank you, Alana."

"I hope you two enjoy your weekend. Bye."

Chapter 2: Lest We Dream

"Dad, I'm an adult, now. I *should* be able to stay at the house by myself."

"I'm worried about you, Mike. All you do is stay in your room and you never talk to anyone. I trust you to stay home alone, but I'm convinced that it'll do you good to get out of the house and do something different."

"I think that between the two of us, you're the one with the bigger problem. I mean, out of nowhere, all of a sudden you've started believing in ghosts."

Kerry laughed at the declaration, then responded, "Fair enough. But I'm not asking you to believe in anything. Just enjoy the change of scenery and the chance to meet some new people and do something different."

"There's Malika!" Toni exclaimed as they pulled into the train station.

"Don't go running off just yet. We need to get our luggage out of the back of the cab." Kerry reminded her.

"Look! There's Alana!" Lorra said happily.

Kerry shook his head, then looked to his son and asked, "Would you mind helping me, Mike? I don't think the girls are going to be able to focus on much of anything for a while."

Mike gave his father a withering look, but rather than complain aloud, he just went to work.

* * * * *

"Kerry! I'm glad that all of you could make it. Is this your son?"

"Yes. Dr. Alana Travago, may I present my son, Mike."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mike. Your father's had some very good things to say about you." Alana said warmly.

"Um, yeah. Hi." Mike said uncomfortably.

Alana grinned at his response, then went on to say, "This is Marsha Gold. She's an investigator, researcher and an occult specialist who works with us."

"Hi." Mike said obligatorily.

"Derek! Come over here and meet Mike." Alana called suddenly.

Mike's expression made it clear that he would be just as happy to crawl under something to hide away from all the attention.

Derek looked up from his tablet computer, then hurried over to stand at Alana's side.

"Mike, I'd like for you to meet Derek Seaver. He's an investigator, and he's also in charge of all our technical needs." Alana said seriously.

"He's also a college student, like you are." Kerry added quietly.

Mike glanced at Derek for an instant, making brief eye contact.

"Van and Hunter are around here somewhere. I'm expecting everyone else to arrive in the next few minutes." Alana explained to Kerry seriously.

"Is there anything you can tell me about what to expect when we get there?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"I was able to get a few details from Mrs. Whitlow and I plan on covering all of that with you while we're travelling."

"Okay. But can you tell me if it's going to be safe for Teresa and Zoe to be there?" Kerry asked anxiously.

"By everything that I've been told, they should be fine. It's mostly auditory phenomena and the occasional visual manifestation. A few

people have been scared, but no one's been hurt." Alana explained.

"Good. After deciding to do it, I began to have second thoughts, worrying that I might be taking my family into danger." Kerry said honestly as he looked at his wife and son, who were both listening.

"We'll all do our best to keep your family safe." Alana assured Kerry, then looked past him at two people who were approaching.

"Mike and Teresa, I'd like for you to meet Jack and Kyla Kane. They're members of Kane Paranormal Investigations and they're going to be helping us, this weekend." Alana said pleasantly.

"I was afraid that we were going to be late. Is everyone here?" Kyla asked curiously.

"We're waiting on Max and Charity, but we've still got a few minutes." Alana assured her.

"We shipped our equipment, just like you said. Are you sure it's going to get there in time?" Jack asked seriously.

Alana looked toward Derek with question.

"The app says that it's out for delivery. I'll be notified as soon as it's been signed for." Derek said professionally.

"Charity's here." Kyla said suddenly.

Alana looked around, then back at Kyla uncertainly.

"Wait for it." Jack said with a loving grin at his wife.

Alana realized what he meant, then turned to Teresa and Mike and explained, "Kyla's psychic."

Teresa seemed to accept the answer, but Mike's expression easily conveyed his skepticism.

Before either could say anything, Charity and Max approached the group with matching wide smiles.

"I'm so glad you could make it. How are you?" Alana asked as she broke ranks and ran to Charity to give her a firm hug.

"I'm doing fine. I miss you guys so much!" Charity said as she returned the hug.

"You know that you can come back any time." Alana asked as she pulled back to look Charity in the eyes.

"I know. But I need to do this. Even though we're just starting out, Max and I have already been able to collect some good evidence." Charity explained.

"I know. I looked over what you sent me. That was some good solid work." Alana said proudly.

Everyone turned at the sound of the train approaching.

"Is everyone ready?" Kerry asked as he looked around to account for his family.

"Let's do this!" Alana announced as she picked up her luggage.

* * * * *

Once everyone was aboard and they were underway, Derek settled into the seat beside Mike and said, "Kerry said that you're going to college. What's your major?"

"I just finished my first semester. I haven't declared a major, yet." Mike quietly responded.

"I'm working on my master's degree now, so I've already had to face a lot of decisions. If you need any help sorting things out, just let me know." Derek said pleasantly.

"Yeah. That might help. Thanks." Mike said in nearly a whisper.

Derek waited for a moment to see if Mike were going to continue their conversation. When he didn't, Derek turned on his tablet to see if their equipment had been delivered to the hotel yet.

* * * * *

Teresa and Kerry shared a smile as they watched Toni, Lorra, Malika and Zoe all chattering together happily.

"You know, back before we left Minnesota, I never would have imagined us doing something like this." Kerry said quietly.

"For as scary as it's been, I think it's also helped us to come closer together as a family." Teresa said thoughtfully.

"Except for Mike. I just don't know what else we can do for him." Kerry said as he shifted his gaze toward their son.

"He needs to know that we're there when he wants to talk. I think the rest is up to him." Teresa said quietly.

"Kerry, if you've got a few minutes, I'm ready to fill you in on what I've been told about the Winchell Hotel." Alana said as she paused in the aisle.

"I'll be right there." Kerry said with a grateful smile.

He leaned in and gave Teresa a quick kiss and hug of assurance before hurrying away.

* * * * *

"Before we begin, I've done as much investigation as I could about the Winchell Hotel." Marsha said as the group gathered around and settled into seats.

"Go ahead, then I'll fill in what Mrs. Whitlow told me." Alana said as she took a spiral bound notebook out of the messenger bag that she was carrying.

"Construction on the hotel began in 1793 and it was completed in 1808. The hotel had great success as a tourist destination during its early days. However, tourism waned in time due to the availability of other, even more grand, destinations being available. I wasn't able to find much of anything regarding the Winchell Hotel in the

past hundred years other than the fact that it exists." Marsha said professionally.

"Did you come across any accounts of paranormal events?" Alana asked curiously.

"Yes. There were a few obscure references, but they were what you'd expect to hear about any structure of that age. Mostly creaking floors and the like." Marsha said seriously.

"I think that the remote location of the hotel has helped to keep the rumors of haunting from spreading. That should work in our favor. When a location is *known* for being haunted, it can interfere with the objectivity of the investigation since paranoia about the haunting causes the reports to become increasingly exaggerated." Alana said as she looked around the group.

"So, what are we looking at?" Jack asked cautiously.

"I'm just going to go through what Mrs. Whitlow told me briefly so that you can get an idea of the range of activity before we delve too deeply into the individual occurrences."

The others in the group nodded their agreement to the plan.

"It appears that they have an apparition that likes to appear on the main floor, near the reception area. It's one of those things that people see for an instant out of the corner of their eye. Most of the other events tend to occur on the upper floors."

"How many floors are there?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Six. But from what I've heard, each floor seems almost like a world unto itself. The building has five different wings that branch off from the main structure in different directions." Alana answered.

"It sounds massive." Kerry said quietly.

"That's why I called all of you in. If we're going to have any hope of covering all this area, we're going to need a lot of feet on the

ground." Alana said as she looked around to see that everyone got the message.

"Okay. It's big. What else have we got as far as paranormal events?" Charity asked seriously.

"In one of the rooms, guests complain that they hear a woman's voice whispering to them. In another area, they've reported a disturbing 'presence'. We've got a hallway where the visual manifestation of a little girl has been reported. In another area they've reported hearing the sounds of crying." Alana said as she read down her list.

"It sounds like pretty standard stuff, and not a lot to document." Jack said absently.

"Although everyone is going to have handheld DVRs, I think that the audio recorders are probably going to be our most valuable tools on this one." Alana responded.

"Is that it?" Charity asked cautiously.

"There are a few other things, cold spots and thumps and bumps, but there *is* one thing that I'm saving especially for Jack and Kyla." Alana finished with a smile at Jack.

"What's that?" Jack asked cautiously.

"A painting that seems to change every time you look at it. Since it's a physical, quantifiable thing, I thought that you might be able to do the most thorough investigation of it." Alana said seriously.

"That sounds like something that I can work with."

"Kerry, I was thinking that when we break into groups, that I'll keep you and Teresa in a central location so that you'll be close by if any of the girls need you."

"What about Van and Hunter?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"I'm going to give them their own area to investigate, just like any

of the other teams. Everyone's going to have a walkie-talkie, so no one will be completely on their own, but with as big as this place is, there's no way we can be following behind the kids and watching over them every step of the way. We're going to have to trust them."

"How are you going to split us up?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"I thought that we could split into teams of two and then the members of those teams can decide if they're going to stay together or split their area between them." Alana answered, then turned to Derek and continued, "Once the remote cameras are set up and recording, I'm going to need for you to take on an area to investigate."

"Awesome! I can't wait!" Derek said happily.

Alana smiled at his reaction, then continued, "This may change once we're actually there and able to personally survey the situation, but I thought that we could divide the groups so that Marsha and I would investigate an area. Jack and Kyla will get that painting. I was thinking that initially I could have Malika and Lorra take one area. Toni and Zoe could take another, and Kerry and Teresa could take an area between them so as to be close by if any of them need immediate help."

"Toni and Zoe? Are you sure that's a good idea?" Kerry asked uncertainly.

"Yes. At least, to start out. I thought that if Zoe gets scared or starts getting tired, then Toni could bring her back to you and they could join your team." Alana said seriously.

"That works. And if Zoe's tired, then Teresa can take her to our room while Toni and I continue the investigation." Kerry said with a nod.

"What about Mike?" Derek asked cautiously.

"From what Kerry's said, he's not really interested in investigating,

so I thought that I could put him in Tech with you, and when it comes time for you to leave to do your own investigation, you could either take him with you or leave him in Tech to watch the remote video feeds." Alana said frankly.

"Yeah. He'll have a walkie-talkie if he spots anything, so that should be fine." Derek said consideringly.

"Just be careful about *depending* on him. Mike doesn't seem to do responsibility very well." Kerry said reluctantly.

Derek looked at Kerry with surprise, and responded with a slight nod.

"Well, that's all I've got. Does anyone have any questions?" Alana asked as she looked around.

"With this place being six stories tall with five wings, how much of it do you think we're actually going to be able to cover?" Charity asked thoughtfully.

"We're just going to focus on the reported hot spots. As it is, we won't be able to investigate all of them, but I think that we'll be able to cover the ones with the best potential." Alana said seriously.

"So, on the second night, we're going to go back and investigate the same areas again?" Charity asked to confirm.

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens. But for right now, that's the plan."

"I think you mentioned that this is their off-season. Are we going to have to worry about disturbing their guests?" Jack asked curiously.

"Mrs. Whitlow mentioned that the only guest that they're expecting this weekend is more of a full-time resident and that she's already aware that we're coming. Of course, it's always possible that someone will book a room at the last moment, but most likely we'll be able to do our investigation without having to worry about disturbing anyone." Alana said carefully.

"The equipment's arrived." Derek said suddenly.

Everyone looked at him inquisitively.

"I just got the confirmation that all our equipment has been delivered." Derek said as he held up his tablet computer.

"Good. Then all that's left is for us to arrive so that we can get started." Alana said with a smile.

"How long do you think it will take us to get there?" Charity asked curiously.

"We should arrive at the train station in about two hours. From looking at the map, I couldn't really get a sense of how long it would take to get to the hotel from the station. Mrs. Whitlow said that she'd send someone to pick us up." Alana said seriously.

"The hotel is remote and I don't know what the road conditions are like at this time of year. It could take us a few hours to get there." Marsha interjected soberly.

"Well, unless anyone has any more questions, that's it." Alana said frankly.

"Is it okay if I go ahead and tell the kids about what we're planning? I think we might all have a more enjoyable trip if they have a chance to plan and scheme." Kerry asked with a smile.

"That sounds like a good idea. Just be sure to let them know that all plans are subject to change at a moment's notice. I've been making decisions based on what I've been told." Alana warned him.

"I'll be sure to let them know."

* * * * *

As Kerry approached the group of giggling girls, they suddenly went silent and looked at him expectantly.

"I've just been filled in on what to expect when we arrive." Kerry

said seriously.

"Did Alana say what we're going to be able to do to help?" Lorra asked hopefully.

"Yes. She's going to split us into teams of two, and give each team a different area to cover. Lorra, you and Malika are going to be a team."

"Just the two of us?" Lorra asked in amazement.

"That's right. You're going to be given your own area to investigate and you two will have to decide how you're going to conduct your investigation." Kerry said with a smile.

"What about me?" Toni asked her father cautiously.

"Alana decided that you and Zoe would be a team." Kerry said simply.

"Me and Zoe?" Toni asked with surprise.

"Yes. And I'll be teamed with your mother. Alana said that our areas are going to be beside each other, so you'll be able to call on us if you run into any trouble."

"But you're going to leave me and Zoe to do an investigation all by ourselves?" Toni asked to confirm.

"That's the plan."

"Do you know what we're going to be investigating?" Lorra asked excitedly.

"No. Alana didn't go into who was investigating what. All I know is that most of it is auditory, so be ready to use your voice recorders." Kerry said with a smile at her.

"How long is it until we get there?" Toni quickly asked.

"Just a few hours." Kerry said with a grin before walking away, leaving frantically chattering girls in his wake.

"How are you guys doing?" Kerry asked as he approached.

"Hunter was just telling me about his school. It sounds like it sucks." Van said frankly.

"He's sixteen, he won't have to put up with it for very much longer." Kerry said warmly, then added, "Alana just had a meeting to fill us in on our plan."

Both boys looked at Kerry with anticipation.

"From what she said, the hotel is enormous. She's going to need every investigator she has so that she can cover all the 'hot spots' that have been identified. She said that you two are going to be a team and that she's going to treat you just the same as any of the other teams. That means that she's going to be trusting you to gather good evidence and that she's not going to have anyone following behind you to see that you're doing your jobs." Kerry said seriously.

"What are we going to have to do?" Van asked cautiously.

"You'll each be outfitted with the standard equipment. All you're going to have to do is go to the 'hot spots' that have been identified and investigate, keeping in mind that you're trying to collect 'evidence'. Be careful and be professional." Kerry said seriously.

"So we'll be doing like you and I did, back at my house?" Van asked cautiously.

"Maybe a little more professional than that. By all accounts, there's nothing really scary or demonic at the hotel. Most likely we're looking at some residual hauntings, which isn't uncommon in a place as old as this one." Kerry said frankly.

"If we don't know what we're doing or if we get stuck on something, will we be able to call you?" Van asked curiously.

"Sure. Everyone will have a walkie-talkie, so you'll have all the help that you'll need at the push of a button." Kerry assured him.

"This is gonna be great." Hunter said with a big grin.

"Yeah." Van agreed with an emerging smile.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Mike?" Kerry asked as he approached his son.

"Derek said that I'm going to be working in 'Tech' with him." Mike announced.

"That's right. Alana thought that it would be a place where you could help out, if you wanted to, but it wouldn't derail our plans if you didn't. You and Derek can work it out." Kerry said simply.

"I can't believe you're making me do this." Mike grumbled.

"Think about trying to make the best of the situation. I mean, I have no doubt that you're capable of being completely miserable the entire weekend. But maybe if you just give it a chance, it might turn out to be not so bad." Kerry urged his son to understand.

Mike glared at his father, but didn't verbally respond.

* * * * *

"Do we have everyone?" Kerry asked as he looked around. Not only did he have to account for his own family, but also Van, Hunter, Lorra and Malika.

"I think we're all here." Alana said uncertainly as she did a quick head count.

As the train pulled away, they were left in the relative quiet of the train station.

"Would one of you be Doctor Travago?" A stout man with a noticeable Scottish accent asked as he approached the group. His expectant gaze seemed to be shifting between Kerry and Jack.

"I am. But you can call me Alana, if you like." She said as she stood forward.

"I'm Oliphant. My boy will be here in a minute with a cart for your luggage, then we can be on our way."

"We can carry our own luggage if you'll just tell us where we need to go."

"Nonsense. No guest of the Winchell Hotel has ever had to carry their own luggage, and as long as I have anything to say about it, none of them ever will. Here's Norville. Leave your luggage with him and I'll show you to the bus."

Alana glanced at the younger man and was surprised to see that he was nothing less than the younger image of his father. They had identical physiques and coloring.

As the group began to follow, Oliphant loudly said, "I'll be driving you to Ballard, where we'll stop for a wee bit to refuel. While we're doing that, you'll be free to look at the shops or stop in to get a bite to eat before we set off on the long part of our journey."

"How long do you think it will take us to get to the hotel?" Jack asked curiously.

"Two to three hours, depending on how long we decide to stay in Ballard." Oliphant answered simply as he boarded the bus.

"The kids are going to need to eat before then." Kerry said as he stood by the door and waited for the others to board.

"Let's plan on having a meal in Ballard. There's no reason for us to make this more uncomfortable than necessary for anyone." Alana said decisively.

Mike happened to be passing at that moment. He flashed his father a dark look before stepping onto the bus.

After a moment for Mike to make his way on board, Alana quietly

asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Kerry shook his head and said, "Everything's been done. It's up to him, now."

"If you think of anything, let me know." Alana said quietly before stepping onto the bus.

Kerry followed her, then did another quick head count to be sure that no one was left behind.

* * * * *

Although the scenery passing by outside the bus was beautiful, the children quickly became bored with it and turned their attention back to planning for their upcoming investigations.

The adults were mostly quiet as they each pondered what was before them.

By the time they drove into Ballard, the sun was setting, casting long shadows throughout the quaint New England town.

While Oliphant and his son were attending to the bus, Kerry and the other adults herded the children toward the nearby restaurant.

Although no one would call it a 'fine dining' establishment, it appeared to be clean and the wait staff were pleasant enough. The food wasn't remarkable, but it was decent and everyone had the opportunity to eat their fill.

Once their meal was out of the way, the entire group made their way out of the restaurant to find the bus waiting for them.

While they had been eating, afternoon had given way to evening.

As soon as everyone was aboard, Alana stood near the front of the bus and said, "When we get to the hotel, I'm planning on us getting the investigation started as quickly as possible. So, if you're able to sleep while we're travelling, I'd recommend it. Otherwise, this could turn out to be a very long night for you."

Kerry looked around the bus and determined that everyone seemed to be settled in reasonably well. Mike was sitting silently in the seat beside Derek, but didn't seem to be any more unhappy than was typical for him, of late.

"Do you think Zoe's going to be alright, staying up all night?" Teresa asked uncertainly.

"I think it will do her some good to do something completely out of the ordinary for a change." Kerry assured her.

"I don't know how you ever talked me into doing this." Teresa said more quietly.

Kerry chuckled, then said, "Actually, I'm not sure about that, myself. But you know what they say, variety is the spice of life. I honestly believe that this is something that will be good for all of us."

"Even Mike?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"I think it has that potential. If he'll just open himself to the possibility that this *could* be fun, he might find something to enjoy about the experience." Kerry said thoughtfully.

"I just don't know what happened to him. What did we do to make him so... miserable?" Teresa asked quietly.

"You have to stop making yourself responsible for his feelings. He's eighteen. He's his own man, now. It's up to him to decide things for himself. If he's not happy, it's up to him to fix it." Kerry said frankly.

"Isn't there anything we can do to help?" Teresa asked as she glanced toward the back of the bus to check on her children.

"We can provide him opportunities to meet different people and do different things... which is what we're doing right now. Everything else is up to him."

* * * * *

"Are you awake?" Derek asked in a whisper.

"Yes. Did you need something?" Kerry asked as he turned in his seat.

"I haven't had cell service for about an hour and I'm starting to get a little nervous about it." Derek quietly admitted.

"What has you worried?" Kerry asked curiously.

"I've been watching. We haven't seen another town or even another vehicle on the road since right after we left Ballard."

"Alana said that the hotel was remote." Kerry said frankly.

"Listen. Since I've been working with you, I've seen how you've been able to reason things out with very few clues. I just wanted to talk to you about this so that you would be aware that there might be something weird going on." Derek said anxiously.

"What do you think is happening?" Kerry asked curiously.

"I don't know. But since I've been studying the paranormal, I've come across a few stories that started out just about like this. It's possible that there might be something bigger going on. Just keep your eyes open for it." Derek said seriously.

"I'll keep watch." Kerry assured him, then thought to ask, "How are you getting along with Mike?"

"He hasn't said much to me, but he seems alright." Derek said honestly.

"I don't know what's bothering him. He hasn't talked to me about it. I wouldn't ask you to betray his trust, but if you think of anything that I can do to help him, please let me know." Kerry said seriously.

"He reminds me of a roommate I had back in my first year of college. It nearly drove me crazy. He probably didn't say five words to me the entire first semester. Later on, he worked things out in his own head and we ended up being pretty good friends. But the thing is, there wasn't *anything* that I did or could have done to make

one bit of difference. He had to do it himself." Derek said frankly.

"I guess I knew that. I just feel like, since I'm his father, that there should be *something* that I can do to help." Kerry said plaintively.

"Nope. Just let him know that you're there when he needs you. Until then, it's up to him."

"Thanks, Derek. I knew that, but I guess that I just needed to hear it." Kerry said gratefully.

"Why don't you try and get some sleep. I've got a feeling that this is going to be a really long night."

"Yeah. I'll do that."

Chapter 3: Moreover

Kerry jarred awake as he felt the bus come to a stop.

"Welcome to the Winchell Hotel." Oliphant said as he opened the door of the bus.

Kerry turned to his side and quietly said, "Teresa, we're here."

"You're insane. You know that, right?" Teresa asked as she opened her eyes.

Kerry chuckled, then said, "Yes. I *do* know that."

"Wake up the kids." Teresa said with a reluctant smile.

"Yes, Dear." Kerry said with a grin, then got up from his seat.

As he looked back into the bus, he could see that everyone was awake and most of them were already standing.

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When Kerry stepped off the bus, he was confronted by the sight of the grand hotel before him. The enormous structure was proudly illuminated and was even bigger than he had imagined.

The height was impressive, but the bulk of it seemed to spread out past him on both sides, almost like a pair of arms spreading wide so as to gather him in.

There was a chill in the air, which considering that it was January in Vermont, could have been much worse.

"Come along, then. Right this way." Oliphant said, drawing his attention to the massive double doors at the entrance.

Kerry glanced back toward the bus and saw that Oliphant's son was unloading their luggage onto a cart.

"Isn't it pretty!?" Zoe asked loudly as she ran to her father and hugged him tightly.

"Yes. It's a beautiful hotel." Kerry said as he returned her hug.

After a moment of hugging, he quietly added, "Let's go and see how nice it is inside."

* * * * *

Kerry stopped just inside the double doors, just as most of the others had done, stunned by the opulent old world luxury.

To his right was a marble fountain, surrounded by a built in marble bench. To his left was a seating area filled with ridiculously ornate furniture. Before him was a reception desk made out of gorgeous old hardwood and he had no doubt that it was original to the structure.

Alana walked up to the large, ornate reception desk and told the woman behind it, "I'm Dr. Alana Travago. Are you Mrs. Whitlow?"

"I'm Levidia Whitlow, but you'll be wanting to talk to Lavinia. She's been waiting for you to arrive. She'll be with you in just a moment."

"Thank you." Alana said cautiously as she looked at the woman's loudly colored blazer, which seemed to be made of something like upholstery fabric.

"Dr. Travago?" A woman's voice called from her left, drawing her out of her contemplation.

Alana turned and was surprised to find that the woman approaching her was wearing an identical jacket.

"My name is Lavinia Whitlow. I'm so glad that you and your group could come."

"Thank you. Do you know, did our equipment arrive?" Alana asked as she fought to maintain her professional demeanor.

"Yes. I had them put everything in the first conference room. I'll show you that once you're all settled in."

"Mommy. Who's that?" Zoe asked her mother loudly as she pointed.

"Shhh. You need to use your 'indoor' voice."

Kerry looked curiously at the sitting area where his daughter was pointing. Although it was every bit as beautiful and luxurious as the rest of the reception area, no one was sitting there.

"Kerry, do you want to go ahead and get your family checked in?"

"Yes. Of course." Kerry said as he turned his attention back to her, then walked forward to the check-in desk.

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Levidia recorded all their information in an old fashioned ledger style guest book, then she gave Kerry several keys and a map, showing where their rooms were located. Kerry briefly looked at the map, thinking that it looked something like a cubist representation of an octopus. But he was happy to see that their rooms appeared to be just down the hall from the reception area.

"If you'd like to take a seat, your luggage is being brought in." Levidia said pleasantly as she indicated the sitting area.

As Kerry stepped away, he thought to say, "Mike, I checked you in with us."

The announcement seemed to irritate Mike, but he didn't say anything. He remained standing at Derek's side as he stood in line to make his way to the reception desk.

* * * * *

"Are these the guests that you were expecting?" An elderly woman asked as she walked slowly into the room.

Her dress and jewelry were from a time long past. Although the

result was something less than picturesque, it was obvious that every effort had been made to affect the facade of elegance.

"Everyone, I'd like for you to meet Mrs. Haversham. She's the only year-round resident that we have, here. At some point, if you join her for tea, she might be inclined to share some of the history of the hotel with you. She's been visiting here since the early sixties."

"That sounds lovely. Once we've had a chance to get settled in, we may do that." Alana said diplomatically.

An old style phone ringer drew everyone's attention to the reception desk.

Levidia answered it, revealing that it was a 'princess' style phone, and talked quietly for a moment before hanging up.

"Julianna thought that you might enjoy a snack after your long journey. She will be serving a light dinner in the dining room once you've all had a chance to freshen up."

Kerry looked at the map that he'd been given and found the dining room right away. According to the map, it was easily the biggest room in the entire hotel, although Kerry couldn't imagine the scale of it based on what he had already seen.

"Hi! What's your name?" Zoe asked loudly toward a small tree in a planter.

"Inside voice." Teresa reminded her daughter harshly.

Once again, Kerry looked to where his youngest daughter indicated but still couldn't see anything.

As he looked away, he noticed that Alana and Charity had the same contemplative expression that he was wearing.

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Once Derek had finished checking in, Mike stepped up to the desk and quietly said, "My name is Mike Hinton. My dad already checked

me in. But is there any way that I can have a room that's not right beside the rest of my family?"

"Yes. Of course. Would you like the room beside Mr. Seaver's?"

"Sure. That'll be fine." Mike said as he glanced over his shoulder at the rest of his family, in the sitting area.

"You'll be in wing G, room 210." Levidia said as she quickly marked the location on a map and handed it to him along with a room key.

"Thank you." Mike said sincerely.

"Please, enjoy your stay with us, Mr. Hinton. We're all very glad that you're here." Levidia said warmly.

Unaccountably, a chill raced up his spine. He muttered a quick, "Yeah." before rushing away to join Derek in whatever he was going to do next.

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"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to your rooms."

Everyone turned in unison to see Oliphant standing in the doorway leading out of the reception area.

As they gathered the few items that they had carried in with them, Kerry held himself back to see that none of their group needed any additional help.

* * * * *

Kerry wasn't the only one who slowed his steps as they walked down the hallway, marvelling at the exquisite craftsmanship in every detail of the grand old hotel.

The rooms were located relatively close to the reception area, so their wonder was short lived.

"All your rooms are located in this wing. You'll be finding the room numbers on your keys." Oliphant said as he stopped in the middle

of the hallway.

Kerry looked at his room key, then looked at the nearest room number. It took him a moment to navigate his way to the room where he and his family were to be located.

As he was opening the door, Toni approached and quickly asked, "What room do I have?"

Teresa ushered Zoe past him into their room.

"When I checked us in, I asked if there were any rooms with three beds. You get to share a room with Lorra and Malika." Kerry said as he handed her a room key.

"Great! Thanks!" Toni said happily as she accepted the key from him.

Kerry looked around and noticed the teenage boys nearby, "Van, I've got your key, here."

"What about Hunter?" Van asked as he and Hunter approached.

"I requested a room with two beds for the two of you. That's alright, isn't it?" Kerry asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah. Thanks, Kerry!"

He watched with a smile as Van excitedly showed the key to Hunter, then ran off down the hall with him to find their room.

A moment later he spotted his son and said, "Mike, I have your key, here."

"It's okay. I got a room of my own." Mike said as he held up his key as evidence.

"Everyone, go ahead and take a few minutes to unpack and we'll meet in the dining room. Then I'll fill you in on the plan for tonight." Alana said loudly, so everyone could hear.

Kerry walked to Oliphant, who was still standing in the middle of the

hallway and handed him the unneeded key.

"It looks like my son made his own arrangements. So I guess that I won't be needing this." Kerry said quietly.

"Aye, it's a good thing, when a man chooses to go his own way. A father should never wish for it to be otherwise." Oliphant said sagely as he accepted the key.

Before Kerry could respond, he heard Zoe excitedly proclaiming how much she loved their room and turned with a smile at the sound of her exuberance.

When he turned back to excuse himself, so that he could join his wife and daughter, he found that Oliphant was nowhere in sight.

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"Isn't this room incredible?" Teresa asked slowly as she looked around in wonder at the sitting room, which seemed to be a suitable venue for receiving visiting royalty.

"Where's Zoe?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"When you asked for a room with two beds, I expected them to both be in the same room. But this suite of rooms has separate bedchambers, Zoe's is right through there. She's busy exploring it, now." Teresa said with a smile as she pointed at a door at the side of the room.

"Did they already deliver the luggage?" Kerry asked as he looked around the ridiculously ornate sitting room.

"Yes, it's in our bedchamber, over this way." Teresa said as she led the way.

Kerry slowly followed. His nerves were on edge for some unaccountable reason.

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As Kerry walked into the bedroom, he spotted their luggage placed on opposite sides of the bed.

"How did they know which luggage went in which room?" Kerry asked thoughtfully.

"From the luggage tags, I suppose." Teresa said simply.

"But as far as I know, Alana didn't tell them who was coming. And they didn't assign the rooms until we checked in."

"She must have called ahead and told them before we left." Teresa said reasonably.

"Of course. You must be right." Kerry said with a smile at her as he fought to quell the unease that he was feeling.

* * * * *

"Are you sure that this is the right place?" Teresa asked in a whisper as they walked toward the open double doors.

"That's what the map says." Kerry said simply.

All of them, even Zoe, were silent as they walked into the truly massive room.

Alana, Charity and Max were already present and seemed to be stunned into the same speechless state.

The room was set up to be an enormous dining room, but the stage at the far side of the room had a drop-down screen lowered, which gave evidence that the room could easily be reconfigured to serve equally well as a stage theater or a movie theater.

"Lookit!" Zoe gasped as she pointed upward.

Kerry followed her pointing finger, up and up at the incredibly high ceiling. There was an ivory white balcony surrounding the room above them on the second floor, but the ceiling of the room continued on, three, possibly four more floors beyond that.

The crystal chandeliers were not only breathtaking in their beauty, but also astoundingly huge.

"I suppose that we'll be eating over here, since these tables are set." Alana said quietly, breaking Kerry out of his stupefied state. As he looked around, he noticed that the tables, chairs and even the place settings had been coordinated to match with the ivory and gold style of the room.

"Max, when we get married, I want it to be in someplace like this." Charity said slowly as she tried to take in every detail of their surroundings.

"Instead of someplace 'like' this, why not just have the wedding here?" Max asked simply.

"It's so far out of the way, I'd hate to drag both of our families out here to the middle of nowhere." Charity said frankly.

"We'll arrange it to be on a holiday weekend, when everyone can take a few days off. The ceremony can be during that holiday, so those who can't stay can get back to work, and those who are able to stay longer can enjoy a week at this incredible hotel." Max said with a smile.

"Let's see just how haunted this place turns out to be before we make any firm plans." Charity cautiously suggested.

"From what I've seen so far, it'd have to be pretty haunted for me not to want to have our wedding here." Max said honestly.

"Alana, you're going to have to ask for our help more often. This is incredible." Jack said as he walked into the dining room with Kyla at his side.

"It'd be nice if all our investigations were like this, but this is actually a first for me. Usually, the conditions are a bit more... rustic." Alana admitted.

Jack chuckled at the understatement, then said, "At least we

shouldn't have to worry about falling through the floors. For as old as this place is, it seems to be extremely well maintained."

"If I didn't know better, I'd be ready to swear that we'd just stepped back in time." Kyla said quietly. The slight note of anxiety behind her words caught Kerry's attention.

"Where do we sit?" Hunter asked as he rushed into the dining room with Van tagging along like a faithful puppy. Behind them were Toni, Lorra and Malika, obviously speechless and looking around in wonder.

Kerry gestured toward the six tables that had place settings and filled water glasses.

"Just pick any table with silverware. It looks like they set plenty of places for everyone." Kerry answered with a smile.

As he said the words, Toni, Lorra and Malika darted away to claim a table all to themselves.

Hunter and Van moved more slowly, but eventually did the same.

"So, do you think we're ready to investigate a place this size?" Charity asked Alana curiously.

"Although I'd really like to cover every square inch of the hotel and record every moment that we're here, that's completely unrealistic. I think we'll be doing good to hit the majority of the hotspots." Alana said frankly.

"Are we having the meeting, now?" Derek asked as he approached the group, with Mike following a step behind.

"No. We'll have dinner first, then I'll brief everyone on what we'll be doing. How much help do you think you'll need setting up?" Alana asked curiously.

"If the teams will each deploy their own stationary cameras, I think that Mike and I should probably be able to handle it." Derek said

seriously, then looked to Mike and asked, "You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"No problem. As long as you show me what to do." Mike answered quietly.

"I think we can do that. Just get with me if you need more help. We have no shortage of able bodied people." Alana assured him, then turned at a movement out of the corner of her eye.

Marsha walked into the room and looked around before approaching the group.

"So, what are we doing?" Marsha asked seriously.

"Mrs. Whitlow said something about us having a light dinner, so I suppose that we should take our seats." Alana said simply.

Marsha walked to the nearest table and sat down.

Derek flashed Alana a dark look, but refrained from commenting. Instead, he walked to another table, followed by Mike.

Alana went to the table where Marsha had sat down and took a seat one away from her.

Charity, Max, Jack, Kyla, Kerry, Teresa and Zoe all filled in around the table, leaving the seat between Marsha and Alana as the only one at the table that was vacant.

As the last person was being seated, a portly young woman walked into the dining room, pushing a serving cart.

"Welcome to the Winchell Hotel. My name is Julianna, I'm the chef. Since this is the off season, I'll be the one seeing to all your meals. I hope that no one will be minding, but I'm going to be serving the soup and salad courses together." Julianna said as she started serving.

"We weren't really expecting anything, we appreciate you providing a meal for us." Alana said earnestly.

"I think that anyone who rides in from Ballard should have a meal waiting on them when they arrive. As beautiful as this place is, it's a long hungry trip getting here." Julianna said frankly as she continued placing soups and salads.

"This is too pretty to eat." Zoe said as she looked at her salad.

Kerry smiled at the comment, and agreed that the presentation of the salad was a feast for the eyes.

"I'll make it less pretty for you." Teresa told her daughter warmly, then used a fork and knife to cut the half of a red leaf lettuce heart into bite sized pieces.

"This tomato soup, does it have olive oil in it?" Kyla asked hesitantly.

"Just a touch." Julianna said with a grin.

"I usually don't like tomato soup, but this is really good." Kyla said frankly.

"Thank you for saying so." Julianna said as a slight blush colored her cheeks.

As soon as Julianna had the last of her guests served, she pushed the empty serving cart out of the dining room.

"When Mrs. Whitlow said that we'd have a light dinner, I didn't expect anything like this." Alana said honestly.

"Bread should be served with soup and salad." Marsha said abruptly.

Alana glanced at her with surprise, but didn't dignify her statement with a response.

"Don't slurp your soup, Zoe." Teresa gently corrected her daughter.

Kerry quickly looked around the table to see if his daughter were disturbing any of the other diners. Marsha wore a slightly disgusted

expression, but he couldn't be sure that it had anything to do with Zoe. In the short time that Kerry had known her, he had seen that disgusted expression more often than not.

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Most everyone had completed their soup and salad course and were sitting, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

Kerry was more or less facing the door, so he immediately noticed when someone walked into the dining room pushing a serving cart.

"Good evening, everyone. I'm Norville, I'll be helping Julianna out tonight." Norville said seriously and it looked as though he were working to affect a professional countenance.

When he arrived at Kerry's table, he began to collect the empty salad plates and soup bowls. As he went along, he refilled water glasses, as needed. Just as he was finishing, Julianna pushed another serving cart into the room, this one heavily laden with already plated dinners.

"Tonight we'll be having broiled chicken in wine sauce, wax beans and Delmonico potatoes." Julianna announced as she began to place the plates.

The frown on Marsha's face gave evidence of her displeasure, but to her credit, she didn't go so far as to insult the meal in front of the chef.

"It smells wonderful." Teresa enthused from beside her husband.

Kerry smiled lovingly at his wife.

"Teresa, we've never really had a chance to talk, before. Do you work outside the home?" Alana asked curiously before taking a bite of her food.

"Not at the moment. I've been seeing to the remodeling of the house since we moved in. But as soon as that's done, I'm going to

see what work is available in Fallwell for an interior designer." Teresa said pleasantly.

"I'm not aware of any interior designers in the area... Not that I've been in the market for one." Alana said honestly.

"When Jack and I opened our office, I looked into hiring an interior designer to get the office done professionally, but the nearest one I could find was in Brookfield. I ended up just doing it myself." Kyla said frankly.

"So it sounds like there's a market. Once you've gotten everything in order and are ready to take on clients, let me know and I'll spread the word." Alana said with a smile.

"Thanks. As much as I've enjoyed staying at home, I have to admit that I'm starting to get a little antsy." Teresa shyly admitted.

"I think that's perfectly understandable. It's good that you were able to take the time to remodel your house to your own specifications before going back to work." Alana said pleasantly.

"It was nice to have a free hand for a change and not have to accommodate anyone else's tastes. I think that having the opportunity to fully realize my *own* vision is going to give me more clarity when I'm working for other people." Teresa said frankly.

"You should really stop by sometime, to visit. You saw the house when you did our investigation. Now you can compare that to what Teresa's been able to do. That way when you mention her to your friends, you can give an honest evaluation of her talent." Kerry suggested.

"Yes. I think I'd like that." Alana said warmly.

"This chicken is incredible. I don't think I've ever tasted anything quite like it." Max said suddenly.

"I don't know what it is, but the seasoning *does* seem to be unique." Jack agreed, then added more quietly, "Whatever it is, it's subtle."

"Have you tried the potatoes? They just melt in your mouth." Charity interjected.

"They're certainly not 'low fat'." Marsha added.

There was a long moment of silence that followed which was eventually broken by Kerry saying, "You know, life's too short to deprive yourself of everything that you enjoy. Sometimes, just every now and then, you've got to give yourself permission to indulge."

Alana smiled at his statement, then added, "Since we're in an elegant place and we're being offered such wonderful hospitality, I think it would be the height of ingratitude if we didn't humbly accept what's being offered to us."

When Kerry glanced at Marsha, he noticed her look of undisguised hatred directed at him for just an instant before she looked away.

A movement drew Kerry's attention and he saw Norville walking into the room, pushing the serving cart again.

Kerry only had a few bites of food left on his plate, and he hurried to eat them. The food was so good that he didn't want to let a single bite go to waste.

"Julianna will be right in with your desserts." Norville said as he approached Kerry's table and started gathering empty plates.

"Thank you. The dinner was incredible." Kerry said honestly.

"Yes. I don't have words to describe how good it was." Alana agreed.

"I'm sure Julianna will be happy to hear that. Would anyone like some coffee with dessert?" Norville asked as he finished gathering the empty plates.

"Do you have any decaf?" Kerry asked hesitantly.

"No, sir. We don't." Norville regretfully replied.

"It's not like we're planning on going to bed anytime soon. We might as well have the good stuff." Charity interjected.

"Good point." Kerry said with a smile at her, then turned back to Norville and said, "Yes, thank you. I'd love some coffee."

Just as Norville was finishing with Kerry and Alana's table, Julianna walked into the room pushing a cart with plated desserts.

"Banana cream pie." Julianna proudly announced as she presented the slices of pie.

Kerry stared in surprise at the piece of pie that was placed before him. It wasn't just a dessert, it was nearly a work of art.

"Did you make this?" Kerry asked Julianna curiously.

"Yes I did, just this morning. I hope you like it." Julianna said with a smile.

"I'm sure I will. It looks amazing." Kerry said honestly.

Julianna had a beaming smile as she left Kerry's table.

"This *is* good!" Teresa said happily.

Kerry wanted to verbally agree, but his mouth was too full to allow him to do anything more than nod.

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As soon as Alana was finished with her dessert, she excused herself and quickly left the table.

The others enjoyed their coffee and some relaxed conversation.

"Can anyone get a signal?" Charity suddenly asked as she looked at the cellphone in her hand.

"I lost my signal about halfway here." Derek said simply from the neighboring table, where he was sitting with Mike.

Everyone in attendance took out their phones and other electronic devices. One by one they all confirmed what Charity had already discovered. There was absolutely no cell service.

"I have master keys, one for each team. Be sure that you get one when you get your maps." Alana called out as she walked into the room with a stack of maps fluttering in her hand.

"Just tell me where I need to go and I'll get started." Derek said as he walked to meet her at Kerry's table.

Alana put the stack of maps on the table, then said, "Mrs. Whitlow told me that the equipment was put in conference room one, here."

Derek looked over her shoulder as she made a mark on the map.

"Since it's a conference room, it will most likely have the seating and electrical outlets that we'll need. I think we should set up Tech in there."

"Sounds good." Derek agreed.

"Once Tech is set up, and the remote video cameras are all linked in, then I'm going to give you 'this' section to investigate." Alana continued, marking one wing of the hotel as she went.

"Is that still on the main floor?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yes. That should allow you to return to Tech quickly, if you need to. If you go down the hallway, through the G wing that we'll be staying in, that will take you to the H wing and the staff area that you'll be responsible for investigating. The staff area includes the kitchen, laundry and storage among other things. According to Mrs. Whitlow, there is a spiritual entity that will occasionally play pranks on the kitchen staff. Over in the H wing, in room 1257, there's a rumor about a troublesome spirit that reacts negatively to the presence of men." Alana explained.

"That's a lot of ground to cover, but I think I'm up to it." Derek said as he carefully examined the map.

"I have every confidence in you." Alana said with a smile as she moved around the table.

"Kerry, as I mentioned before, I stationed you and Teresa in a central location so you'll be available for the girls, if they should need you." Alana said seriously, then marked a location on a fresh map.

"You'll essentially get the C and D wings on the third floor, which incorporates the rooms numbered in the 3300s. One end of your hallway meets up with the A and B wings, which Toni and Zoe will be investigating. The other end of your hallway will meet up with the F and E wings, where Lorra and Malika will be."

"What about the G wing?" Kerry asked slowly as he studied the map.

"No significant activity has been reported there." Alana said simply, then handed Kerry a few maps and three keys as she said, "You can tell the girls what sections they'll be assigned and give them their keys and maps. When we start the investigation, I'll go to the third floor with you and give you the details about the hotspots."

"Where are the boys going to be investigating?" Kerry asked as he accepted the keys and maps from her.

"They're going to be on the fourth floor with Charity and Max. I'll talk to them in a minute. The boys will get the A and B wings, Charity and Max will get E and F." Alana said, then made a quick note on one of the maps before handing it to Charity.

"Which leaves us." Jack said cautiously.

Alana made a quick note on a map, then handed it to Jack as she said, "You're going to be on the fifth floor all by yourselves. The painting that I was telling you about is in the C wing, room 5369."

"Where are you going to be?" Kerry asked as he stared at the maps in his hand.

"Marsha and I are going to be on the sixth floor, in the D wing, mostly focusing on room 6318."

"You weren't kidding when you said that this place was enormous." Kerry said in wonder.

"A few more things. Since this is their off season, they've drained the pipes, turned off the heat and cut the power to the unused wings of the hotel... which is pretty much all the areas that we'll be investigating. Make sure that everyone's dressed warmly and has their flashlights before they leave. Mrs. Whitlow had Oliphant turn on the elevators for us, so at least we won't have to climb six flights of stairs. But that's about the only convenience that we're going to have."

"If the heat and power is turned off, then we shouldn't have to worry about noise pollution in our EVPs." Charity said speculatively.

"Good point." Alana said with a smile, then looked to Derek and asked, "How long do you think it will be before you have Tech set up?"

After a moment to consider, Derek cautiously said, "If each team will deploy their own stationary cameras, I think we can do our part in half an hour."

"I'll go with you, so I can get our equipment together." Jack said as he stepped forward.

"Oh, yeah. Me too." Charity said quickly.

"Everyone, let's meet back here at 10:15 so we can get this investigation started."

Chapter 4: Wicked Gold

"It looks like someone sorted all of this out for us." Jack said as he looked through the boxes.

"Yeah. We should have this set up in no time." Derek said as he started to unpack his equipment.

"Is there anything I can do?" Mike asked timidly.

"Start unpacking those small boxes on the table. All the power cords and USBs should be packed in the boxes with them." Derek said without looking up from what he was doing.

"How have things been going, Derek?" Charity asked as she collected the equipment that she and Max would be using.

"Everything's going according to plan. At the end of this semester, I should be ready to start my dissertation." Derek said happily.

"Do you mind if I leave these boxes here?" Charity asked to be sure.

"No problem. You'll need them when it's time to ship things back. I made sure to pack lots of extra tape, so as long as the boxes don't get damaged, we shouldn't have any problems." Derek said with a smile at her.

"Well, I guess that's everything, then." Charity said quietly.

"Here. Why don't you go ahead and take walkie-talkies for you and Max? We've got plenty and that way we'll be sure to have everyone on the same frequencies." Derek said as he held two walkie-talkies out to her.

"Good idea. I'm sure that ours would probably work, but I'd rather not take any unnecessary chances." Charity said gratefully as she accepted the walkie-talkies from him.

"Here's some for you and Kyla, too." Derek said as he handed

walkie-talkies to Jack.

"Thanks." Jack said simply as he accepted them.

As Derek was about to suggest that they both take wireless cameras, Charity picked up two messenger bags, then handed one to Jack.

* * * * *

Mike stood by as Derek went through the process of connecting the laptops to the external hard drives.

When Derek noticed Mike watching him, he quietly asked, "So, what's your problem with your dad? Did he molest you when you were a kid or something?"

"What?! No! My dad would never do something like that!" Mike immediately responded.

"I didn't really think so. I just noticed that you've been treating him like shit and wondered if it was because of something that he did." Derek said as he went back to work.

"I don't know why I treat him that way. I guess that I've just got this feeling like if I let down my guard and trust my dad, he won't be there when I need him." Mike quietly admitted.

"What does your dad say about that?" Derek asked curiously.

"I don't know. I've never talked to him about it." Mike said honestly.

"So you'll talk to a complete stranger about this stuff, but not your own dad? That's pretty fucked up." Derek said frankly.

"Yeah. I guess." Mike quietly admitted, then tried to explain, "I'm kind of in the dark right now, dealing with some things and I'm just doing whatever I can think of to protect myself."

"Listen. You're a guy. You do the shit that you need to do, just because it needs to be done. Sometimes you go into it knowing

that you might get hurt, but you do it anyway. Don't blame your dad for it, he didn't cause it. That's just the way life is. It's part of having testicles." Derek said seriously.

"There's just a lot of stuff going on right now. I know it's not his fault, but... I don't know. Maybe he's just a convenient target." Mike said miserably.

"Is it college? Because if it is, I've probably gone through the same thing. I might be able to help you with it."

"Yeah. That's a big part of it. Before I left for college, I had this idea of what it was going to be like and I felt like I *knew* what I was going to do. Everything was completely planned out and it all made sense. When I got there, it was nothing like what I imagined." Mike timidly admitted.

"That happens a lot. Tell me what's bothering you. I've seen a lot and I've developed some pretty good coping strategies over the years." Derek said as he sat back and waited for the laptop in front of him to boot up.

"All the freshmen are required to attend these symposiums on gender fluidity, patriarchal oppression, affirmative consent and things like that..." Mike trailed off.

"Let me guess. The gender pay gap? The campus rape culture? The need for equality?"

"Yeah." Mike reluctantly confirmed.

"Just try to keep in mind that when they talk about 'gender equality', it doesn't apply to you. That's equality *for* women, as defined *by* women. Basically, the people who preach those things look at being male as a birth defect or a mental illness. Just about all the college campuses these days have been infected with that horseshit." Derek said simply, then started typing on the laptop.

"I thought that when I went to college, that it'd be like high school, I'd make new friends and we'd do stuff and hang out and... well, it's

not like that... at all. It's completely miserable. From what they said, even walking up to a girl and saying 'Hi' is sexual assault. In fact, you don't even have to say anything, just looking at her can get you suspended." Mike said anxiously.

"First of all, the friend thing will happen when it happens, whether you're in college or not. As far as the 'sexual assault' thing, yeah. We all have to deal with that." Derek confirmed.

"But what am I supposed to do? Even when a girl walks up to me and starts talking to me, I'm afraid that if I do one wrong thing that she'll report me and get me thrown out of college." Mike said desperately.

"I see your problem. You're working under the assumption that there's something you 'can' do or you're 'supposed to' do. There isn't. You have to realize that when it comes to college girls, you can't win. No matter what you say or do, it's wrong. If you agree with them, you're an over-privileged white male hypocrite who's pandering to them. If you disagree, you're a misogynist asshole who was wrong before you ever opened your mouth, just because you have a dick. If you don't do anything, you're supporting the patriarchal oppression of women and the rapists with your silence." Derek said frankly.

"I thought you'd say that I was overthinking it or that I was being overly dramatic." Mike said with surprise.

"Nope. I suppose that it's gotten easier for me in the last few years since I'm majoring in electrical engineering. Not a lot of girls get into that field, so I don't have as many opportunities to get caught up in their traps." Derek said simply.

"But I'm in general studies. What can I do?" Mike asked cautiously.

"First thing, avoid the honey trap. NEVER allow yourself to be alone in the company of a female. Because, when that happens, it's a case of 'he said, she said', and they'll ALWAYS believe the woman. Under no circumstances will they ever believe one word that you

say, that is, if they even let you say anything at all. A lot of times, they'll just accept what the woman says and consider it settled. On most of the college campuses, the definitions of sex crimes have been broadened to the point that literally ANYTHING you say or do can be classified as sexual harassment, sexual assault or rape. So if you're accused, you're automatically guilty." Derek said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Mike reluctantly admitted, "That's what I thought after the first symposium, but then I thought that it couldn't really be that bad."

"If a man and a woman meet and have a few drinks while they get to know each other and end up having sex, that was rape. She was drunk and couldn't give consent, it doesn't matter that he was drunk, too. And, the funny thing is, if you remove the alcohol, it doesn't change anything. Even if the sex was completely consensual and wonderful and the metaphorical fireworks went off for both of them, it could still be classified as rape if the woman has even a moment of regret about it the next day, or even a week later when her boyfriend finds out that she was sleeping around. The man has no defense. His reputation will be ruined FOREVER. He'll be thrown out of college and labeled as a sexual predator. If the girl decides that their sexual encounter was rape, the man's life is essentially OVER. And even if he's somehow found 'not guilty' in court... which is by no means a certainty, it doesn't matter. The accusation and stigma will follow him around for the rest of his life. Remember, regardless of the facts, women are always victims and without exception, men are always responsible. It doesn't matter if the problems women are having are because of the decisions that they made, guys are still somehow responsible for them. Women are victims, so by definition, they can't be responsible for anything... ever."

"What can you do to keep from being accused or blamed by them?" Mike asked slowly.

"There's no way to avoid the *possibility*. But there are some tricks to minimize the likelihood. First, avoid women when at all possible. If

you're in a room alone and a woman walks in, you walk out. Don't look at her, don't talk to her, do your best to keep from making any facial expressions and don't make eye contact. Just leave. And even when you're as careful as possible, if a woman decides that she wants to ruin you, she can. There's absolutely nothing you can do to stop it. The best thing you can do is remain beneath their notice and stay separate from them. If some random woman decides that it would be fun to destroy your life, she can call down the wrath of the entire Internet upon you. If she catches you out in the open, she can punch you, kick you in the balls and spit in your face and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. If you try to fight back, push her away or even raise your voice to her, she can, and will, have you arrested. If you try to explain it to the police, they'll just laugh at you as they haul you off to jail."

Mike thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Do you think that all girls are like that?"

"No, of course not. But look at it this way, you see a candy dish filled with Skittles, sitting on the coffee table. You like Skittles and when you notice them, all bright and colorful and smelling nice, you're tempted. But you also know that mixed in there with the Skittles are twenty or thirty highly toxic Skittles that will kill you with a horribly slow agonizing death. Are you going to take that chance or just avoid the Skittles altogether?"

"Are you saying that I shouldn't have anything to do with women at all?" Mike asked cautiously.

"You're an adult and you can make your own decisions. I'm just warning you about the toxic Skittles. That's all. You know that they say one bad apple can ruin the bunch. It goes for Skittles, too. You can find the most beautiful, colorful, fragrant Skittle in the dish that's perfect in every way, but when you're not looking, the toxic skittles can still spread their poison." Derek said seriously, then thought to add, "By the way, once you're off the college campus, there's usually only four or five toxic Skittles in the candy dish."

"It shouldn't be like this. What can we do to change it?" Mike asked thoughtfully.

"You can't do anything. You're a Western European descended binary cisgender heteronormative male."

"A what?"

"A straight white guy. It turns out that you're a member of the last group that it's socially acceptable to mock, denigrate, publicly disrespect and humiliate. Face it, society hates you. You are considered to be unworthy of notice so your thoughts and feelings are seen as unimportant and will be disregarded. As far as anyone's concerned, you're the dimwitted butt of the joke or the expendable resource who's supposed to silently work himself to death. Men are disposable. If a man stops bringing in the money or doing as he's told, he's just kicked to the curb and a new man is plugged into his place without interruption. 'Man up' means shut up. If you speak up and draw attention to yourself, it won't change anything important in the world but society will crush you as an example to keep all men in their place. Keep your head down and your mouth shut and if you're really lucky, you'll be able to get through college. Once you've got your college degree, then you can get a job doing what you love to do and get yourself financially secure. When all that's done, the women will still be there."

"But what if they aren't?"

"Take off the blinders, man. If you get a good job, a nice house and a steady income, they'll line up around the block to throw pussy at you." Derek said with a grin.

Mike thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "But what if I'm not interested in gold digging whores?"

"In that case, there's one more step that you'll need to take."

"What's that?"

"After you've got your dream job and started making good money,

you'll need to invent a time machine so that you can go back to the early 1900's, when women were feminine and wanted to *be with* men instead of wanting to *be* men."

* * * * *

"How are things going in here?" Alana asked as she walked into the conference room.

"Everything's right on schedule. I've got the camera cases lined up by the door and the personal equipment set out on the table. Everything is charged up and ready to go." Derek said pleasantly.

"Good work. After we've had our meeting in the dining room, I'll get each team to come in here and pick up their equipment." Alana said decisively.

"Do you need for us to be at the meeting?" Derek asked curiously.

"No. I don't think so. I'll just meet with each group to fill them in on their individual investigations, then I'll send them in here to you to get outfitted." Alana said thoughtfully.

"As soon as everyone has their remote cameras set up and everything is being recorded, Mike and I will head out to do our own investigation." Derek said seriously.

"Sounds good. I'll leave you to it, then." Alana said with a smile before leaving.

* * * * *

After a long silence, Mike cautiously asked, "Do you think that you'll ever get married?"

"No." Derek answered simply.

"Never?"

"Probably not. I can't really see myself willingly entering into a legally binding contract with someone who'll be entitled to half of

everything I own. Then there's a better than fifty percent chance that at some point she'll divorce me and take the house, take the kids, take half of everything I have at that time and probably more than half of everything I *will ever have* for the remainder of my life in alimony and child support. Remember, once you get married, your fate is sealed. If she stays, you pay. If she leaves, you pay. If she cheats, you pay. And if *you* leave, you pay. Forever and ever. Amen. When you enter into that contract, you're legally obligated to financially provide for the woman and her offspring forever. And when she signs the contract, she's legally obligated to do... whatever the hell she wants. At any point, for any or no reason, she can hit the 'eject button' and leave with her cash and prizes."

"You said *her* offspring. Wouldn't they be my kids, too?"

"When she dumps your ass, who do you think the court is going to give legal custody to? What do you think the chances are that you'll even be allowed to see those children again? If you do, what kind of *nice* things do you think your *dearly beloved* is going to be telling her offspring about you in your absence. And besides all that, statistically speaking, there's about a one in three chance that the kids won't *actually* be yours, anyway."

"Wow."

"Personally, I'm inclined to go with plan B, which is to masturbate, play Xbox and occasionally spend time with my friends and drink too much."

"It sounds like that might be the way to go."

"Try thinking about it this way, if you see a woman and you notice that she's pretty or seems to be a nice person, that apparently makes you a misogynistic pig because you're objectifying her... somehow. I'm not exactly sure how that works, but I've figured out that what they demand of you is that no matter how pretty, how ugly, how outrageous, how morbidly obese or how slutty they are, you're supposed to treat them as equals... which means like goddesses as you grovel at their feet."

"Yes. That seems to fit in with what I've seen."

"Remember, being a man used to mean that you had a code of honor and that you believed in chivalry. Your word was your bond and nothing was more important than your reputation. Now, being a man means that you have a penis... Well, I guess it doesn't even mean that, since women can 'identify' as men, if they want to. Don't beat yourself up if you don't know what it means to be a man in today's world. No one knows. Anyone who says that they *do* know is lying to you."

"Yeah. I guess I always figured that I'd grow up to be like my dad."
Mike said weakly.

"Your dad's got a sharp mind and a lot more courage than I would have expected of him. But since he's a confident, self-assured man, I doubt that he'd last five minutes at college."

"I never thought of that. I kind of figured that he had it all figured out and that there was something wrong with me because when I left for college, I couldn't seem to get it right."

"It's not you, trust me. But speaking of college; I almost forgot to warn you, watch out for women who are obviously mentally ill. Don't fall into the trap of trying to 'help' them or even worse, 'fix' them. At the first sign that a girl is crazy, get the hell out of there. I'm serious, don't mess with crazy, it'll ruin your life."

"Did that happen to you?"

"No. One of my old roommates."

"What happened to him?"

"He met some batshit crazy girl on an online dating site and made the mistake of talking to her. They exchanged, like, two emails, and then she decided that they were soulmates and that he was in a committed relationship with her. So she felt that it was her right to call him repeatedly and text him several hundred times a day. One time, she showed up at our dorm room at three in the morning,

banging on the door, demanding to be let in. She started showing up at his classes and when he avoided her, she trashed his car and then she went TOTALLY psycho on him."

"How did he get away from her?" Mike asked cautiously.

"I'm not sure that he did. The last I heard from him, he said that he was in Panama." Derek said frankly.

"I can't believe that I didn't hear about stuff like this before. Shouldn't we tell people?" Mike asked thoughtfully.

"You can if you want, but I've learned not to bother. You can scream at the top of your lungs but they won't hear you. To them, anything you say doesn't matter." Derek said matter-of-factly, then thought to add, "If you're interested in how it all works, read up on Marxism."

"Do you have some stuff for us?" Toni asked as she walked into the conference room, followed by Malika, Lorra and Zoe.

"Mike, would you give everyone a walkie-talkie, a K2 meter, an IR thermometer, an audio recorder and a flashlight? I'll get the rest of what they'll be needing." Derek asked as he got up from in front of the laptops.

"Sure." Mike said as he walked to the other end of the table.

"How do you like working in Tech? Is it fun?" Toni asked her older brother excitedly.

"It's been very educational." Mike said honestly as he started handing out the equipment.

"Alana said that we need two remote cameras." Toni said quickly, mostly toward Derek.

"Grab two of those messenger bags with red yarn on the handles from by the door. I'm also going to give each of you a handheld nightvision DVR and a digital camera." Derek said as he gathered

what he would need.

"What do we need the cameras for?" Malika asked curiously.

Before Derek could answer, Toni said, "When you take a still photograph, sometimes you can catch things that you won't notice in a video."

"That's right." Derek confirmed with a smile, then added, "And in situations like this, where most of the activity is auditory, we tend to gather good evidence with the still cameras."

"Is this everything?" Toni asked as she finished clipping various pieces of equipment to her belt.

"That's all I've got for you, but remember, if you come across a location that you think needs a stationary camera, call and let me know." Derek said seriously.

"Got it. We will." Toni assured him.

* * * * *

"What do we do now?" Mike asked as he walked around the table to look over Derek's shoulder at the laptop screens.

"We're going to have a few more teams showing up to get outfitted. After that, we'll wait until all the remote video cameras have been set up and we're sure that they're recording." Derek answered professionally.

"What about our investigation? I've never done anything like this before. What should I expect?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Basically, we're just going to walk around and record everything that we see and hear. Chances are, not much is going to happen. But once we get back here, we'll go through all the audio and video recordings and try to find whispered messages and ghost images. It can be a little spooky, but it's kinda fun, too." Derek answered thoughtfully.

"I just don't see what you get out of doing this." Mike said frankly.

"Oh. Well, like I said, the spooky thing is kinda fun. But because I'm studying to be an electrical engineer, I'm always working on new ideas for how to detect and record paranormal phenomena. As more and more people come to the realization that this stuff is really real, there's going to be a growing market for more sophisticated equipment." Derek explained.

"That makes a lot of sense. I wish that I had something like that... you know, that I felt passionate about and wanted to make a career of." Mike struggled to explain.

"Live your life and keep yourself motivated. The most brilliant ideas come to you when you least expect them. Just, whatever you do, don't stop living. No one ever had a brilliant idea when they were wallowing in a rut. You have to be out there living and doing things to inspire you." Derek said frankly.

"Do you have some equipment for us?" Hunter asked from the conference room doorway.

"Sure, come on in, guys." Derek said as he got up from his chair.

Mike walked to the end of the table and started handing out the meters.

"Do you have any blessed water?" Hunter asked hopefully, then explained, "I guess I'm so used to my moms bringing it, that I didn't think to bring any."

"Sure. Let me give you these cameras, then I'll get you some. What did you need it for?" Derek asked as he carried the DVRs and digital cameras over to them.

"Whenever I go with my moms on a job, we always do a protection ritual, first thing. So, I don't know, maybe it's a habit or something to do for good luck." Hunter explained, then quickly added, "Besides, Van hasn't seen the ritual before."

"Go ahead and grab a messenger bag with red yarn on the handle. Van, you remember how to set up the camera, don't you?" Derek asked curiously.

"Yeah!" Van said happily.

"I'll be waiting by the computer for your signal. Remember to call me on the radio if you need anything." Derek told him, then turned to Hunter and said, "Here's your holy water. Did you need anything else for your ritual?"

"No. I'm good. Is that everything?" Hunter asked as he slipped the vial of holy water into his pocket.

"You each get a handheld nightvision DVR and a digital camera. Remember to snap a few still images whenever you hear anything, even if it's just bumps and creaks. That's usually when we get our best stills." Derek said seriously.

"Okay. We'll do that." Hunter promised.

"That's it, then. You're good to go." Derek said with a smile.

"We'll set up the camera as soon as we get there. It should just be a few minutes." Van said seriously.

"From what I saw of the map, it's probably going to be longer than that. But we'll be here waiting, whenever you're ready." Derek assured him.

* * * * *

"How's it going in here?" Kerry asked as he walked into the conference room.

"Everything's fine so far. Are you here to get set up?" Derek asked curiously.

"Yes. Teresa's having a little talk with Zoe before she leaves to investigate with Toni. So I'll need equipment for two." Kerry said pleasantly.

"Zoe's going to investigate?" Mike asked his father uncertainly.

"For a little bit. If she gets frightened or starts getting tired, Toni will bring her back to us." Kerry answered simply.

"Can you get your dad set up while I get the cameras together?" Derek asked hopefully.

"Um, yeah." Mike said reluctantly.

"Are you okay with doing this? I really didn't want to push you into doing something you didn't want to. I just wanted to get you out of the house." Kerry said quietly.

"It's okay, Dad. Thanks for pushing." Mike muttered, then started handing his father the equipment that he would need for an investigation.

"Are you going to need a wireless?" Derek asked as he placed a nightvision DVR and a digital camera on the table in front of Kerry.

"Yes. We're going to be staking out a hallway, so you should be able to get a pretty good view of whatever's going to happen." Kerry said frankly.

"You know the drill. Grab a messenger bag. Remember to let me know if you'd like a fixed position camera anywhere else." Derek said seriously.

"Will do." Kerry assured him, then turned to Mike before saying, "Call if you need anything."

Mike silently nodded his response.

* * * * *

"Well, that didn't go too bad." Derek said with a smile.

"I don't know why it's so hard for me to tell him that I'm sorry." Mike said with aggravation.

"It's a guy thing. But it gets easier with practice." Derek said

simply, then added, "Even if you can't make yourself say it, I think he already got the message. For a minute there, you were almost *nice* to him."

"Thanks for making me face it. I hate acting like a jerk, but after a while, it started being a habit." Mike tried to explain.

"I think you're right on the money with that one. A lot of people get *waaaay* too comfortable being jerks, or whining or acting entitled. I'm just glad you snapped out of it, because if you didn't, this was going to be a seriously long and miserable weekend." Derek said frankly.

"It still could be." Mike said honestly.

"Nah. Even if we don't find one speck of evidence, I'm pretty sure that we're going to have a good time, just hanging out." Derek said confidently.

Mike considered for a moment, then broke into a reluctant smile before saying, "Yeah."

"How are things going in here?" Alana asked as she walked into the conference room, followed by Marsha.

"Everyone's got their equipment and I think each group got a wireless camera to take with them. We're just waiting for them to get their cameras set up so we can start recording." Derek said seriously.

"So, no problems?" Alana asked cautiously.

"Not a one." Derek assured her.

"Good. Then I suppose all that's left is for Marsha and I to get our equipment." Alana said with a smile.

"You got it, Mike?" Derek asked as he walked to the far end of the table, where the DVRs and digital cameras were stored.

"Yeah." Mike said as he went through the, now familiar, task of

gathering the equipment that they would need.

"I'd like an extra flashlight." Marsha said as she accepted a K2 meter and IR thermometer from Mike.

"No problem." Mike immediately responded.

"Here you go. Are you just going to need one wireless camera, today?" Derek asked Alana curiously.

"We're going to try it out, but I'm afraid that it might be out of range. If it can't connect, I'll just come back down here and get a DVR." Alana said seriously.

"Yeah. We've run into that on other jobs, so I've taken the liberty of giving the transmitters a little 'boost'." Derek said professionally, then looked around and added in a whisper, "Don't tell the FCC."

Alana smiled and nodded.

"Since I don't know *exactly* where the other teams are positioned, I really can't guess who might have connection problems, but I think we'll probably be alright."

"Give me a second and I'll do up a map for you, in case you need it for anything. But I think that all we can do is wait and see." Alana said honestly.

"Well, we've got plenty of stationary DVRs, so however it goes, it shouldn't be a problem." Derek said simply.

"*Derek? This is Charity. Are you ready to connect?*" Sounded from a walkie-talkie beside one of the laptops.

"Excuse me." Derek said before hurrying around the table and picking up the walkie-talkie.

"I'm here. Go ahead." Derek said seriously.

"*Are you getting a signal?*" Charity asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's crystal clear, but could you raise the angle about twenty

or so degrees? I don't want to have to look at the ghosts from the navel down." Derek said with a smile.

"Picky, picky. How's that?" Charity asked.

"Perfect. Yes, yes. I can see you. That's fine." Derek chuckled.

"I guess it's time to get to work!" Charity said cheerfully.

"Call if you need anything." Derek reminded her.

"You, too." Charity said seriously.

"Here's a map for you. The number by each person's name shows which floor they're on." Alana said frankly.

"Thanks. This'll help a lot." Derek said gratefully.

Derek and Mike both noticed Marsha's eyeroll before she left the room, preceding Alana.

"Toxic Skittle." Derek said simply as he took his seat behind the laptop.

Mike immediately nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"Excuse me. Am I interrupting anything?"

Mike and Derek both looked up from the laptop screens in unison.

"That's fine, Norville. We're just waiting on our teams to check in. What did you need?" Derek asked pleasantly.

"I don't need anything. My pa just asked me to stop by and ask if you were alright. You know, if there's anything you're missing and need for me to get for you." Norville said timidly.

"No. We're doing fine. As soon as our last team checks in, we'll be ready to get started on our investigation." Derek said frankly.

"Pa said that you're trying to find ghosts." Norville said cautiously.

"Yes. That's right." Derek confirmed.

"What are you going to do if you find them?"

"What do you mean?" Derek asked curiously.

"Are you going to make them go away?" Norville asked slowly.

"No. Not necessarily." Derek said seriously, then continued, "If we could tell that a ghost were suffering or if the ghost were causing someone else to suffer, then we might try to cross them over. But if they're not hurting anyone or being hurt, then we'll probably just do our best to find out who they are and why they're here."

Norville seemed to think about that for a moment, then he quietly said, "I guess that's alright, then."

Derek tapped Mike's arm, then pointed down the table to the audio recorders.

"Can you tell us anything about the ghosts?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Pa says if you talk about 'em, it makes 'em come that much more. If you just act like you don't see 'em, then maybe they'll start acting like they don't see you, either." Norville explained.

Derek accepted the digital audio recorder from Mike, then turned it on.

"That's an interesting theory, Norville. But since we're here to see the ghosts, could you tell us about the ones that you know about?" Derek asked hopefully.

"I'm not too smart. I don't remember some things too well." Norville said shyly.

"That's okay. I just thought that maybe you'd know some details that Mrs. Whitlow didn't think to tell Alana." Derek said honestly.

"I can tell you about Alydia!" Norville said suddenly.

"Okay. Who is Alydia?" Derek asked cautiously.

"She's the ghost that people see when they first walk in. She's always by the front door because she wants to personally welcome everyone who walks into *her* hotel." Norville said seriously.

"Do you mean that she's in the reception area, right down the hall?" Derek asked with surprise.

"Yeah. We can go there now and see if we can see her, if you want." Norville said excitedly.

"I have to stay here. I have to make sure that everyone has their cameras set up and recording." Derek said as he reluctantly looked toward Mike.

After a moment to consider, Mike finally asked, "What do you need for me to do?"

Derek smiled, then said, "You saw the equipment that everyone else got. Go ahead and get outfitted and I'll get a nightvision DVR ready for you. Then, all you'll have to do is go with Norville and record what he shows you. Don't get frustrated if you don't record anything, we'll be able to come back and try again later and we can do the full range of tests then."

"*Derek, this is Jack, are you ready?*" Sounded from the walkie-talkie.

"One minute, Jack." Derek quickly answered, then made sure that the night vision was turned on and recording before handing it to Mike.

"Just go with Norville and record what he shows you, then come back here and I'll probably be just about ready to go." Derek said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll be right back." Mike assured him.

Derek seemed to be pleased with the answer and hurried back to his laptop before saying, "Okay, Jack. I'm ready when you are. Go

ahead."

Chapter 5: Making a Mark

"Where are we going?" Mike asked cautiously as they walked past the doorway that he knew led to the reception area.

"It's better if we go into the lobby through the second door. You usually don't see Alydia if you go in the other way." Norville said simply.

"Do you know why that is?" Mike asked curiously.

"I don't know. I guess it's because she likes to greet the new guests. If you walk in from behind her, then she probably feels like she's already welcomed you." Norville speculated.

As they walked into the reception area, Mike noticed that it seemed to be far creepier than the last time he had been there.

The lights were significantly dimmed.

Due to the lower light, Mike found that it was easier to use the video camera to visually survey the room. The camera was able to pick up details that Mike couldn't see with his naked eyes.

"She's usually over there, on that side of the room." Norville said as he pointed.

Mike quickly turned his camera where Norville was pointing but didn't see anything.

"Do you know who she is? Why does she want to welcome people?" Mike asked as he slowly scanned the sitting area.

"A long time ago... I don't know how long. I'm sure that Pa told me, but I don't remember..." Norville said with frustration.

"That's okay. Just tell me what you know." Mike said soothingly as he carefully watched his camera for any sign of movement.

"Yeah. Um, a long time ago, I guess somehow Alydia met Wilber. I

don't know how that happened, but it's a good thing that it did." Norville said distantly.

"Who's Wilber?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Wilberforce Boufonce. A long time ago, he used to own the hotel. I don't know why he's not here with Alydia... I figure that it might be because he didn't spend a lot of time here. From what I heard, he traveled a lot and left Alydia to take care of the hotel." Norville said thoughtfully.

After a moment to consider, Mike quietly said, "That sounds kind of lonely."

"Yeah. But I don't think Alydia minded too much. From what I hear, she really loved the hotel. She was happiest when guests would arrive and she could welcome them. She was so proud of this place and all she wanted to do was make sure that everyone who came here was having a good time." Norville said with a smile.

"That sounds really nice." Mike said gently, then carefully asked, "What happened to her?"

"The great depression. No one knows for sure what happened to Wilber. There were stories about businessmen jumping out of buildings, so it might have been something like that. Alydia took care of the hotel and waited for him to either come home or maybe for someone to show up and tell her that she had to move out, because they had lost everything. But no one ever did. She eventually died." Norville said regretfully.

"That's really sad." Mike said quietly.

"I don't know. Pa says that Alydia was in the place that she loved, doing the things that she loved up until her dying day. He says that all of us should be so lucky." Norville said frankly.

Mike smiled at the earnest statement, then quietly responded, "He's probably right about that."

After a long moment of silence, Norville said, "It looks like she's not here. Maybe we can try again later."

"We're going to be here for a few days, so we should have plenty of chances to come back and try again." Mike agreed.

Norville led the way to the rear exit of the reception area, to the doorway that they had avoided earlier. As they were walking, he asked, "So is this what you're going to be doing all over the hotel?"

"Yes. I think so. I've never done this before, so I'm not sure how it all works." Mike said frankly.

"Would it be alright if I went with you? Maybe I could help." Norville asked hopefully.

"We'll have to talk to Derek about it, but I don't think he'll have any problem with that." Mike said assuringly as they walked down the hallway toward the conference room.

* * * * *

The members of the group were quiet as they walked, each of them turning their flashlights in different directions to try and pick up every detail of the deserted hallway. The cold was noticeable, but it wasn't so bitter as to be distracting.

"Although you've technically got the C and D wings, your main area of interest is this hallway. According to Mrs. Whitlow, several guests over the years have reported hearing someone knocking on the doors. From the sound of it, most of them assumed that it was a maid and several complained that it was an unreasonable time of night for maid service." Alana said seriously.

"Have there been any visual manifestations?" Kerry asked professionally and noticed that he could see his breath.

"No. But that might just be because all the guests were inside their rooms while the activity was happening. I thought that you could camp out in the hallway, tonight. Then, if nothing happens,

tomorrow night we could try putting you in one of the rooms and see if we have any better luck." Alana said simply, then grinned at the four girls anxiously waiting for her to finish.

"I think we've got this." Kerry assured her.

"Toni and Zoe, let's do you next." Alana said with a smile.

While it was obvious that Toni was barely able to contain her excitement, Zoe appeared to be fighting to contain her nervousness.

* * * * *

As Alana started to walk, all four girls automatically followed.

"Do you think that you'll need help setting up your camera?" Alana asked casually.

"It's just like a regular camera, isn't it?" Toni asked curiously.

"Yes. I just wanted to ask because people sometimes have problems setting up the tripod." Alana said honestly.

After a moment to consider, Toni finally said, "I think I can get it, but if I have a problem, I can call my dad for help."

"Yes. And remember that you can also call me or Derek, if there's something that one of us can do to help you." Alana reminded her.

"I'll remember." Toni promised.

"Alright then. How about I tell you about your investigation, then?" Alana asked with a smile.

As expected, all four girls were nearly vibrating with anticipation.

"You're going to have the A and B wings to investigate. The hallway we're in now is the B wing, at the right turn up ahead, it becomes the A wing. All the way at the far end of the A wing, there's a sort of a cul de sac which leads to several larger, more elegant suites. There have been reports of an apparition of a little girl spotted in

that cul de sac." Alana said frankly.

"An apparition? So we're getting a *real* ghost to investigate?" Toni said in wonder.

"Yes." Alana confirmed, then continued, "According to Mrs. Whitlow, most of what's reported has been auditory, but this is one of the few reported visual manifestations. Make sure that you have the cameras rolling and don't forget to use your audio recorders."

"We'll do a good job, I promise."

As they reached the right turn where the B wing ended and the A wing began, Alana asked, "Do you think that you'll be alright from here?"

"If I'm not, I can call for help." Toni assured her.

"That's right." Alana said as she stopped, then looked Toni in the eyes before continuing, "Will you promise me that you *will* call, and not try to handle it yourself?"

"Yeah. I promise."

"Alright. Then we'll leave you to it." Alana said gently before turning to walk back down the B wing hallway.

"You can call me, too." Lorra said quietly.

"That goes both ways." Toni reminded her.

"Yeah." Lorra said with a smile, then hurried to follow Malika and Alana back up the hallway.

After a moment, Toni let out a long sigh of resignation and was reminded once again that she could see her breath.

Gathering her resolve, Toni finally said, "Come on, Zoe. We've got work to do."

* * * * *

After walking for a moment, Lorra finally asked, "Can you tell us about our investigation now?"

"Let me check on Kerry and Teresa first, then I'll tell you." Alana said as they approached the junction of the B, C and D wings.

"Is it going to be really scary?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Considering what you've already been through, this should be a walk in the park for you. From what I've heard, not only is there not anything that *can* hurt you, but there's not even anything that *wants* to hurt you." Alana assured her.

Before Malika could form a response, they encountered Kerry and Teresa.

Alana, Malika and Lorra watched for a moment as Kerry was slowly and carefully explaining the setup of the camera to Teresa.

Rather than interrupt, Alana started walking again, leading Malika and Lorra on down the hallway, toward the F and E wings.

* * * * *

Once they were far enough away that they could be reasonably sure that they wouldn't disturb Kerry and Teresa, Alana finally said, "Right by the intersection of the E and F wings, in room 3133, there have been reports of hearing a woman or child crying."

"Has anyone seen anything?" Lorra asked hopefully.

"Not yet. But maybe you'll be the first. We'll set the camera up in the room, then I'll leave you to do your investigation." Alana said seriously.

"Are we just going to investigate the one room?" Malika asked cautiously.

"I'm leaving that up to the two of you. You've got one location where you'll have a better opportunity to gather evidence, but you have all of the E and F wings where you *can* investigate, if you

choose to do so." Alana said frankly as they walked down the hall.

"That sounds great!" Lorra said happily.

"I think that between us, we can get the camera set up." Malika said as she looked cautiously at Lorra for confirmation.

"Yeah. And we can call Toni's dad if we get stuck on something." Lorra interjected.

"That's right." Alana said with a smile, then added, "Room 3133 is up ahead on the left. Remember to call me if you need anything."

"We will." Lorra promised as she held up her walkie-talkie.

"Then I guess that I'd better get back upstairs before Marsha collects all the evidence and doesn't leave me anything to do." Alana said with a warm smile at the girls.

"She's not very nice, is she?" Lorra asked cautiously.

"Marsha is a very intelligent woman who is dedicated to her job." Alana said diplomatically.

"I get that she's *smart*. She's just not *nice*." Lorra said seriously, then thoughtfully added, "If I had to choose, I'd rather be nice than smart."

"You don't have to choose, Lorra. Trust me, you *can* be both." Alana assured her.

Before Alana could walk away, Malika cautiously asked, "Did Marsha choose?"

After a moment to consider, Alana quietly said, "I think she might have."

* * * * *

"How are you two doing?" Alana asked as she walked down the silent hallway with her flashlight leading the way.

"We're all set up. Max and I were just about to walk the hallways to see if he could get any impressions about likely hot spots. That might give us a good starting point." Charity said simply.

"I can't wait to see what you come up with." Alana said happily.

"I'm just wondering, why did you give *me* this area to investigate? If there have only been creaks and thumps reported up here, I don't understand why you didn't get one of the other teams to investigate it." Charity asked curiously, obviously trusting that Alana had a good reason for her decision.

"Honestly, it's because I know how you work. This is such a large location that you're one of the few people I'd trust to cover it and do a reasonable job. Even though this might not have the most 'ghostly' potential, I feel safe in saying that if there's something here, you'll find it." Alana said seriously.

Charity smiled, then said, "Thank you, Alana. I hope that someday I'll get to the point where I can think things through the way that you do."

"You'll think them out in your own way, and I have no doubt that you'll achieve your goals, and one day you might even impress a former protegee of yours with your reasoning skills." Alana said warmly.

"Yeah. I guess." Charity said shyly, appreciating the darkness, since she was able to feel a blush rising up her cheeks.

"It looks like everything is in good hands here. I'd better get upstairs and get to work." Alana said quietly, wanting to change the subject before things became too awkward.

"Have you checked on the boys?" Charity asked cautiously.

"No. I'm letting them have this investigation on their own. From beginning to end, every phase of their investigation is up to them." Alana said seriously.

After a moment to think about it, Charity quietly said, "Flying solo for the first time can be kind of scary, but we've all got to do it sometime. I guess this case is a good one for beginners to cut their teeth on."

"I hope so. Logically, this sounds like the right thing to do. Realistically, we'll have to wait and see how it turns out."

* * * * *

"How are things going in here?" Alana asked as she entered room 6318.

"I've got everything set up. I just don't understand why you chose for us to investigate *this* location. From what Mrs. Whitlow said, there hasn't even been an apparition reported at this site." Marsha said frankly.

"I chose it because Mrs. Whitlow referred to it as 'The Whispering Ghost'. I thought that of all the hauntings reported, that this one had the best potential to be 'active'. From her description of the few physical manifestations, they sounded like they were probably residuals. If there's any chance that we'll be able to interact with a conscious, self-aware spirit, I'm going to take it." Alana explained.

"Well, the remote camera is set up and all the audio recorders are placed. How do you want to handle the investigation going forward?" Marsha asked carefully.

"I thought that one of us could investigate the surrounding area while the other remains here and attempts communication. Would you prefer to walk around or try to make contact?" Alana asked seriously.

"I took this job for the chance to seriously investigate ghosts. So I'll stay here." Marsha said simply.

"Sounds good. I'll do my walkabout, and when I get back, I'll see if you're ready to trade with me." Alana said decisively.

Marsha nodded that she accepted the arrangement.

"If there's any activity, be sure to call me right away." Alana said as she prepared to leave.

"Of course." Marsha said shortly.

Although Alana was slightly annoyed by Marsha's dismissive attitude, she simply reminded herself, once again, that she had no one else to blame for her decisions.

* * * * *

"Are you sure that this is the right room?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"Alana told us forty-four twenty-one." Van said simply.

"Somehow I expected it to be more... eventful." Hunter said honestly.

"Did we get everything?" Van asked cautiously as he looked around the room.

"All the equipment's set up, but we still haven't done the protection ritual." Hunter reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. We can do that now, if you're ready." Van said quickly.

"Okay. Hang on a second while I get my stuff." Hunter said as he started taking what looked like ridiculously random items from his pockets.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Van asked cautiously.

"Nope. Just stand there. This'll just take me a minute." Hunter said as he picked up the vial of Holy Water and opened it.

Van watched carefully as Hunter made a complicated gesture with the vial of Holy Water in his hand.

"Do you remember, back when we first met, that thing you said about surrounding yourself with light to protect you?" Hunter asked

cautiously.

"Yeah."

"This is like that. Go ahead and gather your light, then I'll do the incantation thing and the water thing and then we'll be done."

Hunter said seriously.

"I thought you didn't believe in the light stuff." Van said suspiciously.

"I didn't back then, but after I talked to you about it, I checked it out and found out that the protection spell that we use is basically the same thing that you were doing all on your own." Hunter explained.

"Okay. I'm surrounding us with light. What now?" Van asked cautiously.

Hunter took a deep breath, then slowly began to recite from memory, "*Anadl einioes Ac ngoleuni fy meddwl Creu hudoliaeth Of amddiffyn a chysur Wrth i'r aer wyf anadlu ei buro wyf yn amgylchynu fy hun gyda Coryn o aur hwn haze euraidd A yw puro gyson Ac gwahanu oddi wrth unrhyw negyddol Mai fy lle yn cael eu diogelu.*"

Once he was done saying the incantation, he took a drop of the Holy Water from the vial, then reverently touched it to Van's forehead. A moment later he placed a drop of water on his own forehead.

"What did all of that mean?" Van asked quietly, not entirely sure that the ceremony was over.

"Basically, it means 'Let the air and light protect me'." Hunter said frankly.

"What language was that?" Van asked curiously.

"Welsh. I don't speak it or anything, but I've been hearing it and reciting it with my moms for as long as I can remember, so I know how to say that much." Hunter said as he put everything away.

"Is that it? Are we ready to get started?" Van asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I guess since our 'disturbing presence' isn't being very disturbing, we can walk around and check out our area, then come back here later and see if we can feel anything 'menacing'." Hunter said thoughtfully.

"Let's do it!"

* * * * *

"Are you sensing anything?" Jack asked quietly.

"Only that someone should have destroyed that horrible thing decades ago." Kyla said distastefully.

"All I can see is a painting with fog and trees. Can you see something more in it?" Jack asked cautiously. "No. At least, not with my eyes." Kyla admitted.

"Does that mean that you can see something with your second sight?" Jack asked, even more slowly.

"Yes."

"What do you see? I need to know. It might be important." Jack urged her to understand.

"I can't see... things. If only I could. That would make it so much easier to deal with."

"What do you see?"

"Madness."

* * * * *

"How did it go? Did you see anything?" Derek asked when he noticed Mike and Norville walking into the command center.

"No. But Norville was able to fill me in on who Alydia is and why he thinks that she's here." Mike said seriously.

"Good." Derek said happily, then asked, "Why don't you give me that DVR so I can download the video? Did you use your audio recorder or still camera?"

Mike placed the DVR camera beside one of the laptops as he said, "No. Since nothing happened, I didn't think that I needed to use them."

"That's fine. I just wanted to be sure that you had full batteries and empty memory cards before we started our investigation." Derek assured him.

"Can I help, too?" Norville asked curiously.

Before answering, Derek looked to Mike with question to see if he had any objection.

"Norville might be able to tell us some of the history of the places that we're investigating." Mike said simply.

"Good enough for me. Why don't you get Norville fitted with the standard equipment while I get this downloaded?" Derek asked as he picked up the DVR.

"Come on over here and I'll get you set up." Mike said with a smile as he walked to the end of the table.

"What is all this stuff?" Norville asked cautiously.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know about most of it." Mike shyly admitted.

As soon as Derek was sure that the DVR was downloading, he walked around the table and picked up a piece of equipment.

"First, we have the K2 meter. It measures electromagnetic fields, you might think of that as 'ghost energy'. Sometimes it will give us an idea of when something is present that we can't see with our eyes." Derek said seriously.

Norville looked at the equipment Derek and Mike were already

wearing before clipping the K2 meter onto his belt.

"Next we have the infrared thermometer. Sometimes when ghosts are present, they draw in the heat from the area around them and create a 'cold spot'." Derek explained.

"That happens a lot upstairs." Norville said quietly as he hung the thermometer on his belt.

"Sometimes ghosts will speak so quietly that we can't hear them. The digital audio recorders will record things so that we can amplify them when we play them back and hear things that we couldn't hear at the time." Derek said seriously.

"Usually, I hear a lot more than I want to." Norville quietly admitted.

"Of course, you know what the flashlight and walkie-talkies are for. There's nothing special about those." Derek said before walking to the other end of the table and gathering up equipment.

When he returned, he handed Norville and Mike each a night vision DVR and said, "These will be your 'point-of-view' recorders, so that when we review the evidence, we'll be seeing exactly what you're seeing. It's very important that you keep these things running at all times because when we review the evidence, we're going to be matching everything with the timestamps on these recorders."

Once he was assured that both of them understood, he handed Norville a digital camera and said, "Whenever you hear something, whether it be a whisper, a thump or a creak, it's a good idea to snap a picture or two with the still camera. Sometimes the stills are able to catch things that the video cameras miss."

As Norville accepted the digital camera, Derek could tell that he seemed to be on the verge of information overload.

"That's it. Everything here is set up to record. Since we have two 'hot spots' to investigate, we're going to need two wireless remote cameras. Those are the ones with the red yarn on the handles." Derek said as he pointed toward the diminishing supply of

messenger bags by the front door.

"Are you going to have to come back here to get them connected to the laptops?" Mike asked as he picked up two of the messenger bags, then handed one to Norville.

"The way I've got it set up, they *should* connect and start recording automatically. But if for some reason they don't, I won't have any way of knowing about it until we get back here." Derek said honestly.

"So, what do we do now?" Mike asked cautiously.

"We investigate."

* * * * *

"Do you think that the girls are alright?" Teresa asked anxiously.

"I think that they're probably having the time of their lives." Kerry assured her as he carefully scanned their surroundings with the night vision DVR.

"You're crazy." Teresa stated simply as she tried to adapt to walking in complete darkness, using the video from the DVR viewfinder as a guide.

"Yes. You've mentioned that before." Kerry said fondly.

After a long moment, Teresa cautiously asked, "What are we doing?"

"This is the C wing. You can kind of think of this as a 'base reading'. We're walking through, recording just how everything is laid out and what state it's in. If we come back tomorrow night and something's out of place, then we'll know to investigate it." Kerry said seriously.

"I just got a chill up my spine when you said that." Teresa said quietly.

"That could have something to do with it being close to twenty degrees in here." Kerry said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Teresa quietly said, "No. I don't think that's it."

* * * * *

"What can I do?" Zoe asked petulantly as she sat huddled by the wall, watching Toni through the video output of her DVR.

Toni couldn't blame her younger sister. Zoe had been exceedingly patient (for a six year old) while Toni had set up the wireless video camera on its tripod.

"Do you remember how to use the K2 meter?" Toni asked carefully.

"You just push the button. It's not hard!" Zoe said indignantly.

"True." Toni chuckled, then continued, "Since we've got everything set up and recording here, the next thing we need to do is investigate the rest of our area. You can do the K2 readings and I'll keep an audio recorder running and we'll walk back to where Mom and Dad are."

"What if the K2 starts doing yellow and red things?" Zoe asked cautiously.

"If that happens, we'll stop and I'll ask the ghosts questions while we're recording with our audio recorders." Toni said calmly.

"I'm cold." Zoe quietly admitted.

"So am I. You've got your gloves on, don't you?" Toni asked cautiously.

"Yeah. My hat, too." Zoe answered.

"Good. Then we're ready to go." Toni said confidently, then thought to add, "Remember that if you get too cold, or scared or sleepy, all you've got to do is tell me and I'll take you back to Mom and Dad."

"No. I want to be like you." Zoe said firmly.

It took a moment for Toni to gather her emotions, but she finally said, "Turn on your K2 and let's get started."

* * * * *

"Hold on. Did you hear that?" Lorra asked in a whisper.

"No. What?" Malika asked nervously.

"Shhh. Listen." Lorra said even more quietly.

After a long silent moment, both girls just barely heard the slightest whine in the distance.

"Where did that come from?" Malika finally asked.

"Over there, I think." Lorra said cautiously, as she pointed.

Malika picked up her DVR and hurried to look at Lorra so she could see where she thought the sound came from.

"Pull back and get a wide view of the room and I'm going to do a quick K2 sweep, then we can do the EVP." Lorra said decisively.

Malika was about to answer, but froze as she heard an even more pronounced high-pitched whining sound.

"Yeah." Lorra confirmed nervously, without having to be asked if she'd heard it, too.

Finally, Malika's back was against the door and she began to slowly pan around the area, carefully watching for any sign of movement.

While Malika was visually surveying the room, Lorra was walking around the perimeter of the room with her K2 meter in hand.

Malika was holding her breath in an effort to hear the slightest sound.

"Malika, come over here." Lorra suddenly whispered, causing Malika

to jump.

Although she tried to hurry, she was aware that she might easily fall flat on her face if she didn't carefully scan her path.

"Look." Lorra said as she pointed.

Malika let her handheld DVR fall to her side as she looked at the outer world bathed in moonlight. There was no evidence of modernization within view. She was struck with the realization that a person looking out this same window two hundred years before would have seen very much if not *exactly* the same thing.

After an exaggerated silence, Lorra finally said, "I think we need a camera looking out this window."

"For what?" Malika asked in confusion.

"Do you see the way the wind is whipping the treetops, out there?"

"Yes."

"What if there's some kind of a hole or something that's whistling when the wind blows and making that sound?" Lorra asked seriously.

"You think that the crying sound is the wind?" Malika asked cautiously.

"I think that if we put a camera in the window, we can match the sounds we hear with the way the wind is blowing at the time." Lorra explained.

"So there might not be a ghost?"

"Our job isn't to find ghosts, it's to figure out what's really going on here. To do that, we need to be willing to honestly evaluate the evidence despite what we do or don't believe." Lorra carefully explained.

"You've said that before, but I guess I forgot. I was so excited and

worried about seeing ghosts that I stopped looking for anything else." Malika reluctantly admitted.

"Yeah. It's easy to think of what we're doing as 'ghost hunting', but what we're really doing is looking behind the excitement and fear and trying to figure out what's really going on, whether it's supernatural or not." Lorra calmly stated.

"Do you want me to ask Derek to get us another camera?" Malika asked cautiously.

"No. He has his own investigation to do. We can do it ourselves." Lorra said seriously.

"What do you need for me to do?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Give me a second." Lorra said, then keyed her walkie-talkie and said, "Derek, this is Lorra. We're going to need a second stationary camera."

"Does it have to be wireless?"

"No. And you don't have to bring it to us. We can get it ourselves if you'll just tell us which one to take."

"There are several messenger bags just inside the door of the conference room. Just grab one with yellow yarn on the handle. The setup is basically the same as the wireless, just make sure that it says 'rec' with a red dot in the corner and everything should work just fine."

"I'll get it." Malika whispered.

"Thanks, Derek." Lorra said into the walkie-talkie, then released the button.

After a breath, she turned and quietly said, "Thanks, Malika."

Chapter 6: Shrieking Devastation

"Norville, do you know how to turn off the power in this part of the building?" Derek asked as they walked.

"I know where the fuse boxes are, but I think Pa is the only one who knows which fuse box and which fuse goes to which thing." Norville slowly explained.

"Do you know if there's a light switch for this hallway?" Derek asked hopefully.

Norville looked around the hallway where they were walking, then slowly said, "I never really looked for one before."

"If I were going to put a switch somewhere, I'd put it at the entrance to the hallway." Mike said reasonably.

"In newer buildings, that's usually true. But a building this old wasn't originally built with electricity being taken into account. So later, when it was time to add the electricity, they had to deal with what was in front of them, which sometimes led to some less than ideal choices being made." Derek slowly explained.

"Do we really *need* for the lights to be turned off?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Complete darkness is ideal, but it's not like we *can't* investigate without it." Derek reasoned.

"If we're going to the 'bad' room, stuff happens if the lights are on or not." Norville said cautiously.

Derek looked at Norville with surprise, then cautiously asked, "What can you tell us about 'the bad room'?"

"Pa's always told me not to go in there. He said that if someone in room 257 needs something, I'm supposed to get Ma to get it for them." Norville said earnestly.

"Is room 257 the same as room 1257?" Mike asked curiously.

"Yeah. The people who work here usually call the rooms by the little number. We only use the big number when we're talking about a room on a different floor."

"Well, did your Pa say why you weren't supposed to go in there?" Derek asked cautiously.

"He just said that it's not good for guys to go into room 257. He didn't tell me any more than that." Norville said simply.

"There it is, what do we do now?" Mike asked uncertainly.

"We set up the first camera, then we move on to the next location." Derek said simply.

"Oh." Mike said with surprise, then said, "I thought we were going to be ghost hunting."

"We are. The first step is to get the recordings started, that way no matter if we're there or not, whatever happens is being recorded." Derek explained.

"Do I have to go in there with you?" Norville asked anxiously.

"No. Of course not. If you want to stay out here in the hallway, we'll only be a minute." Derek assured him.

"Okay. I'll stay right here."

* * * * *

"Shouldn't we stay back by the camera, so the girls can find us if they need us?" Teresa asked anxiously as they slowly walked.

"They each have a walkie talkie, so they can call if they need to. And if they want to come looking for us, all of them know which area we'll be searching." Kerry assured her as he divided his attention between the K2 meter in his right hand and the night vision camera in his left, which was the only indication he had to

tell him where he was going.

"But what if Zoe gets scared?" Teresa asked in a whisper.

"If she gets scared, then she'll have her big sister to protect her." Kerry said frankly, then added, "Coming out here and doing this isn't just about helping Alana. Giving Zoe and Toni the chance to explore something together gives them a chance to not only become closer to each other, but also to become more independent from us."

After a moment more of walking, Teresa finally said, "I guess you're right. Since we've been in Massachusetts, I've known exactly where they are, what they're doing and who they're with every minute of the day. This just seems like a pretty big leap from what I've become comfortable with."

"It's not that big of a leap. You still know where they are and who they're with. And you know that if they need you, they can call you." Kerry said gently, then cautiously continued by asking, "Do you have that master key that Alana gave us?"

"Yes. I have it right here." Teresa said as she fished it out of her pocket.

"I'm getting an elevated EMF reading that leads up to this door. I'd like to see what's inside." Kerry said seriously.

"What do you need for me to do?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"If you would, just open the door, then stand back and record everything while I investigate."

Teresa awkwardly stepped forward, using her night vision camera to guide her to where she needed to be. It was a bit of a challenge for her to get the key to match up to the keyhole, but she finally got it in and turned the key in the door, then pushed it open.

As she stepped aside, Kerry was particularly aware of his handheld video recorder and made a point of slowly sweeping the room to

get a clear picture of every detail before him.

He took another step into the room and suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" Teresa whispered.

"I thought I heard something. Would you step in here with me and keep recording while I put down my camera?" Kerry asked softly.

Teresa was nervous, but cautiously took a few steps into the room so that she could get a clear view of everything.

She watched through the viewfinder on the night vision video camera as Kerry carefully placed his DVR on a nearby table and positioned it to get a good view of the room. He then took a digital audio recorder off his belt and turned it on before stepping forward in the dark and blindly placing it on a side table, beside a settee.

Once the audio recorder was in place, he calmly said in a clear voice, "If you have anything to say, we're here to listen to you. Even if we can't hear you, we have a device that can record your voice. If you'll speak into the red light on this table, we'll be able to hear whatever you want to say."

Teresa fought not to breath and strained to hear any response to her husband's words.

After a long pause, Kerry asked, "What is your name?"

Teresa felt a full body flinch as she heard something bump on the far side of the room.

Kerry quickly took the small digital camera off his belt and snapped a few still photos in the direction that the sound had come from.

"Why are you here?" Kerry asked as he put the camera back on his belt and turned on his K2 meter.

As much as Teresa wanted to go to her husband and hold him to reassure herself, she was able to remain in place and continue recording.

"What year were you born?" Kerry asked as he blindly ventured forward, holding the K2 meter in front of him.

Teresa let out a slight yelp when she heard a faint ::psss:: sound between her and her husband.

"Time mark, Teresa made a noise in reaction to an unexplained sound." Kerry said clinically, then continued, "What year did you die?"

Teresa heard what sounded to be either a slight whisper or possibly the sound of the wind blowing outside. This time she was able to keep herself silent, although every instinct that she had was telling her to run with all her might back to the safety and security of their suite of rooms, which had both heat and light.

"We're going to be leaving soon. If there's anything you want to tell us, if there's something we need to know, please speak into the red light and tell us now." Kerry said seriously as he put his K2 meter back onto his belt.

Teresa waited and listened, but couldn't hear any response.

"Thank you. We'll be leaving now. Go in peace and find good rest." Kerry said, then blindly walked across the room to one of the few lights visible to him, the viewfinder of his night vision camera.

Once he had the camera in hand, he walked back to the side table and picked up the audio recorder before saying, "This is Kerry and Teresa in room thirty-three fifty. One audio recorder, two DVRs and still photo evidence to review at this timestamp."

When he was done speaking, he turned off the digital audio recorder and hooked it back onto his belt.

"Is that it?" Teresa asked hopefully.

"Yes." Kerry assured her as he walked to join her near the doorway.

"What do we do now?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"We're done with this location. If we find anything when we review the evidence, then we may visit here again tomorrow night or we might decide to put a stationary camera in here and see what happens when there's no one here to provoke a response." Kerry said seriously as they walked out of the room.

"So that's it? That's all we have to do?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"Well, we're not done investigating, so it's always possible that we might find another active area before we're done. But I'd be willing to bet that that was probably the most exciting thing that we're likely to find tonight." Kerry assured her as he took the K2 meter off his belt and turned it on with his thumb.

After a moment to consider, Teresa quietly said, "That wasn't so bad."

"Ghosts usually aren't." Kerry said as he divided his attention between his DVR and his K2 meter. "Most of the time they're simply energies that have been imprinted on the surroundings. What we see, hear or otherwise sense is just a leftover shadow of what was here before. It isn't good or evil and actually has no intent. It's just a wispy lingering memory."

"I guess that after what happened at our house, I thought it would be a lot more... dangerous." Teresa quietly admitted.

"What we had was a demon. That's an entirely different thing. If I had the slightest hint that there was a demon present, I'd get you and the kids out of here as quickly as I could." Kerry assured her.

"So these ghosts, they're like Daniel and Benjamin?" Teresa asked to confirm.

"Probably not. Daniel and Benjamin are 'active' or 'revenant' hauntings, meaning that they have awareness and can interact with us if they choose to. There's a good chance that the ghosts here are 'residual' hauntings, which means that they don't think or feel. They're just shadows left over from a time long past. They

have no more thought and feeling than the playback of a DVD recording." Kerry carefully explained.

Teresa was about to say something else when she noticed the K2 meter in Kerry's hand starting to light up.

Kerry stepped back and forward a few times before turning and walking up to a closed hotel room door.

"How would you feel about investigating this one?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Me?" Teresa squeaked.

"Sure. You saw what I did in the last room. If you want to, you can investigate this one and I'll stand back and record everything." Kerry said encouragingly.

It took a moment for Teresa to gather her courage, but finally she said, "I'm going to open the door. Follow me in."

* * * * *

"We already walked through here." Zoe said as she walked up the hallway.

"We didn't have our K2 meters out to tell us if there was something here that we couldn't see, and we weren't recording." Toni explained, then thought to ask, "Are you okay with using the camera to see where you're going?"

"Yeah. This is fun." Zoe said happily.

"I guess it is." Toni reluctantly admitted. She had to stop herself suddenly, when Zoe stopped in front of her.

"I got yellows." Zoe said seriously.

"Let me see." Toni said as she moved to Zoe's side.

"It was doing it before, I promise." Zoe urged her sister to believe her.

"Move the meter around and see if you can get it to go off again. Maybe whatever you ran into moved away." Toni suggested as she looked at her own K2 meter.

"Is it a ghost?" Zoe asked as she started searching.

"Slow down a little. If you move too fast you might miss something." Toni warned her sister, then continued, "It might be a ghost, or it might just be an energy spot. Sometimes when something really sad or happy happens, that energy soaks into the walls."

"So, like, when you have a smelly room and you take the smelly stuff out, sometimes the room can still stink?" Zoe asked curiously.

Toni laughed, then said, "Yes. It's just like that. You know how it is when Dad leaves his sneakers out. Even after he puts them away, you still notice it in the room."

"I got another yellow." Zoe said suddenly.

Toni walked to her sister's side, then used her own K2 meter to try and isolate the boundaries of whatever it was that Zoe had discovered.

Once they had determined that their high energy reading was isolated to an area in the hallway, not near the entry of any rooms, Zoe quietly asked, "What do we do next?"

"Do you think that you can figure out how to use that little camera that Mike gave you?" Toni asked hopefully.

"Don't you just point it and push the button?" Zoe asked cautiously.

"You might have to turn it on, first, but after that, yeah. That's probably all you'll have to do." Toni admitted.

Toni knelt on the floor then set her K2 meter and DVR aside as she got her digital audio recorder out. Before turning it on, she quietly said, "I'm going to be recording. We can't hear what the ghost is

saying if you're talking at the same time, so I'm going to need for you to be quiet for a minute. If you hear anything or feel a change in temperature or something, go ahead and take a picture of it. This is why Mike gave us these cameras."

"Can you help me with this? I can't figure out how to turn it on." Zoe asked with frustration.

Toni set the audio recorder aside then picked up her DVR so that she could use the night vision to help her find the power button on the little camera.

It took a moment, but she was finally able to get the digital camera turned on.

"This is Toni and Zoe Hinton. We're in the third floor A wing in the hallway, between room thirty-five twenty-five and thirty-five twenty-six. At this timestamp we have digital audio, still photos and two handheld DVRs. Zoe got yellow K2 readings and we isolated it to this part of the hallway. Now we're going to do an EVP session." Toni said seriously.

Before she could continue, there was the flash of Zoe taking a still picture.

"I am speaking to whoever or whatever lives here. Can you tell me who you are?" Toni asked carefully.

She purposefully waited to give the entity an opportunity to answer.

As she did, Zoe snapped another still photo.

Toni's first instinct was to tell Zoe to save the camera until something happened to take a picture of, but she held herself back and reminded herself that Zoe wasn't hurting anything and that there was a chance that Zoe might be able to catch sight of something.

"What is your name?" Toni asked in a clear, firm voice.

She paused, as necessary, then asked, "Why are you here?"

Zoe snapped two pictures before Toni continued by asking, "Do you want us to leave?"

Zoe took another picture, then whispered, "Can I ask the ghost some questions?"

"Sure, go ahead. Just remember to give the ghost time to answer."
Toni said softly.

"Are you happy?" Zoe asked confidently.

Toni smiled to herself, then decided to do as Zoe had done and took the camera off her belt and turned it on.

"What do you like to play?" Zoe asked reasonably.

Toni snapped a picture of the area in front of her, where the EMF readings had been located.

"Is your mommy and daddy here?" Zoe asked curiously.

Toni turned and snapped a picture of Zoe.

"Which room is yours?" Zoe asked in a casual tone, as though she were talking to a new friend that she'd just met.

Toni then turned and snapped a picture of the hallway, back the way that they had come from.

"Do you have any toys?" Zoe asked, and Toni thought that she sounded a little hopeful.

Toni then snapped a picture of the hallway that led to the B wing, where they were heading.

"This is my sister, Toni... that's not a boys name, her real names Antonia. I'm Zoe. If you're unhappy or you need something, you can tell us and we'll try to help."

Although Toni felt that she had covered all the bases, as far as

taking pictures went, she snapped one more of the high EMF area.

"I'm done. What do I do now?" Zoe whispered.

"Just say goodbye to let the ghost know that we're leaving and say thank you to them for talking to us." Toni said instructively.

"Oh, okay. Um... We've got stuff to do so we're going to go now. Thanks for talking to us. If you think of something that you want to say to us later, just remember it and we'll come back and talk to you again." Zoe said seriously.

"Peace and good rest." Toni said softly, then picked up the audio recorder and said, "This is the end of the EVP with Toni and Zoe Hinton. We didn't see or hear anything, we just got some yellow K2 readings in this area. Check two handheld DVRs, two still cameras and one digital audio recorder at this timestamp."

"Should I turn off the camera?" Zoe asked cautiously.

Toni thought about the question for a moment, then said, "Leave it on. That way if you hear something later, you can take a picture of it right away."

Looking through the viewfinder of her night vision DVR, Toni saw Zoe nod as she attached the camera to her belt.

Toni made a quick survey of the area to be sure that they hadn't left anything, then asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Do you want for me to do the K2 again?"

"Sure. If you want to. Since you did such a good job with the last one."

Zoe pressed the button on her K2 meter, then lifted the DVR so that she could see where she was walking.

Toni silently followed behind, feeling nearly overwhelming pride in her sister.

* * * * *

After another quick K2 scan of the room, Lorra took the audio recorder from her belt and turned it on before saying, "This is Lorra in room three one three three. We've heard a sound that might be either crying or maybe the wind blowing. Malika is getting a stationary DVR right now that we're going to point out the window. When we do our evidence review we're going to need to synch the times on all the video and audio evidence to see if the wind is blowing at the same time we hear the sounds. Evidence to review is one stationary DVR, one stationary wireless DVR and one audio recorder. Once everything is recording, we're going to do a basic investigation of the E and F wings to detect any other activity."

Lorra placed the audio recorder on a table, then used her night vision DVR to find her way back across the room.

She paused when she heard what sounded to be someone crying in the distance.

"I'm doing a short EVP session, just in case this isn't the wind." Lorra said loudly across the room, then continued, "We have a recorder, that's the thing with the red light on the table by the window. If you have anything to say, speak into that red light and we'll hear you."

She paused for a moment and listened carefully before asking, "What is your name?"

"Where are you from?"

"What years did you stay here?"

"Why are you still here?"

"Do you need help?"

A sound from behind her made her jump.

Lorra turned her night vision camera toward the door and was

relieved to see Malika walking into the room, carrying a messenger bag.

"Let's get this set up, then we can go and look at the rest of our area." Lorra said decisively.

"What's that red light?" Malika asked cautiously.

"That's the audio recorder. I did the time check when I turned it on and then I did a short EVP session." Lorra said as she walked across the room with Malika.

"I thought I'd be more scared, but I feel okay." Malika said absently as she opened the messenger bag.

"Hang on." Lorra said quickly, then turned on her flashlight. Then she explained, "Trying to put this thing together in the dark is stupid."

"Yeah." Malika agreed as she started to take the camera and tripod out of the bag.

"Do you need any help with that?" Lorra asked cautiously.

"No. It looks pretty simple." Malika assured her.

Lorra watched as Malika made quick work of the set up process.

"Is that right?" Malika finally asked as she looked at the viewfinder.

Lorra turned off her flashlight and glanced at the display before saying, "It says that it's recording, that's all that Derek said that we needed to do."

"Are we done in here?" Malika asked curiously.

"Yeah. Let's go and see what else we can find." Lorra said as she scanned the area to make sure that they hadn't inadvertently left something lying around.

Malika did likewise, then started walking toward the door.

"Time check. We're leaving room three one three three to investigate the E and F wings." Lorra called loudly into the room before following Malika into the hallway.

* * * * *

"Are you sensing anything?" Charity asked Max cautiously.

"No... And that's what's bothering me." Max said quietly.

"How do you mean?" Charity asked curiously.

"This place is over two hundred years old. I should be sensing dozens of echoes and voices from the past. So far, this place feels as flat and... eventless... as a newly built home." Max said anxiously.

"What do you think that means?" Charity cautiously asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm instinctively shielding myself, preemptively blocking out what I'm expecting to sense. Sometimes I do that." Max said uneasily.

"Is that kind of like when you close your eyes and brace yourself when you know you're about to get a shot?" Charity asked curiously.

"Yes. Aunt Felicia said that it's natural and that it's not a bad thing. It's part of our self preservation instinct." Max slowly explained.

"Is there anything that you can do to stop it?"

"Yes. I'll need to stop and center myself and consciously lower my walls." Max said quietly.

"Okay. Then you'd better do it before we go any farther. My K2 isn't telling me anything, so you're the only hope that we've got of finding anything at all." Charity said frankly.

"I'm going to sit down and clear my mind for a moment, then I'll be ready." Max said seriously.

Charity watched through the viewfinder of her night vision camera as Max sat down in the middle of the hallway with his legs crossed and closed his eyes.

The sound of a movement off to one side drew Charity's attention and she quickly turned her DVR in that direction.

She didn't see anything, but took the camera off her belt and snapped a few still photos as quickly as she was able, one handed.

Charity slowly scanned around the hallway with her DVR as she kept the digital camera poised, ready to snap another picture at the first indication of another sound.

"I'm ready." Max said quietly as he stood.

"Can you sense anything?" Charity asked cautiously.

"This way."

* * * * *

As Alana stepped out of room 6318, she realized that she was probably at the most central location of the sixth floor of the hotel. Taking that into account, there wasn't any logical reason for her to choose one wing over the others. That being the case, Alana set off to the right, planning to go to the A wing, so that she could simply investigate them in alphabetical order.

With her DVR in one hand and her K2 meter in the other, she slowly walked down the hallway of the D wing, approaching the junction where the B, C and D wings intersected.

Suddenly, she heard a faint fluttering or scampering sound from above her. Reflexively, she turned her DVR camera upward, but nothing was there.

She turned and did a quick visual survey of the area, but nothing appeared to be out of place in any direction.

Alana was aware that her heart was pounding and that she seemed

to be experiencing the aftereffects of too much adrenaline. She chastised herself for reacting to such a benign thing as an unexpected sound.

Having reached the intersection, she turned left and went down the B wing which would eventually branch off to the right into the A wing.

Her years of investigatory experience told her that she was in absolutely no danger whatsoever, but still she found that her nerves were on edge and that she had an increasing pool of anxiety welling within her.

The K2 meter in her hand wasn't giving any indication of anything out of place. Nevertheless, not only was her heart racing, but her breathing was also becoming rapid and shallow.

Aware that her handheld DVR was recording, Alana carefully said, "About a minute ago, in response to an unknown sound stimulus, I was overcome with a feeling of anxiety and a sensation of being pursued. I can't seem to get the feelings to settle down although I'm in no apparent danger. EMF shows as normal."

* * * * *

"Can you imagine how much money you must have to have to stay in a room like this?" Van asked as he looked around the 'imperial' suite.

"No. But if I was a ghost, I can think of worse places to end up." Hunter said frankly.

"Why don't we do an EVP session in here?" Van asked curiously.

"Are you getting any EMF readings?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"No. But we haven't got any anywhere else, either. This place is as good as any." Van said reasonably.

"I don't know. I feel like we'd be wasting time, and since they're

giving us our own investigation to do... it just feels wrong." Hunter said anxiously.

"How much of an investigation are we going to get done if we just walk around and don't get any readings?" Van asked simply, then added, "I mean, since our 'hot spot' turned out not to be all that hot."

"Yeah. Okay. Just a little one." Hunter relented.

Van turned on his digital audio recorder and said, "Hunter and Van in room forty-four fifty-one. We're doing an EVP session. We haven't seen or heard anything, this just seems like it would be a nice place for a ghost to hang out."

Hunter walked to Van's side and carefully did a visual scan of the room with his DVR.

"Do you want to take some stills while we're doing this?" Van asked seriously.

"Yeah. I've got it." Hunter said quickly as he took the digital camera off his belt.

"I'm holding a voice recorder in my hand, it has a red light. If you talk to it, I might be able to hear you. We're not here to hurt you or make you go away or anything. We just want to ask you some questions." Van said into the darkness.

Hunter took a picture in the general direction of the center of the room.

"What is your name?" Van asked professionally.

Hunter snapped another picture and waited.

"What year was it when you first came here?" Van asked as he turned to face away from Hunter to try and avoid the flash from the camera.

All of a sudden, the lights on the K2 meter in Van's hand went from

nothing to fully illuminated, all the way into the red.

Shocked by the sudden EMF reading, Van cautiously asked, "Do you want us to leave?"

"Yes." A voice whispered from between them.

"Did you say that?" Van asked in a trembling voice.

"No." Hunter answered fearfully.

"Okay. We'll leave. But before we do, I'm going to give you a few seconds to tell us anything that you want to say."

"*Get out!*" A voice whispered harshly.

"Um, yeah. We're outta here." Van said as he started walking toward the door.

By the time he had reached the door, Hunter was at his side.

"What do we do now?" Hunter asked as soon as they were in the hall.

"Let's get back to where we set up the camera. If things are heating up, we need to check out the main thing we were sent here to investigate." Van said seriously.

"Do you think it's going to try to hurt us?" Hunter asked as he struggled to keep up with Van's hurried pace.

"Even if it does, we're protected." Van said simply.

"Right this minute, I don't feel very protected." Hunter said honestly.

"Your moms know that this stuff works, so trust them. I know it works, too. So trust me. Draw in the light. Let it surround you and fill you."

"Yeah."

* * * * *

"I need to get out of here. I can feel that thing eating at me." Kyla said gravely. Her hands were trembling, causing the beam of her flashlight to 'flutter'.

"Go ahead, if you need to. I'm going to stay here and keep studying it." Jack said simply as he moved the flashlight closer to look at the painting in detail.

"You don't understand. This thing is malignant. The longer you're around it, the more likely it is to infect you. It's a trap." Kyla urged him to understand.

"It's a painting. If I can just record one instance of it changing appearance, I'll have photographic *evidence* of a paranormal event." Jack said seriously.

"Is *that* worth your soul?" Kyla asked as tears welled in her eyes.

"I don't believe in souls. I believe in energies." Jack responded reasonably.

"Fine! If you stay here the *energy* in that painting is going to corrupt *your* energy and turn it into something evil and insane." Kyla said angrily.

Jack took in a long slow breath of cold air, then said, "Alright. Let me double check that everything is recording, then we'll go and walk around the rest of this floor to see what else we can find."

"Oh my God!" Kyla gasped.

Jack turned the flashlight toward her and found her wide eyed and pale, staring at the painting.

As he followed her gaze and turned back to the painting, he saw a dark figure, walking in the fog, amongst the trees.

* * * * *

"Do you smell that?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Perfume?" Derek asked to confirm.

"Yeah. I didn't smell it until just now." Mike said nervously.

"Would you do me a favor and walk around the room with your K2 meter while I finish getting this camera set up?" Derek asked hopefully.

"Just hit the button, right?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Yes. If it reads anything over green, let me know." Derek answered absently.

"Um... Derek?" Mike asked nervously.

When Derek turned, he saw Mike holding out the K2 meter for him to see, with all the lights lit up.

"Hold still." Derek whispered as he carefully turned the wireless DVR on its tripod to face Mike.

"What should I do?" Mike asked in a whisper.

"Just stay still." Derek said calmly as he reached down to his belt and took off the audio recorder.

As he was turning it on, Mike let out a sudden scream, then ran for the door.

Derek was conflicted about what he should do, but finally decided to follow after Mike to make sure that he was okay.

* * * * *

"What's wrong? What happened?" Derek asked as he approached Mike and Norville in the hall, some thirty feet from the door to room 257.

"I felt it touch me." Mike said in a trembling voice as he fought to clip his K2 meter back onto his belt.

"What did you feel?" Derek asked as he held out his digital audio recorder.

"It was cold and wet... on my neck." Mike said as he began to reach up to it.

"Stop. Let me see, first." Derek cautioned.

Mike stopped in mid motion, but from his expression, it appeared to be something of a struggle.

Derek looked carefully at Mike's neck, then immediately took out his digital camera and started taking pictures from different angles.

"What's wrong? What is it?" Mike asked with escalating panic.

Derek was in too much of a documenting frenzy to answer.

It was finally Norville who whispered, "Lipstick."

Chapter 7: The Great Momo

After stepping into the room, Teresa stopped and took in a deep breath of cold air to help calm herself.

Using the night vision of the handheld DVR, she was easily able to see every detail of the room. Nothing stood out to her as being threatening or even out of place. It looked like a perfectly normal hotel room.

Following the example of what Kerry had done earlier, Teresa set her DVR aside and took the audio recorder off her belt and turned it on.

"This is Teresa Hinton, I'm here with Kerry in room thirty-three fifty-seven. Kerry got an elevated EMF reading from this room so I'm investigating. We haven't seen or heard anything, but I'm going to do an EVP just in case." Teresa said before placing the audio recorder on a side table.

"What is your name?" Teresa asked carefully.

As Kerry had done, she waited for a long moment to give whatever might be inclined to answer the opportunity to do so. A sudden flash startled her, but she didn't have to look behind her to know that Kerry was taking pictures with the still camera.

"Why are you here?" Teresa asked carefully, then realized that she didn't remember what else Kerry had asked.

She waited another moment, then quietly asked, "Did you leave anyone behind?"

Suddenly feeling vulnerable, standing in complete darkness, she went back to the DVR, easily able to find it from the little bit of light from the viewfinder screen.

"Are you lonely?" Teresa asked as she picked up the DVR and did a relatively slow scan of the room.

She realized that she couldn't think of anything more to ask, so she simply said, "Thank you for your time. Peace and good rest to you."

She waited another moment, then went to the side table and picked up the recorder.

When she looked back toward the doorway, she saw Kerry watching her with a smile on his face.

"I didn't get anything." She said as she approached him.

"We won't know that for sure until we do the evidence review. You'll be surprised at how many things we can find." Kerry said encouragingly.

"Maybe you aren't crazy after all." Teresa grudgingly admitted.

"The jury's still out on that one." Kerry said with a smile, then added, "Thanks for giving it a chance. I enjoy being able to share this with you."

Teresa moved next to her husband and gave him a firm hug.

"Let's go back to our 'hot spot' and see if anything's going on."

"Do you think that the girls are alright?"

"I'm sure they're fine."

* * * * *

Toni was careful to keep Zoe within view at all times as her younger sister led the way down the hallway.

When they finally reached a camera on a tripod in the middle of the hallway, Toni quietly said, "Mom and Dad must be investigating the rest of their area. Let's go back."

"Where are we going?" Zoe asked as she turned her camera so she could see her sister.

"Do you remember where we set up our camera? We need to go

back there." Toni said simply.

"That's a long way." Zoe said unenthusiastically.

"You've done a great job and been a lot of help, you don't have to do any more if you're too tired. Since we're already here, we can call Mom and Dad on the walkie-talkie and they'll probably be here in just a minute." Toni said honestly.

"No. I'm not too tired." Zoe said firmly.

"Okay, then. Lead the way."

* * * * *

"Which way do you want to go?" Malika whispered as they stepped out of room 3133.

"Let's go check out the E wing. Once we're done with that, we can go ahead and check out the rest of the F wing." Lorra said decisively then turned her DVR toward Malika to see if she agreed.

"Yeah." Malika said uncertainly.

That being decided, Lorra triggered her K2 meter and slowly started walking, paying careful attention to every detail of what was ahead of them.

"Do you think that we're going to be the only team to not find any ghosts?" Malika asked anxiously.

"I don't know. Why would you think that?" Lorra asked cautiously, maintaining the majority of her focus on her night vision camera and her K2 meter.

"Well, since we've kinda debunked our 'hot spot'... what are the chances that we'll find something else?" Malika asked quietly.

"Actually, I'd say that the chances are pretty good. First of all, this is a really old building, so I bet that there's more than one ghost hanging around here, just waiting for us to notice him. Second,

you've got to remember that ghosts *like* us... I mean they *really* like us. We're both thirteen years old and we're girls. We're like their favorite food." Lorra said expressively.

"I really wish you wouldn't put it like that." Malika said honestly.

Lorra laughed, then said, "Alright. Let's just say that our psychic energy is some of their favorite food. That means that if we only find the tiniest little speck of a ghost, between us we'll be able to supercharge him and hopefully catch him on camera or video or on an audio recorder."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Malika reluctantly agreed, then cautiously asked, "Are you getting anything on the K2?"

"Not a thing."

* * * * *

Charity followed along as Max led the way.

As they turned the corner where the E wing became the F wing, Max took an unexpected turn and opened the door to a supply closet.

"What are you sensing in here?" Charity cautiously asked.

"Forbidden love." Max said as he walked deeper into the room.

Once she was inside, Charity realized that it wasn't a simple linen closet, as she had first assumed but instead, a rather large room with all manner of cleaning equipment and supplies.

"What else can you tell me?" Charity quietly prompted.

"This is the only place that they could meet. This was their escape, their refuge." Max said distantly.

"Who? Max, can you tell me who *they* are?" Charity implored.

"On second thought, it was more forbidden than it was love. They were both caught up in the thrill of doing something they weren't

supposed to. The danger was their passion." Max said thoughtfully.

"Who?" Charity asked seriously.

"Momo... that's the only name I can get. It's a nickname, I think." Max said slowly.

"Can you see when?" Charity asked as she slowly panned around the room to see if she could detect anything out of the ordinary.

"A long time ago... 1850, maybe. I can't be sure." Max said carefully, then added, "If it hadn't been forbidden, they wouldn't have had anything in common. Defiance, danger and rebellion were the foundations of their relationship."

"That doesn't sound like a lot to work with." Charity said frankly.

"It was glorious." Max said with a serene smile as he finally turned his attention in her direction.

"Are you back with me?" Charity asked to confirm.

"Yes. I'm sorry if I got lost in it for a minute. It's easy to lose myself in the sights, sounds and emotions washing over me." Max tried to explain.

"Are you up to doing an EVP session?" Charity asked cautiously.

"I'm fine. But I don't know how much luck we'll have. I think that what I was getting was residual." Max said thoughtfully.

"Still, it's all we've got so far. It won't hurt to try." Charity said as she took the digital audio recorder off her belt and turned it on.

"Timecheck: Charity and Max, E and F wing supply closet." Max said dutifully.

"What is your name?" Charity asked firmly.

Max closed his eyes and concentrated on sensing anything around them.

"What years were you here?" Charity asked carefully.

Slowly, Max began to shake his head.

"What was your lover's name?" Charity asked as she slowly scanned around the supply room for any sign of activity.

"There's no consciousness here with us." Max said frankly.

"Thank you. Go in peace." Charity said before turning off the audio recorder.

* * * * *

As Alana walked down the hallway of the A wing, she had a slight sensation of vertigo and it appeared that the far end of the hallway was getting farther away rather than nearer the more she walked.

Her thoughts were cloudy and her heart felt like it was trying to beat it's way out of her chest.

Every instinct that she had was telling her to run to safety; either run back to the room where she had left Marsha, or back to the conference room with its heat and light.

As her foggy mind was struggling to cope with the wildly meandering thoughts, she finally reached the end of the hallway, which culminated in a semi-circular array of doors.

Alana wasn't sure if she should be relieved that she had accomplished this part of her overall goal, or if she should panic at the realization that she had nowhere to run.

As she struggled to calm herself and make logical sense of what she was feeling, she heard a man's voice faintly whisper, "I got you."

* * * * *

"Why are you waiting?" Van asked cautiously when he noticed Hunter lagging behind.

"What if our 'hot spot' is actually hot now?" Hunter asked apprehensively.

"I guess it could be." Van said simply.

"Do you think that it might be worse than the 'get out' one we just left?"

"Probably not. Alana said that people just feel 'a disturbing presence' in this room. We can handle that, no problem." Van said as he inserted the master key into the door.

Hunter put a hand on his arm to stop him from opening it, then quietly asked, "What *exactly* is 'a disturbing presence' supposed to mean?"

"People who stay in this room feel uncomfortable, paranoid or afraid. They usually either end up leaving the hotel or requesting another room. That's nothing. It's creepy feelings. We can handle it." Van said confidently.

"Well, I guess if that's how it is, then our 'hot spot' isn't half as bad as the room that we accidentally found on our own." Hunter said as he fought down his nervousness.

"Yeah. This is gonna be a piece of cake." Van said encouragingly, then added, "Besides, we didn't feel anything when we were in here before, setting up the camera."

After a moment to gather his courage, Hunter finally said, "Right. I guess I'm ready."

"I'll go first. Have your DVR ready." Van said, wanting to take some of the pressure off of Hunter.

"Don't worry. I got your back." Hunter said, sounding a little bit more like his usual carefree self.

"I'll hold you to that." Van said with a grin as he opened the door and stepped inside.

Hunter was about to follow, but stopped in his tracks when Van backed into him and whispered, "Get back."

* * * * *

"Kyla? Are you getting this on your handheld?" Jack asked as he snapped multiple pictures.

"You need to get away from it." Kyla whispered as tears slid down her cheeks.

"What you're sensing is frightening you. I need for you to shield yourself and record this!" Jack snapped.

Kyla was stunned by her husband's forceful tone and fought against her natural instincts to will her logical mind to override what every molecule of her being was telling her to do.

"I'm going to need to talk to the owner of this place to see if we'd be allowed to collect a sample of the pigment." Jack said as he moved even closer to examine the shadowy figure in the painting.

"Jack!" Kyla yelled.

"What?!" Jack barked with irritation.

"I can't block it. I can't hide from it. It's seen me." Kyla whimpered, then dashed out of the room.

Jack glanced toward the door, then back at the painting and was shocked to see that the shadow figure in the painting now had two pinpoint glowing white eyes.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Derek asked cautiously as he took quick stock of the equipment that Mike and Norville were carrying.

"Yeah. It just freaked me out a little bit. I wasn't expecting anything like that." Mike said as he tried to calm himself, then thought to ask, "Does stuff like that happen all the time?"

"Nope. Beginner's luck." Derek assured him, then motioned for Mike and Norville to start walking.

Since they were walking away from the room, Mike cautiously asked, "Are we going to place the other camera now?"

"No. We're going back to the command center. Since we know that the first room has activity, we need to be sure that the wireless camera connected the way that it was supposed to and that it's recording." Derek explained reasonably.

"So, if nothing had happened in there, you wouldn't be going back right now?" Mike asked to confirm.

"Yeah. If we placed the camera and nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary in the room, then I would have gone to place the other one, then back to the command center to check on them both at once. But since we know the location is active, I don't want to take the chance of missing a single minute of footage."

"Are you alright, Norville?" Mike thought to ask.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I guess from the way the ghost scared you, that that's probably why my pa didn't want me going in there." Norville said cautiously.

"It sounds like your pa's a good man who just wants to protect you." Mike said with a quick smile at him.

"Sometimes, I feel bad because I don't get to go places and do things. But Pa says that someone like me needs to be someplace where things are easy to understand and don't change too much. He says that the world away from here is busy and fast and loud and that people don't have time to care about each other or help someone who needs it." Norville said carefully.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Derek said frankly.

"You know, I think you could probably do alright out in the outside world if you had people to help you." Mike said thoughtfully.

"Everyone I know lives here."

Conversation faltered after that.

Although Mike tried to maintain his focus on the paranormal situation that they were embroiled in, he couldn't help but keep flashing back on what options might be open to Norville in the world away from the hotel.

* * * * *

"How do we know if anything's happened while we've been gone?" Teresa asked as they approached the stationary camera that they had positioned in the hallway before they left to investigate the rest of their assigned area.

"Well, if we have someone in Tech to monitor the live feed, they'll usually spot something as it's happening so we can react to it immediately. But in a case like this, we just look around to see if there are any signs that anything's changed while we've been away." Kerry explained.

"It sounds like not having someone watching Tech is a missed opportunity for your investigation." Teresa said reasonably.

"It's convenient to have someone stationed in Tech, but ninety-nine times out of a hundred, he's just sitting there waiting for something to happen and nothing does. Making sure that we have all the tools that we need and helping us to organize and evaluate the evidence is the bigger part of the job." Kerry said frankly, then turned on his flashlight.

"Don't you need to keep that off?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"I'll only have it on for a minute. I'm just checking the equipment. It looks like nothing's happened while we've been gone, so why don't we go ahead and stop in one of these rooms so that maybe we'll hear what the hotel guests reported hearing?" Kerry asked reasonably.

"Which room?" Teresa asked as she turned on her own flashlight and looked at the nearest doors.

"Pick any room you like." Kerry said as he turned off his flashlight, satisfied that the camera was working as it should be.

Teresa walked to room 3312 and used the master key to open the door. By the time she had the door open, Kerry was at her side.

"What happens now?" Teresa asked in a whisper as the door closed behind them.

"Probably not much." Kerry said frankly, then explained, "According to Alana, no one's ever seen anything, but there have been several reports of knocking and..."

Kerry suddenly went silent at the sound of running footsteps in the hall.

* * * * *

"Everything looks fine. I don't think anyone's messed with it." Toni said as she looked over the wireless DVR.

"What do we do now?" Zoe asked uncertainly as she looked around the 'cul de sac' with her night vision camera.

"If you want to, we can do like we did in the hallway and do an EVP session." Toni said simply, then thought to add, "Why don't you sit down over here where the wireless camera can see what you're doing? That way if something happens, we'll be sure that it gets recorded."

"Is there a ghost here?" Zoe asked as she turned her camera toward her sister to see her expression.

Toni took the K2 meter off her belt and turned it on as she said, "I don't know, yet. According to Alana, there's supposed to be one around here. While I'm taking readings, why don't you get your audio recorder turned on and get your still camera ready? As soon

as you've got everything set up, we can try talking to the ghosts and see if they'll show up to answer."

"Is this ghost like Daniel and Benjamin?" Zoe asked as she took the digital audio recorder off her belt and turned it on.

"That's one of the things that we're here to figure out." Toni stated simply.

Zoe snapped a picture, then looked at the output on the little viewscreen.

While she was examining the picture, Toni finished her preliminary sweep of the area, then moved in front of the stationary camera and sat down beside her sister.

"What now?" Zoe asked cautiously.

"First off, you tell the audio recorder who we are, what we're doing and why we're doing it. That way, when we go back to look at all the evidence, we'll know which pieces go where." Toni suggested.

Homing in on the little red light, Zoe picked up the digital audio recorder and carefully said, "This is Zoe and Toni. We're doing a VVP in case there's any ghosts here."

"It's an EVP, but besides that, you did it just right. Do you want to go ahead and ask the ghost some questions?" Toni asked encouragingly.

"Yeah." Zoe said happily, then asked into the recorder, "What's your name?"

Toni took the opportunity to slowly scan around the room with her DVR to try and spot any activity.

"Is this a fun place?" Zoe asked earnestly.

Toni, still looking through her DVR, looked at her K2 meter and found that it wasn't reading anything at all.

"Is there anyone here besides you?" Zoe asked curiously and sounded to be getting more comfortable talking to something or someone who wasn't visible to her.

On impulse, Toni took her camera off her belt and snapped two pictures. She didn't really have a reason except that there was always the slightest chance that she might accidentally catch something.

"Do you stay in one of these rooms, or do you stay out here in the hall?" Zoe asked slowly.

Although Toni had gone to great lengths to teach Zoe as much as she was willing to learn about the paranormal, Toni was still surprised at the thoughtful and relevant questions that her sister was asking.

"When did you come here the first time? Do you remember what year it was?" Zoe asked seriously.

Toni snapped two more pictures in different directions.

"I can't think of anything else to ask. Did you want to ask some questions?" Zoe asked in a whisper.

"No. I think you did a really good job and asked about everything that was important. Why don't you just tell the recorder that we're done with our EVP, then tell the ghost goodbye and thank you?" Toni said instructively.

"This is Toni and Zoe. We're done with the E V P. We didn't see anything or hear anything or anything." Zoe said into the digital audio recorder before turning it off.

Toni smiled at her sister's manner of speech, but was content with the sentiments she expressed. As long as it was understandable, she couldn't see why anyone should have any objection.

"If you told me your name, I didn't hear it. But if it recorded, then I'll know it when I come back. The recorder's turned off now, but if you

want to tell us anything, you can talk to us tomorrow. We'll be back. I'm Zoe. This is my sister Toni. Did I already tell you that? Anyway, we'll be back tomorrow, so we'll talk to you more then." Zoe rambled.

"Peace and good rest. Thank you." Toni said sincerely.

"Yeah. Thanks." Zoe quickly added.

After a long moment of silence, Zoe quietly asked, "Is that it? What do we do now?"

"I think we're going to sit and be quiet for a few minutes. If there's a ghost here, let's give it a chance to show itself." Toni said decisively.

"Can I sit next to you? I'm cold." Zoe asked hopefully.

"Sounds good."

* * * * *

"Well, there's the end of the hall. I guess we're not going to find anything." Malika said as she looked at the 'cul de sac' of doors before her.

"Shhh." Lorra hissed.

Malika froze and listened as closely as she could.

A moment later, she heard a thump which was loud enough to make her jump.

"It's coming from over here." Lorra whispered as she slowly walked with her nightvision DVR in one hand and her K2 meter in the other.

There was another sound, which was more a series of successive sounds. To Malika, it seemed like the sound of something tumbling across the floor.

"Did you hear that?" Malika asked nervously.

"It sounds like someone's moving around in there." Lorra whispered in return.

"Do you think it's one of the other teams?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Look under the door. There's no light. If it was one of us, they'd probably be using a flashlight." Lorra said reasonably.

"Then do you think it's someone from the hotel?"

"I doubt that they walk around in the dark, either."

"So, you think it's a ghost?" Malika finally asked to confirm.

"I can think of one way to find out."

After a moment to gather her courage, Malika finally asked, "Okay. What are we doing?"

"I'll take point, you stay behind me and make sure to record whatever happens." Lorra said decisively.

"Yeah. Okay. I can do that." Malika said, trying to sound confident and dependable.

"Be ready to run." Lorra said firmly before slowly turning the master key.

Malika was certain within herself that her preparedness for running was *not* an issue. Keeping herself from running might end up being the greater challenge.

As Lorra walked more fully into the room, Malika carefully panned around the room to record every detail of what they were seeing.

The room looked as though it had been trashed.

The couch cushions were on the floor and the smaller pieces of furniture were overturned.

"This is Lorra, I'm here with Malika in room three one six four. We heard movement in this room and it looks like someone had a

pretty good tantrum in here. See the video. We're doing an EVP to try and make contact."

Malika looked at her with nightvision and saw the red light of the audio recorder in Lorra's hand.

"Do you want to get some stills while I'm doing this?" Lorra asked over her shoulder.

"Yeah. I got it." Malika said nervously, then fought to get the small camera off her belt, one handed, while continuing to record what Lorra was doing.

"What is your name?" Lorra asked firmly.

Malika was finally able to get the camera turned on with her cold, slightly numb, fingers.

"Where are you from?" Lorra asked next.

The flash from the camera surprised Malika to the point that she almost dropped the DVR and had to fight to regain her hold of it.

"Why did you mess up this room?" Lorra asked firmly.

The sound of a door slamming caused Malika to jump and she felt a tingle of fear run through her entire body.

She quickly turned toward where the sound had come from and saw a closed door which, from what she had seen in other rooms, she assumed to be the door to the bathroom.

"Get some stills." Lorra whispered.

Malika quickly raised the camera that she was somehow still holding and snapped three pictures in succession.

"What are you doing here?" Lorra asked in a voice that bordered on angry and demanding.

Beginning to calm slightly, Malika slowly panned around the room to see if she could notice if anything had changed position.

"We're going to leave in a minute. Tell us what you want." Lorra said seriously.

As Malika finished her sweep of the room, she made a point of snapping a few more stills to document the chaos.

"That's it. We're done." Lorra said decisively, then turned off her recorder.

"Aren't you supposed to thank the ghost for talking to you?" Malika asked cautiously.

"I don't feel like thanking a spoiled brat. Any ghost that would do this doesn't deserve to be thanked, they deserve to be told off." Lorra said firmly.

Malika couldn't restrain her nervous laughter at the suggestion, then felt compelled to ask, "Are you going to take the ghost over your knee and spank him for misbehaving?"

"No. But I think he needs a time out to think about what he's done." Lorra responded, then added, "Let's go."

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Max?" Charity asked as they slowly walked down the hallway of the E wing of the fourth floor.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry that I drifted away for a minute back there." Max said repentantly, then carefully asked, "Did we get any good evidence?"

"We won't know for sure until we do the evidence review. But as far as I can see, we've collected *exactly* nothing." Charity said frankly.

"Sorry." Max said quietly.

"You don't have anything to be sorry about. I'm just saying that regardless of what you sensed, we haven't come across anything that could reasonably be considered to be *evidence*." Charity said seriously.

After a long silence, Max finally said, "We need to go back to the supply room."

"What for?" Charity asked cautiously.

"We need to be more thorough... and more patient. *That's* the hot spot. I'm sure of it." Max finished somewhat distantly.

"Okay. We'll go back."

* * * * *

Alana spun on her heel and frantically searched for the source of the voice for a moment before making a concerted effort to calm herself.

When she was finally able to put her thoughts into some sort of order, Alana took the audio recorder off her belt and turned it on before saying, "I just heard a voice speak from directly behind me. It sounded like an adult male and I believe it said, 'I got you'. Further, I'm still having an increasing sense of paranoia, which might be affecting my objectivity. Considering the intensity of what I've been feeling, I'm going to have to disregard anything that I believe I witnessed as being brought on by an agitated mental state. I was recording with my handheld DVR at the time, so if there were an actual audible sound, that should have recorded it."

Alana took a deep breath, then said more calmly, "Since it's *possible* that I actually heard something, I'm going to do a K2 sweep and standard tests, including temperature readings, still photos and I'm going to leave this audio recorder running in the meantime. My location is outside room sixty-four forty-nine."

After setting the audio recorder aside, Alana proceeded to do as she had said and made a thorough investigation of the area.

* * * * *

"What is it? What did you see?" Hunter asked anxiously.

"I didn't see anything. But as soon as I took one step into the room, it was like I couldn't breathe. The feeling was so strong I couldn't think of anything but getting out of there." Van said anxiously.

"But you didn't see anything on the camera?" Hunter asked to confirm.

"No. It looked just the same as when we were here before." Van said as he tried to calm himself.

"It didn't hurt you or anything, did it?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"No. Nothing like that. All of a sudden, I just felt scared." Van quietly admitted.

"I think, before we decide what we need to do, that I need to go in there and feel it for myself." Hunter said and the uncertainty could be heard in his voice.

"Are you sure?" Van asked to confirm.

"If I *really* know what you're talking about, then I can help you decide what's best to do next." Hunter said reasonably.

"Okay. I'll hold the door open for you, so you don't get trapped inside." Van said supportively.

"Then, I guess I'd better go ahead and do it before I can talk myself out of it." Hunter said nervously.

"It won't hurt you. It just makes you feel bad for a second." Van tried to assure him.

Since the key was still in the door, all Hunter had to do was turn it and the door clicked open.

He raised his DVR and watched as Van pushed the door open for him, to clear the way.

Hunter stepped into the room and saw that Van had been correct. It looked like a typical hotel room, just the same as when they had

been there earlier setting up the camera. Nothing seemed to be out of place.

All of a sudden, a feeling washed over him and, as Van had said, the fear essentially made him freeze in place. He wasn't even able to draw breath.

As soon as he could get his paralyzed limbs to respond to his commands, Hunter backed out of the room as quickly as was physically possible.

"Are you alright?" Van asked as he made a point of pulling the door closed.

"I don't know, yet." Hunter said honestly.

"How do you feel?" Van asked as he hurried to Hunter's side.

"Dirty."

Chapter 8: Matroyshka

"Are you alright?" Jack asked as he held his wife in his arms.

"I think that I was able to get away in time. I don't feel like it got a firm hold on me." Kyla said as she returned his hug.

"I'm sorry that I didn't take what you were saying more seriously. It's just that being able to photographically document a paranormal event, from beginning to end like this is monumental. It could change everything." Jack said frankly.

"I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing." Kyla said honestly, then expanded on it by continuing, "I'm afraid of what's in that painting. I'm afraid that you might be playing into its hands."

"So, do you think that it might be trying to manipulate me into letting it out?" Jack asked cautiously.

"I haven't been able to gain any insight into its intention toward you. It might be coaxing you to let it out or it might be trying to draw you in." Kyla said carefully.

"How sure are you? I mean, I know that sometimes your insights can be a bit tenuous or easily misconstrued." Jack asked as gently as he was able.

After a moment to consider, Kyla carefully said, "I can't tell you anything about its intent. The only thing I could sense was when it focused its attention on me."

"Have you been able to determine *what* it is?" Jack asked cautiously.

"No. The only thing I can tell you for certain about that, is that what you and I are seeing is what it *wants* us to see." Kyla said thoughtfully.

"So, we don't know what it is, what it wants or why it's inhabiting the painting in the first place." Jack summarized.

"I don't think it's inhabiting the painting, I think it's using it as a portal."

* * * * *

As they walked into the conference room, Derek went immediately to the laptops to check on the live video feeds.

"Is there anything we can do?" Mike asked as he and Norville stopped inside the door.

"No. This should just take me a minute." Derek said as he began typing.

"What's he doing?" Norville asked in a whisper.

"All of the different teams set up cameras, just like we did. Derek is making sure that all the cameras are recording." Mike explained, then asked, "Do you want to see?"

Norville nodded enthusiastically.

Mike led the way around the conference table and stopped behind Derek's left shoulder, where he had a good view of all the screens.

Norville stopped behind Derek's right shoulder and looked on in awe at all the different windows.

"Those are my sisters." Mike said as he pointed at one window in particular.

"What's she doing?" Norville asked as he pointed at another screen.

All of them, including Derek, watched as Marsha knelt in the middle of a room with a dagger in her hand and began to go through the motions of slowly drawing a pentagram in the air. There wasn't any sound playing, since the sounds from so many video streams at once would result in nothing but gibberish, but they could clearly see that Marsha was saying something.

Derek typed something quickly on his laptop before saying, "We still have a job to do. We need to get back and set up our other camera."

"But what was she doing?" Mike asked cautiously.

Derek stood then began walking to the door as he said, "That's a good question."

* * * * *

Before Kerry could react, Teresa had already opened the door and was looking out, using her night vision DVR.

"Do you see anything?" Kerry asked from behind her.

"No. I thought it might be the girls." Teresa said quietly.

Kerry took his audio recorder off his belt and turned it on before saying, "This is Kerry and Teresa. We're in room thirty-three twelve. We've just heard what sounded like footsteps running in the hallway. I'm leaving the audio recorder outside the door, then we're going back into the room to wait and see if we hear anything else."

After nudging Teresa out of the doorway, Kerry knelt down and placed the audio recorder just outside the door.

Once Kerry was back inside and had the door closed, he quietly said, "Let's just be quiet and wait. If we hear footsteps or knocking, we won't open the door. The video camera and the audio recorder should pick up whatever it is so that we can identify it in the evidence review."

"But what if it's the girls?" Teresa asked with concern.

"Then they can call us on the walkie-talkies or they can say something when they're in the hallway." Kerry said reasonably.

"So all we have to do now is wait and listen?" Teresa asked to be sure.

"Yes. Unless the girls call us for something, we'll just wait here until Alana calls an end to tonight's investigation." Kerry said simply.

"How long does it usually take for her to call it off?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"That all depends on what's going on. If there's activity, she'll usually let it run longer. If nothing's happening, then she'll sometimes cut it short. There's really no way to predict it." Kerry said frankly.

"What's that?" Teresa asked suddenly.

Both silently listened to a knocking sound in the distance.

* * * * *

Time passed slowly as Toni and Zoe waited for something to happen.

Occasionally, one or the other of them would snap a picture, but there weren't any elevated K2 readings or any sounds to indicate that anything supernatural was present.

Toni finally broke the silence by saying, "I think that we've done everything that we can do here."

"I'm not too tired. We can do more." Zoe said quickly.

"There's nothing to do. If a ghost shows up, the camera will record it. If you're up to it, you can take K2 readings while we walk to where Mom and Dad are investigating." Toni said reasonably.

"Yeah. If we get yellows, can we stop and talk to the ghost in the hall again?" Zoe asked hopefully.

"Yes. I promise."

* * * * *

"So, what should we do next?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Go back to room three one three three and make sure that everything's still recording." Lorra said simply.

"No. I mean about the 'brat' ghost?" Malika explained.

"Nothing. We'll just go back and check on it tomorrow and try again." Lorra said simply.

"I think we should put a camera in there tonight. It did stuff when we weren't there and stopped when we were, so if we put a camera in there and leave it, we should have the best chance of catching something." Malika said reasonably.

Lorra thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah. Okay. Let's do that."

"Do you want for me to go down and get another camera?" Malika asked cautiously.

"Sure. If you don't mind going by yourself, you can go do that while I check on things back in three one three three." Lorra said decisively.

"I don't mind going downstairs... but you don't want me to set it up by myself, do you?" Malika asked cautiously.

"No. When you get the camera, come back to three one three three and get me. Since the 'brat' is violent, neither one of us should go into three one six four alone." Lorra said firmly.

"Good."

* * * * *

"Any idea of what we should do now?" Charity asked quietly.

"Shhh. Wait for it." Max slowly whispered.

As she waited, Charity took the opportunity to be sure that her camera was on and ready to be used, her audio recorder was

recording and her handheld DVR was positioned nearby so that it could cover the most area.

Charity checked her K2 and IR thermometer, but neither showed any indication of things being anything other than perfectly normal.

Although Charity wanted to get up and seek out activity, her trust in Max kept her sitting and waiting in the darkness and silence.

* * * * *

As Alana left the A wing, she unaccountably felt the sensation of paranoia ease. So far as she could tell, nothing had changed. The atmosphere in the B hallway was not in any way different than it had been in the A hallway, but the difference in what she was feeling was like the difference between night and day.

She once again checked her K2 meter and was once again told that there was no measurable electromagnetic activity anywhere around her. Although she had the utmost confidence in Derek's diligence and capabilities, she still resolved herself to verifying that the meter was functioning properly.

As she quickly stepped into the intersection of the B, C and D wings, it was as though another layer of the all consuming fear that had been gripping her suddenly fell away.

Although it had been her original intent to return to the room where Marsha was investigating, presumably to check on her progress, Alana decided to, instead, explore the C wing to see if she would experience anything along the lines of what she had felt in the A and B wings.

With her K2 meter in hand, Alana slowed her pace and did her best to get back into the proper frame of mind for an investigation.

* * * * *

"So, now that you've felt it, what do you think that we should do?" Van asked anxiously.

"Honestly, what I'd *like* to do is call Alana or some of the others in here to deal with it." Hunter said quietly.

"But..." Van said in a slow, leading tone.

"But we can't do that. This is *our* job. They're trusting us to investigate this thing, so no matter how gross it is, we're going to do it." Hunter said, sounding quite a bit more confident than he felt.

"Okay. I'm with you. But what are we going to *do*?" Van asked reasonably.

"Well, I guess that since what we're going up against is kind of a 'feeling' thing, that we should probably fight it with another 'feeling' thing." Hunter said thoughtfully.

"You lost me." Van said honestly.

"I'm saying that you need to get your glow stick on. If we can surround ourselves with light and protection, then maybe it won't be able to do anything to us."

"But you already did that protection ritual thing..."

"Yeah. But that was just a little, light weight, say-it-but-don't-really-mean-it, all purpose kind of a thing. This time, we need to amp it up and really get behind it."

"What do we do?" Van asked uncertainly.

"This time when we go back in there, we'll use our protection to actually protect ourselves." Hunter said simply.

"What if that doesn't work?" Van asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Then I guess we run away like a couple of scared little girls." Hunter said weakly.

After a moment to consider, Van finally said, "Sounds like a plan."

"Do you need to do anything in advance to ramp up your glow stick?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"No. Do you need your Holy Water?"

"I've got it right here." Hunter assured him.

"Then let's do this thing." Van said as he stepped forward and opened the door.

Hunter crowded in, so that he was able to walk into the hotel room at Van's side.

There was a moment when both of them thought that perhaps whatever had inhabited the room might have left. But then they were both hit with a jarring force of intense negative emotion.

Hunter immediately began to recite his protection spell as Van concentrated on the light within him and visualized it growing stronger and brighter to combat the vile darkness that was pressing in against them.

Van was startled when he felt Hunter touch his forehead and it took a moment for him to realize that Hunter was anointing him with Holy Water.

The only sound in the room was Hunter's continued chanting in a language that Van didn't understand.

They were surrounded in cold and darkness, yet the negativity before them felt like a tangible thing.

Feeling another surge of negativity assaulting him, Van reached within himself and brought forth even more light to combat the darkness.

Suddenly, there was silence.

Hunter had stopped his chanting.

"Do you feel that?" Hunter finally whispered.

Van raised his briefly forgotten DVR and did a quick survey of the room before quietly saying, "I think it's gone."

* * * * *

"How are you feeling?" Jack asked with concern.

"Better." Kyla assured him.

"Do you think that you're in good enough shape to go back in there?" Jack asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I'll go back in with you, but I can't promise that I'll be able to stay." Kyla said honestly.

"You're more important to me than this investigation. If you go in there and decide that it's too much, I'll leave with you." Jack said firmly.

"But you shouldn't have to give up your investigation because of me." Kyla said quietly.

"Nothing is more important to me than you are. Besides, Alana has plenty of investigators who can handle this. All she'll need to do is make sure that whoever she assigns to replace us isn't psychically sensitive." Jack said seriously.

"Maybe we could ask her to team you up with someone else." Kyla slowly suggested.

"Let's go back in there and see how things go. If it's too bad, we'll talk to her about it and see what she wants to do." Jack assured her.

"Okay. I'm ready."

* * * * *

"Are we going back to 'the bad room'?" Norville asked as they walked away from the conference room.

"No. We're going to the kitchen." Derek assured him.

"You know where that is, don't you? Why don't you show us the way?" Mike asked pleasantly.

Before Norville could answer, a voice from behind them called out, "Norville?"

All three turned to see Oliphant standing in the hallway behind them.

He wasn't near any of the intersecting hallways and Mike briefly wondered where he had come from.

"Hi, Pa. Derek and Mike said that I could help them. That's alright, isn't it?" Norville asked hopefully.

From the look on Oliphant's face, he seemed to be poised to deliver an unpleasant verdict to his son.

"Norville was just going to show us where the kitchen is, so that we can set up a camera in there." Mike quickly interjected.

"And he's been filling us in on what he knows about the different hauntings." Derek added.

"You wouldn't be minding if he tagged along, then, would you?" Oliphant asked them cautiously.

"Norville's been a big help already." Mike assured him.

"Well, as long as you're helping our guests, I suppose that's alright." Oliphant said slowly.

"Thanks, Pa!" Norville said happily.

"Since you're staying up late to help our guests, just sleep as much as you need to. Me and your ma will see to things in the morning." Oliphant said with a warm smile at his son.

"I will. But when I wake up, I'm going to want to tell you and Ma all about what we did tonight." Norville said excitedly.

"As long as the work gets done, that will be fine." Oliphant said with a smile.

Norville ran to his father and gave him a firm hug.

"Have a good night, Norville." Oliphant said gently.

"You, too, Pa." Norville said happily, then ran the few feet back to rejoin Mike and Derek.

Mike smiled at his youthful energy and turned to say goodnight to Oliphant but was surprised to find that he was nowhere in sight.

"What can you tell us about the kitchen ghost?" Derek asked Norville as he began to walk again.

Mike looked behind them for a moment longer, then hurried to catch up to the others.

* * * * *

Both Kerry and Teresa had to fight not to open the door.

There was such a flurry of activity, they were both understandably curious about what was going on out there.

At times, there were running footsteps. Sometimes they heard knocking sounds. Just as had been reported, occasionally it sounded like a maid firmly knocking before entering the room. Once, they heard what sounded like slow heavy footsteps, as though someone were patrolling, up and down the hall.

"If we're just sitting here, not doing anything when we hear something, why are we here? Couldn't we accomplish the same thing being downstairs where there's heat and light?" Teresa asked reasonably.

"Yes. If I were in this same situation during another investigation, that's *exactly* what I'd do. But since we have to be available in case the girls need us, we really need to stay right here until Alana calls an end to it." Kerry said regretfully.

"Oh. Right." Teresa said in realization.

"You can go downstairs now, if you want to. I can wait on the girls." Kerry quietly offered.

"No. I really don't mind being here, doing this. I was just bothered by the seeming pointlessness of it." Teresa said frankly.

"Some of our investigations end up being entirely pointless. We'll investigate for two or three days and not only will we not collect any evidence, but we won't come across anything that's even remotely supernatural." Kerry said frankly.

"Is that what happened on that church investigation you were telling me about?" Teresa asked curiously.

"Yes. We spent two days following up on several reports of supernatural instances and we weren't able to find a single thing that was even the slightest bit creepy... well, except the preacher. Just the sight of that man could give you nightmares for a week." Kerry finished with a chuckle.

"Why do you do this?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Maybe it's for the excitement of exploring the unknown. Part of it might be to help people in need, kind of as a way to pay back for the help that we received when we needed it. And I guess another part of it could be just to do something that's a little unpredictable. I don't know how much sense it makes, but it seems to satisfy something in me to be a part of the team." Kerry said introspectively.

"You're happier than you used to be." Teresa said quietly, then added, "Somehow, I got the feeling that you might be trying to get away... you know, to spend time apart from us... from me."

"No. I never wanted that. I just stumbled into this thing and found out that I enjoyed being a part of it. Since I had the time and it wasn't hurting anyone, I went ahead and continued on with it. If you or the kids found something of your own that you enjoyed doing, I'd encourage you to do it, too." Kerry gently explained.

A sudden bout of knocking sounded, possibly from right across the hall.

"Do you think the girls are alright?" Teresa asked in a whisper.

"I'm sure they're fine."

* * * * *

"Is this it?" Zoe asked as she stopped in the hallway.

Toni looked at the nearest room number, then said, "Yes. This is the spot. Go ahead and see if you can find any high EMF readings. If you do, we'll stop for a few minutes and do an EVP session."

"Okay." Zoe said happily, then started slowly walking as she also kept track of her K2 meter.

Toni watched through her night vision camera, noticing that her younger sister looked to be every bit a paranormal investigation professional.

"Watch where you're walking, you're close to the wall." Toni quickly warned, worried that her sister was paying more attention to the K2 meter than the night vision camera in her other hand.

"I'm not getting any yellows." Zoe said with disappointment.

"Well, maybe the ghost went back to its room. But you told them that you'll be back tomorrow, so we'll check back then." Toni assured her.

"Even if we don't get any yellows?" Zoe asked to be sure.

"Yes. We'll do an EVP session even if the K2 meter doesn't react at all." Toni promised her.

"Okay." Zoe finally relented, then asked, "What now?"

"Now, we're going to meet up with Mom and Dad." Toni said simply.

"You're not going to make me go to bed now, are you?" Zoe whined petulantly, proving to Toni that Zoe probably *did* need to go to bed.

"That's up to Mom and Dad. But if they're busy doing their own investigation, maybe they'll let us help them, first." Toni said as she tried to inject cheer into her voice for Zoe's benefit.

"Do you think Mom's scared?" Zoe asked curiously.

"Maybe, a little. This is a new thing for her. New things are usually scary." Toni said as they started walking again, then thought to add, "Don't worry about Mom. Dad wouldn't let anything bad happen to her."

* * * * *

As Lorra walked into room 3133, she did a quick visual survey to confirm that nothing had changed in their absence.

Once she had made that determination, she turned on her flashlight and examined the wireless stationary camera and verified that it was still transmitting.

After that, she went to the stationary video camera that was a simple recorder. Although Lorra wasn't quite as familiar with the DVR, it only took a moment for her to determine that it was recording as it was supposed to.

She could easily see that the audio recorder was still recording, due to the red light.

"This is Lorra. I just came back to three one three three to make sure that everything was still recording. Everything seems fine. Malika will be back in a minute, then we're going to put a stationary DVR in room three one six four." Lorra said as she looked around with the flashlight one last time.

When she was satisfied that everything was as it should be, she walked to the door and turned off her flashlight, so that she could wait in the hallway for Malika to return.

* * * * *

To Charity, it seemed that the silence had gone on for an unreasonably long time. The fact of the matter was, patience wasn't one of Charity's strong suits.

For the most part, Charity remained still but with every minute that passed, she felt the increasing need to be up and 'doing something'. For her, investigating was an active process.

Charity picked up her night vision DVR and scanned around the room, yet again, and her focus finally came to rest on Max. Even with the green on green display, she had to admit that he was undeniably handsome. Beyond that, she knew that beneath his looks, he was an intrinsically good and gentle soul. Charity once again came to the realization that there wasn't anyone else she could imagine that she would want to spend her life with.

On closer introspection, Charity found that not only did she enjoy spending time with Max, but that when she was in his company, she felt good about herself. If she needed to be strong, he would be there to back her up with his encouragement. And in those rare instances when she was feeling vulnerable, she could count on Max to step forward and she could be assured that he would take charge. In essence, he could be strong without making her feel weak.

As she was staring at the image in the viewfinder of the night vision DVR, a movement drew her attention.

Behind Max, over his left shoulder, she caught a glimpse of an undefined mass, which appeared to be glowing in the night vision. It took every bit of self control that she had to keep from calling out, but she was able to remain silent as she moved her camera, ever so slightly, to focus on the misshapen cloud that appeared to be slowly approaching.

Without warning, Max turned his head slightly, and Charity realized that even though nothing was visible to the naked eye, he was aware of the presence.

* * * * *

Alana used her master key to open the door to room 6316.

When she stepped in, she was surprised to find Marsha sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

"Has there been activity in here?" Alana asked cautiously.

"No. Nothing's happened. It's been quiet." Marsha answered simply.

"Well, I've just finished surveying the A, B and C wings. Would you like to go and do a preliminary sweep of the E, F and G wings?" Alana asked seriously.

"If there haven't been any reports of activity, I don't really see the point. But since nothing's happening here, I might as well." Marsha said as she slowly stood.

"Even though I can't be sure that I was able to collect any evidence, I still think my walk was productive. Who knows? You might get something out of it." Alana said encouragingly.

Even though Alana's vision was limited by the night vision, she was easily able to detect a momentary 'whatever' look from Marsha as she gathered her equipment and started walking toward the door.

"Remember to call if you run into any trouble." Alana reminded her.

Marsha flashed the look at her again before stepping out the door.

Alana considered the reaction for a moment as she turned on her K2 meter, then finally muttered, "Bitch." before starting her investigation of their 'hot spot'.

* * * * *

"What's your name?" Hunter asked cautiously.

After a few seconds to allow the ghost to answer, Van asked, "What are you doing here?"

Hunter allowed a momentary pause, then asked, "Are you angry?"

Van looked down at his K2 meter, which didn't show any activity at all.

"I think we got rid of it." Van reluctantly whispered.

"Yeah. When we were doing our 'protection' thing, it felt like whatever it was kind of 'popped', you know, like a soap bubble." Hunter said uncomfortably.

"Do you think Alana and Kerry are going to be mad at us? I mean, we were just supposed to investigate and collect evidence. The only way we were supposed to get rid of something is *after* we were done investigating it." Van asked nervously.

"I don't know. I never had to worry about this with my moms. By the time we were called in on a job, the investigation was done and everyone already agreed that whatever it was needed to be gotten rid of." Hunter said quietly.

"Maybe it's not totally gone. Maybe it just went away because we were too strong for it." Van suggested half-heartedly.

"Yeah. Maybe. Let's try again." Hunter agreed.

"Are you still here? What's your name?" Van asked into the air.

"Come on! Talk to us!" Hunter urged.

* * * * *

"What happened?" Jack asked as they walked into room 5369.

It took a moment for Kyla to understand what he meant.

Jack turned on his flashlight and stepped closer to the painting to verify what he had been able to see with his night vision.

The shadow figure in the painting was gone.

"Can you sense anything from it?" Jack asked cautiously.

"No. Nothing at all." Kyla said slowly.

"Nothing, as in 'no presence' or nothing, as in 'nothing spiritual'?" Jack asked carefully.

"Nothing, as in 'nothing'. That painting feels just as bland and mundane as any other painting. In fact, I don't even feel anything like an echo of the passion the artist felt as he was painting it." Kyla explained.

"What do you think that means?" Jack asked contemplatively.

"I don't have anything to base it on, but if I were to guess, I'd say that the portal closed."

* * * * *

"Do you know where they usually see the ghost?" Mike asked as they walked into the kitchen.

"I never heard about anyone 'seeing' the ghost. All I've heard about is things happening around the kitchen... you know, like someone scooping out sugar for something and somehow it turns out to be salt." Norville said slowly.

"Do you know if it happens in one part of the kitchen more than another?" Derek asked as he slowly walked around with his K2 meter in hand.

"No. I don't know that." Norville said regretfully.

"Well, based on what you already told me, I think I'm going to position the camera here in the prep area. Would you guys mind doing a sweep of the rest of the kitchen?" Derek asked seriously.

"I know where the brooms are!" Norville quickly announced.

"I think he means a K2 sweep. That means that we walk around the room and see if we get any readings." Mike gently explained.

"Oh. Sorry." Norville muttered.

"It's no problem." Mike assured him, then asked, "Do you want to do the K2 sweep for us?"

"What do I have to do?" Norville asked cautiously.

"Go ahead and take the K2 meter off your belt and turn it on." Mike said instructively.

Using the night vision camera, Mike watched as Norville struggled to try and get the K2 meter with one hand while continuing to hold the DVR in his other.

"I'll hold your camera, if you like." Mike quietly offered.

"Thanks." Norville said with relief, then handed the DVR to Mike.

"Just push the button to turn the K2 on." Mike said patiently.

"Okay. Now what?" Norville asked happily as the K2 meter lit up briefly.

"Go ahead and take your camera back, then start walking around the room. If your K2 meter starts lighting up, stop and let me know and I'll help you." Mike said patiently.

Derek watched with a smile as Mike followed behind Norville, not crowding him, but remaining close enough to help, should he have need.

As Mike and Norville finally made their way into the back, to the dry storage area, Derek turned his attention back to the task at hand.

* * * * *

"Dad? It's Toni. Zoe and I are just about to enter the D wing. Is that okay? We're not going to be messing up anything that you're doing, are we?"

"No. That's fine. Is everything alright?" Kerry asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think we've finished doing everything that we can do for now."

"Your mother and I are in room thirty-three twelve. We'll meet you in the hallway, by the camera."

"We'll be there in just a minute."

Chapter 9: Spiderhole

Kerry was reluctant to open the door when the knock sounded. Although he knew that his daughters would be arriving soon, he was still hesitant since he had been listening to similar knocks and not responding to them since he and Teresa had entered the room.

"How did everything go?" Kerry asked as he ushered his daughters inside, and did a quick visual survey of them with his night vision camera.

"We'll have to wait to see what we got in the evidence review, but I think we did good." Toni said happily.

"Toni let me do the meme-em-effs." Zoe interjected.

Teresa turned on her flashlight, then moved in to give Zoe a firm hug.

"EMF readings." Toni corrected with a smile, then added, "Zoe did a good share of the investigation herself. And I can't wait to see if she caught something in her still photos."

"Are you two ready to go downstairs and get warm?" Teresa asked gently as she switched her hug from Zoe to Toni.

"Yeah. I think so." Toni responded as she enjoyed the hug.

"I think we are, too. I'd like to leave the audio recorders up here for a while longer to see if they pick up anything when we're not here listening." Kerry said as he took his turn hugging Zoe.

"Did you get something?" Toni asked hopefully.

"We heard quite a bit, we'll just have to wait and see how much of it was documented." Kerry explained, then accepted Toni into his arms to give her a long and heartfelt hug.

"I don't know if we got anything, but I'm pretty sure that we did everything right." Toni quietly explained to him.

"Are we all ready to go?" Teresa asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Toni confirmed as soon as she was released from her father's arms.

* * * * *

"From the sound of it, Toni and Zoe are done. As soon as we get this camera placed, let's go to the conference room." Lorra said decisively.

"Do you think that we should do an EVP session in the room before we leave?" Malika asked cautiously.

"I'd rather wait to see what happens with the stationary camera. I want to get more of an idea of just how powerful or angry this thing is before we go in there and start talking to it." Lorra said frankly.

"This is the room. How do you want to do this?" Malika asked nervously.

"I'll set it up while you keep recording. All I want to do is drop and go." Lorra said seriously.

"Yeah. Sounds good."

* * * * *

A minute or two after hearing Toni and Kerry talking on the walkie-talkies, Max quietly said, "I think it's gone."

"Do you know what that was?" Charity asked cautiously.

"Momo, I think."

"What can you tell me about it?" Charity asked quietly.

"Nothing, really. If Aunt Felicia were here, she probably could have gone deeper and figured out more, but all I could do was sense a presence."

"How did you get the name 'Momo'?" Charity asked curiously.

"I wanted to know its name and I heard that in my head. I didn't get anything else with it." Max quietly explained.

"Can you tell me anything else at all about it?" Charity asked hopefully.

After a long silent moment, Max cautiously said, "Usually when I tell you something, it's when I have a fairly strong feeling about it. But this isn't like that. This time I'm only getting a glimmer of a sense about it. I don't think it's residual after all."

"It's active?"

"Maybe."

"Do you think that we should stay here to see if anything else is going to happen?" Charity asked cautiously.

"No. I think that we've seen all that we're going to see in here for tonight." Max said thoughtfully.

"Well, it sounds like Kerry and Toni are about to pack it in, so we might as well go."

"Yeah." Max said absently and seemed to be lost in thought.

* * * * *

Although Alana had been startled by the sound of Toni and Kerry on the walkie-talkie, it turned out to be a good thing.

She evaluated what she had done so far in the investigation as well as what she was currently doing.

The room was dark and silent.

There hadn't been a single 'blip' on the K2 meter.

Beyond that, as unscientific as it was, Alana had to admit that she didn't *sense* anything spooky or other-worldly, either.

"Everyone, this is Alana. I'm going to make one last sweep of my area, then I'm heading down to Tech. Anyone who's at a good stopping point is free to join me there. Everyone else, call and let us know if you need any additional help." Alana said into the walkie-talkie before clipping it on her belt.

There were a few acknowledgements on the radio as Alana took her K2 meter and night vision DVR and began to slowly walk around the hotel room, doing one final, thorough pass.

* * * * *

When Hunter and Van had heard Kerry and Toni's exchange on the walkie-talkies, they renewed their efforts to try and make contact with whatever had been inhabiting room forty-four twenty-one.

By the time that Alana had called an end to their investigation, both Van and Hunter were feeling discouraged.

"Do you think they'll be mad at us?" Van asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I'm sure that stuff like this just happens, sometimes." Hunter said as he started walking around the room, once again, with his K2 meter.

Van automatically went to the wireless stationary camera to verify that it was still transmitting.

"When you've gone with your moms to do investigations, did you ever hear about anything like this happening?" Van asked cautiously.

"Well, no." Hunter reluctantly admitted.

"Kerry's never said anything about it happening before, either." Van said quietly.

"Do you and Kerry talk a lot?" Hunter asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Van finally said, "Yeah. Once or twice a week, I guess."

"That must be nice. My dad... he's nice to me and everything. But we just don't have anything to talk about." Hunter quietly admitted.

"You have a dad?" Van asked with surprise.

"Yeah. He's a friend of my moms' and they asked him to make a 'donation' so that they could have me. I've always known who he is and he's always been nice to me and stuff but... I don't know... I guess I don't feel like I have anything in common with him." Hunter struggled to explain.

"Yeah. That's kinda how it is with my dad." Van admitted.

"That's weird. I thought it just happened to me because my moms are lesbians. I never thought that someone who lived with their dad could feel the same way." Hunter said with surprise.

"It's just like you said, we don't have much in common. Dad grew up in Pakistan in a completely different world than I did. Whenever I try and talk to him, it's like we're talking about completely different things." Van said quietly.

"That's kinda what it's like talking to my dad. I just never thought about it that way before." Hunter said consideringly.

"When I talk to Kerry, he gets it. I know that when I tell him something that he really understands what I mean." Van said with a slight smile at the thought.

"Are we done here?" Hunter asked as he panned around the room one last time with his DVR.

"Yeah. I think so."

* * * * *

After hearing Alana's announcement on the walkie-talkie, Jack quietly said, "I'm not getting anything on the K2. Are you sensing anything?"

"No. Nothing at all." Kyla said slowly.

"Since we're the only ones stationed on this floor, how would you feel about us doing a quick walk through, then going downstairs?" Jack asked curiously.

"I like that idea very much." Kyla said honestly.

"When we get downstairs, I'm going to ask Alana if she'll put another team on this investigation." Jack quietly added.

"You don't have to do that. I know how much you enjoy investigating things like this." Kyla said quickly.

"I learned an important lesson on the Osmani investigation. We can't always handle everything by ourselves and sometimes allowing someone else to investigate will allow them to approach the situation from a new perspective." Jack said reasonably.

"Yeah." Kyla whispered.

"If we weren't part of a bigger team, there's no way that I'd back away from this investigation. This is a quantifiable paranormal phenomenon. But since we have other team members that we can depend on, I think that it's best to allow another team to do their research and see what they might be able to uncover." Jack explained.

"Do you really believe that, or are you looking for a way to justify your decision?" Kyla asked carefully.

After a moment to consider, Jack reluctantly admitted, "A little of both."

"Works for me." Kyla said easily, then asked, "Are we ready?"

"Yes. Everything's set."

* * * * *

"Did you get anything?" Derek asked when Mike and Norville walked back into the prep area of the kitchen.

"No. It's like a maze back there, but we didn't get any readings." Mike said seriously.

"Did you hear Alana on the walkie-talkie?"

"Yeah. Do we need to do anything else before we go back?" Mike asked curiously.

"No. We have cameras set up in both our assigned locations. When people start showing up in Tech, they're going to need our help to download all the different files." Derek said decisively.

"What about the other room... you know, 257?" Mike asked anxiously.

"We'll review the evidence we were able to collect, then we'll decide what type of an investigation we'll need to do tomorrow." Derek said seriously.

"Are you okay, Norville?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Am I going to be able to help you with... whatever you're going to be doing next?" Norville asked slowly.

"We're going to be watching and listening to different recordings. If you want to help us, all you'll have to do is pay attention for anything out of the ordinary." Derek explained.

"I can do that!" Norville said happily.

"Then come on."

* * * * *

As Kerry, Teresa, Toni and Zoe approached the elevator, which was conveniently located between the D and F wings, they were

surprised to encounter Lorra and Malika approaching from the opposite direction.

"How did your investigation go?" Toni asked excitedly as she broke away from her family and hurried to join her peers.

"We'll have to wait and see what the evidence says, but I think we debunked our 'hot spot'." Lorra said frankly.

"Really?! Wow! I mean, finding a ghost is exciting and stuff, but actually getting to 'debunk' a haunting... that makes you like a *real* paranormal investigator." Toni said admiringly.

"We can talk about this downstairs." Kerry said as he walked up to the elevator and pressed the call button.

"How did your investigation go?" Malika asked Toni hopefully.

"Well, we didn't see or hear anything, but Zoe got some high EMF readings, so we did an EVP session. We'll just have to wait and see if anything showed up in our pictures or answered any of our questions." Toni said honestly.

Before anyone could respond, the doors to the elevator opened.

Once they were all aboard, Lorra whispered, "How did Zoe do?"

"She was *great*. I'd be happy to have her on my team any day." Toni said confidently.

Kerry noticed Zoe's arm tighten around him and put an arm around her shoulders to hug her in return.

* * * * *

As Charity and Max stepped off the elevator, the elevator next to theirs also opened.

"How is everyone doing?" Charity asked with a smile at the happy family.

"Actually, I think we're all doing fairly well. How about you?" Kerry asked as he motioned for the group to start moving, so that they could talk along the way.

"I'm not entirely sure if we've found a haunting or not." Charity reluctantly admitted.

"That sounds like something that's right up your alley." Kerry said enthusiastically.

"How so?" Charity asked cautiously.

"The only answer you're ever happy with is the one that you've had to struggle with and fight for. Easy answers are for snake oil salesmen and video preachers." Kerry said frankly.

Max laughed with delight at Kerry's summary.

Charity looked up at Max beside her and said with fierce intensity, "Tonight we're going to *talk* to Momo."

* * * * *

Although Marsha was her teammate, Alana felt no desire to confer with or wait for her to complete her part of the investigation. Alana was enough of a professional that she completed her own survey without cutting any corners, but once the last of her negative readings had been recorded, she quickly gathered her things and hurried to the nearest elevator.

Alana wasn't afraid of whatever she had encountered in the A hallway. What propelled her forward was a combination of the hotel room, which represented what her life had become, contrasted against the conference room, filled with all the best parts of what her life had once been.

As Alana rode the elevator down, she felt the tension within her easing. She would soon be among her people, those who stood with her '*come feast or famine*'.

When the elevator doors opened, Alana didn't hesitate. She immediately started walking toward the hallway where the grand double doors were located that connected to the heated part of the hotel.

"Alana!" A young voice called enthusiastically.

Alana turned and found that Toni and her family were approaching from the other hallway.

The children were excited to see her and the adults were expectantly waiting for her to tell them what to do next. In that moment it became clear to her that to be with people she respected, trusted and enjoyed spending time with was worth more to her than all the scientific journals ever written. And the most ironic part of it all was that there wasn't ever any need for her to trade one for the other.

"Do we need to do anything else before we start in on our evidence review?" Kerry asked seriously.

"Why don't you take a few minutes to warm up and get comfortable before we start into that? Whenever you're ready, just go to the tech conference room and we'll dig in." Alana suggested.

"Sounds good. We'll see you there in a little bit." Kerry confirmed.

"Charity, remind me when we get back to Tech. There's something I want to talk to you about." Alana said seriously.

"We can talk now if it's important." Charity quickly offered.

"No. Get comfortable and once we've gotten everyone on-task, I'd like to sit down with you and Derek and have a long discussion." Alana said somberly.

"I'll look forward to it." Charity said slowly.

Alana didn't seem to notice as the group walked through the double doors back into the part of the hotel that had heat and light.

"Hey guys! How's it going?" Derek asked pleasantly.

"I thought everyone else would be down here already." Hunter said honestly.

"Yeah. I thought that too. Maybe they got to talking along the way. That sometimes happens." Derek said frankly, then broke into a smile as he continued, "I can just picture the whole group of them standing around chitchatting and freezing their butts off and none of them ever thinking about going where it's warmer."

"Is there anything that we can do to help you?" Mike cautiously asked.

"I kinda wanted to talk to Kerry about something." Van awkwardly stated.

"C'mon. I've been doing this forever. Give me a try." Derek prodded.

Van and Hunter shared a long anxious look before Hunter finally said, "When our 'hot spot' started doing something, I did my protection spell..."

"We both did it. It wasn't just Hunter." Van firmly interjected.

"Yeah... well. It looks like when we tried to stop the thing, whatever it was, from being mean and nasty toward us we must have kind of..." Hunter seemed to run out of words.

"We popped it like a zit." Van said gravely.

"You what?" Derek asked with interest.

"It was hitting us with, like, fear and hate and stuff, so we kinda pushed back..." Hunter started.

"...all we were trying to do is project positive energy so that it couldn't drag us down in fear or depression or anything like that." Van finished.

"Hold on. Are you telling me that you were psychically attacked and that you were able to defeat your attacker?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I guess." Hunter somewhat confirmed.

"Do you think Alana and Kerry will be mad at us for messing up our hot spot?" Van asked anxiously.

"It attacked you and you defended yourselves, there's nothing in the world wrong with that." Derek said firmly.

Both Hunter and Van seemed to wilt with relief at the declaration.

"Do you really care that much about what my dad thinks?" Mike asked into the silence that followed.

"Yeah. If it wasn't for Kerry, I wouldn't be able to do this." Van said simply.

"Why is that?" Mike asked curiously, seeming to be desperate to know.

"He's shown me how to deal with things. When I was scared, he told me what to do and helped me to get through it. He didn't do stuff *for* me, he did it *with* me and showed me how to handle lots of different things as we went along." Van quietly explained.

"I wonder why he never did that for me." Mike said mostly to himself.

"Maybe you never needed him like that." Derek suggested.

At Mike's inquisitive look, Derek continued, "Maybe you didn't get yourself into situations where you needed anyone else's help to get through it."

"Or maybe you didn't ask for help when you *did* need it." Van quietly suggested.

Mike glanced at Van uncertainly for a moment before responding, "Okay. But can I still hold a grudge because he didn't read my mind and help me when I said that I could do it myself?"

"I suppose that you *could*. But between you and me, that's a pretty shitty thing to do. He doesn't deserve that. He's a good guy who tries really hard to do the right thing and help everyone around him." Derek said seriously.

"But if you really don't want him, I'll trade you. With my dad you'd never have to worry about him jumping in and helping you deal with anything. He'd leave you completely on your own and never get into your business." Van said frankly.

"Thanks, but no. I'm not ready to trade in dads yet, I've barely used this one at all." Mike said with slightly pained humor, then thought to ask, "Do you need help with anything now?"

"No. Right now I'm great." Van said happily, then explained, "Since I met Kerry he's been helping me understand how things work. I think I'm really in a good place."

"Mike, you don't *have to* do anything. But if you find yourself in a situation where you could use a little advice, you might consider talking to your dad about it." Derek quietly suggested.

"Yeah. And if that doesn't work you could trade dads with Van. Then you'll never have to worry about him trying to intrude on your life." Hunter said eagerly.

"Qaiser's not a bad guy. But Hunter's right, whatever your dad's done to piss you off is probably something you're going to miss the hell out of if you decide to let him go." Derek said urgently.

"You hate your dad?" Norville asked uncertainly.

"No. I don't hate him. I guess I pushed him away when he tried to help me and then blamed him for not being there." Mike gently explained.

"I don't understand." Norville said honestly.

"That's because it doesn't make sense." Mike assured him, then explained, "Sometimes people make bad decisions or react to things childishly or badly. I guess that's what I did with my dad."

"Are you sorry?" Norville asked curiously.

"Yeah. Now that I realize what I've been doing, I am." Mike said quietly.

"If he's your dad and you tell him that you're sorry, he'll forgive you for whatever it is that you did. That's what dads do." Norville said with conviction.

"How's it going, guys?" Max asked as he entered the conference room.

"We're fine. Where *is* everyone? When I heard Alana make the call I thought that everyone would be on their way here." Derek said frankly.

"We met up on the way here and Alana suggested that we go to our rooms to change. Everyone else should be here soon. It looked like Charity might be a few minutes so I went ahead so we could get our files downloading." Max said simply.

"Did you guys record any good evidence?" Derek asked with interest.

"I'm not sure. Most of what we experienced was vague feelings. There's a slight chance that we might have caught an EVP, I don't hold out much hope beyond that." Max said frankly.

"Well, everything's set up for you. Let me know if you need any help." Derek said pleasantly.

"I could do this in my sleep." Max chuckled.

"Mike got kissed by a ghost." Norville suddenly announced.

"Really?" Max asked with surprise.

"While I'm normally the last one to make supernatural claims before we've reviewed the evidence, I honestly can't think of any other explanation for what happened." Derek said frankly.

"I can't wait to hear all about it in the evidence review." Max said happily as he connected his DVR to a laptop.

"I just hope that we got something on video. For as exciting as it was, it means nothing if we can't get the evidence to prove that it happened." Derek said anxiously.

Max suddenly stopped what he was doing with the laptop, then turned to look curiously at Van and Hunter.

"What?" Hunter asked self-consciously.

Max looked the teenager in the eyes and firmly said, "No one's going to be mad at you."

"What do you know about that?" Hunter asked defensively.

"Nothing. I just got the feeling that you two were worried about something. Whatever it is, no one is going to be upset. They'll understand." Max assured him.

"Derek said that too. But it seems that since we were brought all the way here to investigate these things, the last thing we need to be doing is destroying them." Hunter said honestly.

"First of all, destroying a spiritual entity is a lot harder to do than you think. In fact, we're not completely sure if it's even possible. Second, nothing is more important to us than your safety. Third, we're in a place that's packed to the rafters with ghosts. If you caused one to retreat from our plane of existence, there are probably four or five more to take its place." Derek said firmly.

After a long silent moment, Van hesitantly asked, "What do you mean that it may not be possible to destroy them?"

"What appears to us to be destruction is usually transformation. We can't be sure about every case, but what little we've been able to analyze suggests that when a ghost is in the process of being 'annihilated' it is actually becoming something else. While everyone seems to have their own theory about it, no one can prove what or where that 'something else' is." Derek carefully explained.

"How is everyone doing this morning?" Alana asked as she strode into the room.

"Everything seems to be going fine so far." Derek said cautiously as he looked around.

"I think we broke our ghost." Van anxiously blurted.

"I'm not sure how one would go about *breaking* a ghost, but I'm interested to find out." Alana chuckled warmly.

"Sorry if I'm late. Zoe sat down for two seconds and was fast asleep. Teresa is going to stay with her and will probably get some sleep herself." Kerry said as he hurried into the conference room.

"What about the older girls? Are they still planning on helping us?" Derek asked cautiously.

"Yes. They just need a few minutes to themselves to compare notes and chatter aimlessly." Kerry said frankly, then added, "Trust me, we'll all be better off if they take the time to get it out of their systems before we start."

"I think you're probably right about that." Alana chuckled.

"While we're waiting on that, it would be a good time for Alana to assess Van and Hunter's situation. That way the guys won't have that hanging over them while they're trying to concentrate on their evidence review." Derek said professionally.

The boys' matching anxious expressions telegraphed their concern about how Alana would react.

"Good idea." Alana told Derek, then turned to the boys and asked, "Would you tell me what happened?"

"Well, you told us that our ghost was mostly just an angry feeling that lived in that one room. When Van and I first went in there to set up, neither one of us felt anything unusual. We ended up going and checking out the rest of our area, but when we got back and tried to go in the room, the angry ghost was there. We couldn't even walk in there. We felt like we were being attacked."

"Okay. Before you go on, it sounds like you might have encountered a low level wraith. They're spirits of people who were so full of anger and hatred during life that the hate continued to live on after death."

"Are they dangerous?" Van asked cautiously.

"The higher level ones are supposed to be. According to legend, wraith spirits can be called up to enact vengeance or, if the necromancer is skilled enough, function as an army." Alana said distantly.

"Theoretically." Derek interjected.

Alana blinked with surprise, then quickly confirmed, "I'm just relaying the legends. So far, we haven't conclusively proven the existence of ghosts."

"Do you think what we had was a wraith?" Hunter asked quietly.

"I don't know, but that's the first thing that comes to mind from the way you describe it." Alana explained, then quickly asked, "Go on. What happened next?"

Van looked to Hunter to see if he were going to continue the story.

When it was apparent that he wasn't, Van reluctantly responded, "When I walked in, I ran into the scary angry feeling face first. As soon as I felt it, I backed out. Hunter walked in and felt the same

thing, so we decided to do a high power blessing to protect us from the hate and anger coming at us."

"What kind of blessing?" Alana asked curiously.

"I did a Celtic blessing that my moms use all the time." Hunter answered quickly.

"And I did that thing that we did at my house where I surrounded myself with light." Van quietly added.

"How did that work out?" Kerry asked with concern.

"We're not really sure about what happened next." Hunter said anxiously, then explained, "We did our blessing and protection things, trying to get ready to face whatever it was. But when we walked back into the room, we felt it push us, so we automatically pushed back and then... it was just gone."

"It popped like a soap bubble." Van added.

"We weren't trying to destroy it or anything, we just wanted to be able to face it on even ground." Hunter hurried to explain.

"I think I see the problem." Alana said slowly, apparently still putting the pieces into place.

Both boys looked at her hopefully, desperately wanting to be absolved.

"Once you got past the hate and anger, there wasn't anything else there. It's like blowing away a cloud of smoke to find that whatever had made it is already gone. Right?"

"Yes. That's exactly what it was like." Hunter quickly confirmed.

"This is still consistent with what is considered to be a wraith, although an admittedly weak one. In the most basic terms, it could be looked at as a residual haunting, what was left over when the rest of the soul passed on." Alana said thoughtfully.

"So we didn't mess up your plans?" Hunter asked to confirm.

"No. All you did was reveal how unstable that particular energy field was. Even though it started out by presenting itself in a hostile manner, at the slightest pushback, it folded in upon itself." Alana further explained.

"Wait. If it 'folded' or 'retreated' then that means that it wasn't destroyed?" Van asked slowly.

"No. Probably not." Alana confirmed.

"Then, maybe we could go back to the room and kind of set up an ambush for it. I mean, if it's in hiding, maybe we could be there and watch it as it comes back." Van said with anticipation.

"Could we do that?" Hunter asked Alana hopefully.

"It's your investigation. Take whatever steps you deem necessary." Alana said seriously.

"Do you want to do it, Van?" Hunter asked cautiously.

"That's what we're here for, isn't it? I mean, if we aren't willing to follow up and do the work, why did we even bother to show up here at all?" Van asked reasonably.

"Good. Then I'll consider it handled. I'll be here if you need any advice or anything. Otherwise, let me know how things turned out when you're done." Alana said with a smile.

Van and Hunter silently nodded with matching surprised expressions. Neither was quite sure just what they had agreed to or even how it happened.

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"Did we miss anything?" Lorra asked as she led the contingent of girls into the conference room.

"Not at all. We were just waiting on you to get started." Alana assured them.

"Where's everyone else?" Toni asked as she looked around.

"I'm sure that Jack and Kayla are still working on their investigation. They'll be along as soon as they've reached a good stopping point." Alana assured her.

"Is Zoe not going to help us?" Toni asked more quietly, directing the question mostly toward her father.

"She fell asleep when we got back to the room. Teresa is going to stay with her. I think that between us we can cover their part of the evidence review." Kerry assured her.

"I expected her to be here. I didn't get her equipment." Toni said thoughtfully.

"Don't worry. I think I brought everything, but if I missed something we can just go back to the room and get it." Kerry said as he moved to his daughter's side and hugged her around the shoulders.

"I was kind of looking forward to doing the 'whole' investigation with Zoe." Toni said honestly.

"Things don't always end up working out the way that you planned, but that doesn't mean that we won't have a good time with just the two of us." Kerry said happily.

"The three of us." Toni corrected as she looked at her older brother hopefully.

"Of course. If he would like to." Kerry easily accepted.

"Sorry I took so long! That shower felt so good that I lost track of time." Charity said as she hurried into the room.

"Your timing couldn't be better. We were just about to begin." Alana said pleasantly, then said more loudly, to be heard by the entire group, "Everyone, go ahead and get started on the evidence

review. If you need any help with anything, be sure to speak up and someone will be right there to help you."

That seemed to be all that was needed to set everyone into motion.

"Derek, Charity, hold on. I'm going to have a special job for you."