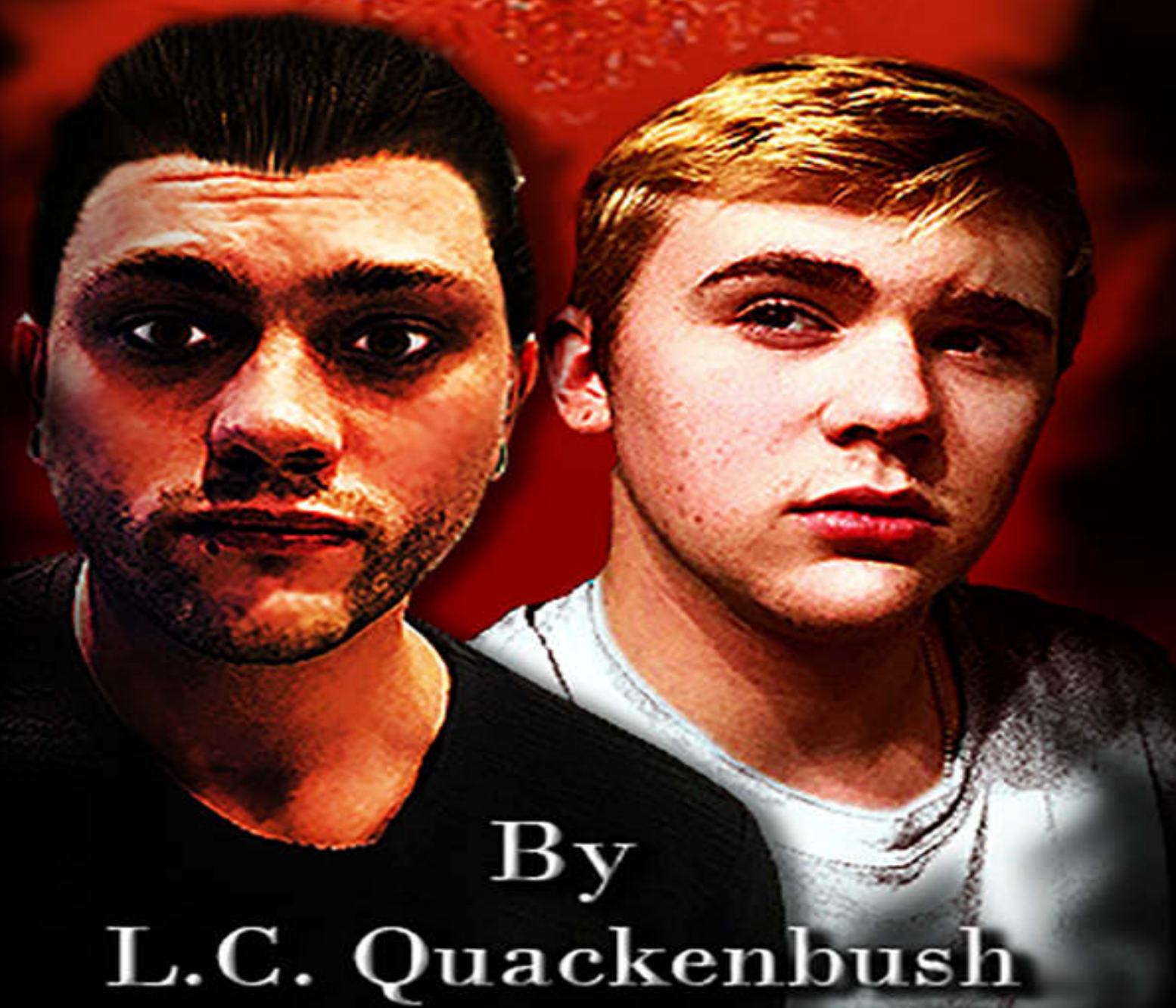


The Moorsfield Hotel



The
Moorsfield Hotel

By
L.C. Quackenbush

Dedicated to

Bret Brown
for being one of my oldest,
sweetest friends. Thank you for
lending me your beautiful
face for the cover.
I love and miss you very much!

And

A. Micheli
an incredible photographer.
I also thank you allowing
me to use your
your face on the cover!

1

Jake huffed as he used his foot to slide open the grate in front of the elevator that he was attempting to utilize. Shifting the many grocery bags in his arms around, he stepped into the rectangular room and closed the grate behind himself in a similar fashion before hitting the circular number five on the wall with his elbow. Leaning his back against the wall as he looked up at the mirrored ceiling, the man sighed as he realized his stubble was starting to get out of control. Glancing to the numbers above the door of the ancient elevator, Jake was certain this had to be the worst part about living in an outdated hotel.

The Moorsfield had been built a decadent, five-star hotel in 1917. It had catered to the wealthy in every way imaginable until the economy came to a halt during World War Two. By the time everything had settled down again, the hotel had fallen into disarray and the original owner sold out to the highest bidder. Now, just over a hundred years later, the building was still standing; though it had dropped down to a one-star building that offered up rooms by the month to long-term residents.

Standing fully upright again, Jake felt the elevator drop as it leveled with his floor. Waiting for the doors to open so he could get back to his room, Jake sighed as he once again fought with the useless half-door. Not paying any attention to what was happening outside of his personal bubble; Jake was shaken from his stupor as he heard a light 'oof' arise from his left. Looking up for the first time,

Jake saw that he had bumped into another person.

“My bad.” He glanced over the tall, caramel colored man who appeared to be in his mid to late twenties and had a smattering of stubble, which appeared to be intentional, across the lower half of his face.

“No problem.” The man stated simply as he reached out to shut the grate for Jake, “Do you need a hand?”

“Thanks, but no.” Jake shifted his load around, “My room is right here.” He tapped the door with the toe of his boot.

“Alright then.” The man ran a tattooed hand over his black hair and readjusted the loose bun that was holding it back, “See you around.” He casually sauntered through the door that contained the stairwell and headed downward.

Digging his key card out of his pocket, Jake waved it in front of the handle of the door with a faux-gold ‘515’ stuck to it. Pushing into his room, the man quietly appreciated the small updates the current manager of the hotel had added as they did make his life slightly easier. Dropping his bags onto the bed, Jake looked at the ancient desktop computer on his dresser and muttered to himself darkly about writer’s block as he slowly put his groceries away.

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“Nah, I haven’t felt much of anything yet. I just finished my first walkthrough. I’m not too surprised as it’s the early evening, though. You know they rarely show up on the first round.”

Roland Gaona was standing on the platform between floors three and four as he spoke to his boss, “We both know how wary spirits can be around newcomers. I figure something will show itself after dark or, at the very least, I’ll have some idea as to what is happening around here by the end of the week... Yeah... Of course I did.... Okay, talk to you later, Janette.”

Hanging up the phone, Roland spent a few moments appreciating that he managed to get great cell reception in a stairwell before continuing on to the first floor where, he had heard, a bar

resided.

Wandering past the vacant front desk, Roland looked through a small crack between a set of double doors to make sure he was in the right area. Once certain, he pushed quietly through the doors and looked around the surprisingly deserted room. The carpet under his feet was old and worn, but was still a deep scarlet with twisting, golden designs running through it. A few small, circular, wooden tables were scattered around the edges of the room that also contained two sizeable billiards tables. Overhead hung a grandeur chandelier that made Roland uncomfortable to stand under as he had watched *The Phantom of the Opera* one too many times.

Moving toward the aged wooden bar to his right, Roland looked up to see his own reflection in the mirrored wall that stood behind it. Sitting down on a red leather bar stool, Roland drummed his fingernails against the wood as he looked up to the top shelf which held rows of virtually untouched, dusty bottles of high end liquor. Roland's mind had started to drift off when a warm tenor voice rose from the doors.

"It really would be easy to grab one and run off, wouldn't it?"

Roland turned around and made eye contact with a beefy, dark skinned man who had a charming smile twisting across his smooth face. His hair was twisted into very short dreadlocks, the tips of which had been bleached to a medium-blonde. A plain, navy shirt that was streaked with what appeared to be oil stretched over his broad chest and simple black jeans covered his legs.

"Are you a mind reader?"

"Nope," the man stepped behind the counter, "just a bit of a delinquent." He winked to let Roland know he was joking and offered his hand up to shake, "I am also the live-in maintenance man of this hotel and, at this moment, your personal bartender."

Roland shook the man's hand, "Good to meet you. I'm Roland."

"I'm Devon." The man replied warmly, "What can I get for you?"

"A double scotch on the rocks, please." Roland was reaching for his wallet but paused when Devon held his hand up.

"Free drinks for the new resident psychic."

"How did you know that was me?"

Devon gestured to the tattoos that ran up both of Roland's arms, "Not only was I aware the boss called in a psychic, but I've never met anyone else with damned near every religious symbol known to man in ink up their arms."

"You are very observant, Sir." Roland raised tumbler to Devon before taking a sip, "While we're on the subject, though, I bet the maintenance man could give me a few pointers on where to look for boogiemens in this place."

"I sure could." Devon poured himself a shot of Jager, "What exactly are you looking for?"

"Your boss wants to know who is haunting this building, why they are doing it, and whether or not it has any correlation with how bad the business is going. Once we know that, he'll decide if he wants to kick the spirit out or make it an attraction."

Devon rolled his eyes, "Typical." He threw back his shot, "You should know now that it's not just one spirit though."

"That's not surprising in a place like this." Roland took another sip, "Are there any hot-spots?"

"The basement is creepy for sure." Devon rested his elbows on the counter as he thought, "Then again, most basements are." The man took his time thinking, "Whatever is in here is fairly free roaming but there is this one room on the fourth floor that seems to act up more often than the others."

"Is anyone renting it out right now?" Roland finished off his drink.

"Yes, but they're due to check out in two days. That is, if they last that long."

"It's that scary, huh?"

"In my opinion, no, but some people get startled easily and this couple is just here for a short vacation."

"Definitely noted, thank you."

Roland's train of thought was interrupted as the door burst open to reveal the blonde that had run into him earlier. He was a moderately tall, lean, disheveled looking mess with dark circles around his tired looking eyes. His hair was slicked straight back and dark stubble that did not match his hair ran across his chin and down his neck all the way to a massive tattoo on his chest that was



peeking out from under the loose v-neck shirt that adorned his torso. Beneath this was a pair of ratty pajama pants that had seen far better days and bare feet.

The man was sending Roland a wary gaze as he strolled casually behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of gin. As Roland stared in shock, the blonde dropped a wad of cash on the counter before turning around and exiting as quickly as he had entered.

“That was rude.” Roland turned back around to face Devon.

“Not at all, he’s just a little eccentric. I don’t mind.” Devon was flattening out the bills and sliding them into the ancient cash register that resided beneath the bar.

“What’s his deal, anyway?”

“He’s a classic case of a struggling writer at the end of his rope.” Devon refilled Roland’s drink, “His name is Jake Ziegler. He’s lived in this building for three years but, even though he’s been published at least a couple times before, nothing he writes is being accepted anymore. I don’t know what the exact problem is though.” Devon knocked back another shot.

“Well, have you actually read his work?”

“Nope.” Devon shrugged, “I couldn’t even tell you what genre it is. I don’t have a lot of spare time to go to the library as this place is severely understaffed. I’m on call pretty much twenty-four-seven.”

“Ah, that sucks.” Roland emptied his glass, “Thank you for the drinks. I should probably finish up my walk-through.”

“Sounds good to me.” Devon set the two glasses in the sink, “If you need anything, my room is the one on the far end of the first floor hallway. Knock anytime. I don’t really sleep.”

After thanking the man, Roland wandered back out the doors, determined to find something paranormal before he went to bed that night.

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Roland was sitting on the roof of the hotel as he tried to smoke away his vague sense of irritation. Being a natural born medium,

he'd had twenty-eight years to hone his skills and instincts. Rarely had he ever walked into any environment that came up reading free but, today, in supposedly one of the most haunted hotels in St. Louis, he had felt absolutely nothing.

Exhaling smoke as he looked to the orange tinted clouds overhead, Roland let out a frustrated groan.

"Something's not right in this place." Roland muttered to himself seconds before a loud click sounded from the door that led back into the hotel. Head jerking up, Roland once again saw the walking train-wreck that was Jake Ziegler.

"You're not up here to jump, are you?"

Roland was startled that the man had spoken to him so casually, "W... what?"

Jake lit up a cigarette and took a long drag before replying, "I'm just curious. Most people don't bother to break onto the roof unless they're looking for some adventurous amorous activities or are going to jump. As you're completely alone, I figured you're not up here for the latter." Jake filled in the sentence with a vague gesture to the edge of the building.

"Oh, no!" Roland stood up and moved to stand closer to the peculiar man, "I was given an all-access pass from the manager. I'm here on business for the hotel." Roland flashed the keycard he had stashed in his deep pocket, "You're not up here to jump are you?"

"Nah." Jake exhaled, releasing the distinct odor of gin into the air along with the cigarette smoke, "I just like to smoke outdoors sometimes and don't particularly feel like getting mugged on the street." He held up a key ring with three cards hooked to it, "I lifted some special access cards of my own. If you hadn't noticed, this place isn't well guarded."

"I had noticed that, actually." Roland found the blunt nature of his smoking companion amusing, "Aren't you worried you're tattling on the establishment to an inspector that could shut down your building though?"

Jake scoffed so hard he choked on smoke, "You expect me to believe you are an in inspector?" He wiped a stray tear from his eye, "You are very funny." Jake looked the man up and down once more before continuing, "You have too much ink in your skin and haven't

had enough visits to the barber for me to believe any formal business would hire you.” Jake lit a second cigarette off his first one, “Now that you bring it up, though, what is your business here?”

“I could be under cover...”

“And I could be J.K. Rowling but alas, I’m still virtually unheard of and you still have noticeably gauged ears and a real lip ring.”

“Touché!” Roland was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to talk to Jake, “I am a medium. I was called in by Mr. Vanhousen to see if I can sort out the haunting, or hauntings, in this building.”

Jake gave Roland a long, slow once over as he debated if the man was telling the truth. Fidgeting under the long stare, Roland felt his nerves rising as he waited on edge for Jake to come to a conclusion. After what felt like eons, the blonde nodded.

“You won’t find them on the roof.”

“Well, no, of course not” Roland faltered, “I came up to smoke off some stress because I can’t find signs of anything anywhere and this has never happened to me before.”

“You don’t say...” Jake scratched at his chin and thought for a few moments, “It seems that is this hotel’s greatest trick.”

“What is?”

“Taking away people’s most natural affinity toward the jobs they have chosen.” The blonde’s exhale came out a wary sigh.

“Oh my god, you’re right!” Roland threw his cigarette butt to the ground and stomped it out as his excitement rose, “You’re brilliant!”

“What are you even...?” Jake blinked hard as Roland’s sudden mood swing momentarily incapacitated him, “Are you high? I mean, it’s cool if you are, I don’t judge, but I don’t know anything about ghosts.”

“There must be something in the building that is intentionally jamming my abilities. It’s rare, but I have read about curses that suck motivation, inspiration, and talents out of certain people so I don’t see why one couldn’t wreck an entire space.”

“Other people have seen the ghosts though.” Jake had turned to face Roland as he was now completely committed to the conversation, “Hell, even I have a few times.”

“Yes, that’s why I was called out here in the first place.” Roland rubbed his hands together as he tried to get his voice to catch up

with his mind, "Spirits will sometimes *choose* to show themselves to people for various purposes, but the trick of my gift is that I can usually see them at any given moment, with or without their consent. If one chose to appear now, it could appear to both of us, but if my gift was working properly, I could see or hear it without you having the same experience." Roland looked up to Jake, "Unless, of course, you're also a medium?"

"If I was even a good enough liar to pretend to be a medium, I would absolutely not be wasting my time with a dead-end writing career."

"Right." Roland was chewing on the ring in his bottom lip as he thought, "You don't by chance know of any rooms that have weird marking or objects or even a funky vibe in them do you?"

"Well, the billiards room gives me the jeebs, but you seemed perfectly comfortable in there earlier so, no not really. Sorry." Jake shrugged.

"It was worth asking." Roland was pacing as he tried to remember the floor plan of the building, "I'll just take another walk through or something tomorrow and try to figure this out." He looked up to Jake who still had a slightly skeptical look on his face as he watched Roland cautiously, "Thank you, Jake."

"You're welcome, I think?" Jake paused for a few seconds, "How did you know my name?"

"The maintenance guy told me."

Jake's eyes narrowed slightly, "Weird, I didn't think anyone in this place other than Vanhousen knew my name but I guess after three years, it's about time. I figure I should know who you are now as it appears we're going to be bumping into each other, both literally and figuratively, on a fairly regular basis while you're here."

"I'm Roland Gaona," he held his hand out to shake Jake's, "and it was a brilliant stroke of luck bumping into you. You have no idea how long it would have taken me to reach this conclusion on my own."

"In that case," Jake opened the door that would lead back to the sixth floor, "I might also recommend you visit the public library. It's only six blocks south-west of here and probably has the

blueprints to this building as they keep the historical things in the back.”

“Again, thank you.” Roland stated sincerely as he stopped outside the door to his room.

Jake waved him off, “Don’t mention it.”

“If you insist.” Roland unlocked his door before pausing once again, “If you see or hear anything, feel free to come and talk to me, alright?”

“Sure thing.” Jake waved the man off as he walked toward the elevator with a surprising amount of grace for someone who had clearly downed a fair amount of liquor that evening.

Shaking his head at how strange this job was turning out, Roland moved back into his room to think over the new idea the surly author had unintentionally presented him with.

2

Roland was rifling through a small pile of documents in the back room of the public library. The librarian had seemed a little uneasy about handing over the blueprints to a hotel until she had realized what a dump the place was. After cracking a joke about ‘the most useless heist in St. Louis’s history’ she had left Roland alone in the back room to continue his research.

Scanning carefully over each of the many blue scrolls, Roland was elated to find that the hotel did contain a fair few rooms that were not open to the general population that he hadn’t noticed the day before. Glancing over to the scanner, Roland knew instantly that the pages would never fit. Snatching photographs of each one on his

phone instead, Roland made a mental note to thank Jake for this idea later.

Pocketing said phone, Roland had one more mission to accomplish before he left. Stepping up to one of the catalog computers, Roland typed in the name Jake Ziegler and waited. Running his hand over his chin as nothing came up; Roland took out the first name and hit the search button again.

In seconds, a list of books came up that ran through three pages. Mouth dropping open, Roland scrolled through and found that every one of the nineteen books was credited to the author J.L. Ziegler. Memorizing the code for the section of the library he needed, Roland wandered deep into the back corner of the building.

The light over this corner was starting to burn out and was blinking in an ominous manner as Roland walked to the end of the aisle and had to kneel down to see the bottom shelf. Grabbing one of the many thick, dust covered tomes, Roland looked over an artist's rendition of a young boy facing off with a dragon, wielding only a tiny dagger. Grabbing for another, Roland saw a monstrous looking mermaid with mossy hair and long talons dragging a screaming maiden into the ocean.

Flipping the back cover open, Roland came face to face with a picture of the man he had spoken to the night before or, at least, some version of him. This picture was a woman with long black hair and dark makeup adorning her grim looking face. Cocking his head to the side, Roland pulled all the books off the shelf and watched as a transformation took place.

Book by book, each picture changed. The long hair got shorter and paler as the makeup got lighter. Jake's features became sharper and stubble started to appear. In the most recent book, he looked like a much cleaner version of the man Roland had met the day before.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Looking over each of the books, Roland grabbed one that had a picture of a Minotaur on the cover and made his way to the front desk to check out. As he walked back to the hotel, Roland had to physically restrain himself as the urge to attempt to read and walk

simultaneously would inevitably end in him face-planting into the concrete below his feet.

Walking through the revolving front door of the Moorsfield Hotel, Roland was surprised as he was addressed by name.

“Mr. Gaona!” The man who had hired him spoke warmly, “Have you had any luck on our mission yet?” He ran a hand over his greasy, slicked back, salt-and-pepper colored hair.

“I’ve found nothing definitive yet, Sir. I’ve just been to the library to look at the blueprints of this building and it was very educational. I’m sure I will have a better investigation plan by nightfall.”

“That is great! If you need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to let me know.” The man tilted his head to the side and pointed to the book in Roland’s hand, “Research?”

“Nah.” Roland held up the book, “Entertainment for down time. The spirits only come out at night in most cases and I like to read to calm my mind.”

The man’s eyes ran over the cover, “Oh, I see you’ve met one of our permanent guests.” A look of distaste crossed his features.

“I’ve met a few, actually.”

“Well don’t let her get you down.” The man picked up a previously untouched newspaper from behind the desk, “If you want to read something by her, I recommend you waste less of your time and read today’s absolute drivel.” He flipped out the horoscopes page and thrust it toward Roland.

“Oh um... I normally wouldn’t contradict someone who hired me, but Jake is a man.” Roland took the newspaper as his mood shifted to an uncomfortably edgy one.

Mr. Vanhousen scoffed, “She wasn’t when she moved in.” He sat on a stool behind the desk, “It’s a shame really. When Jaclyn moved in, she was a ten; hotter than Barbie herself. I don’t know why she went and ruined that.”

“Himself, Sir. I do not believe you get to choose another person’s gender.”

“Yeah, well, the name on the checks hasn’t changed so *she* can just deal with it and so can you.”

“I’ll talk to you later, yeah? I’d like to take a closer look at these blueprints.” Roland realized that he would never get anywhere with

this man unless he wanted to risk losing his job. He had learned over his years in the business that trying to change the mind of a bigot was a waste of time, especially when he had a job to do.

“Get on with it then.” Mr. Vanhousen grunted and waved Roland off.

Heading up the stairs, Roland couldn't help but feel awful for Jake. The guy hadn't been friendly per se, but he had in no way been mean either. Slowly starting to understand why the man avoided talking to the staff of the hotel, Roland tried to shake off his creeping pity as he hit the sixth floor landing.

“Focus, Roland.” He commanded aloud to himself as he stepped into his room to get ready for that evening.

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Jake was staring blankly at his computer screen when a soft knock at his door tore him away from his stupor. Looking down at his watch, Jake couldn't fathom who would be looking for him at ten at night. Standing to gaze through the peephole, Jake scoffed and rolled his eyes as he spoke through the door.

“What do you want?”

“I want to ask you for a favor you don't owe me.”

Jake opened the door to reveal a nervously fidgeting Roland, “That is not a strong way to word a request.”

“Well, I'm here to bargain really.” Roland held up a bottle of Patron, “I'll trade you this for your assistance.”

Stepping aside, Jake wished his curious nature wasn't so strong, “Come in to talk, alright? People already think I'm a piece of shit. There is no need to make them think I'm a hooker too.”

Roland stepped into the room that was an absolute mess of empty fast food containers, stacked newspapers, and dirty laundry, “Thank you.”

“So, what do you want?” Jake crossed his arms over his chest and looked to Roland who appeared to be having trouble maintaining eye contact.



“Well, I found some hidden rooms on the blueprints and it is unwise to explore old buildings like this alone when you’re going through places no one would ever look for you if you got stuck.” Roland was chewing on his lip-ring again, “I was going to ask the maintenance guy to come with me but he must be out because I couldn’t find him anywhere so I thought maybe you would trade your company for this totally-not-stolen bottle of Patron.”

“Totally-not-stolen, huh?” Jake couldn’t help but be amused by the medium.

“Well, ok, I lifted it from the bar, but Vanhousen should really have it guarded and also not be such a jerk about you.” Roland’s hand smacked against his mouth as his eyes widened in horror.

Jake knew that the manager of the building had an unfavorable opinion of him, but hadn’t previously known that this opinion was being shared openly with guests. Running a hand through his now fluffy, uncombed hair, Jake gave his surprisingly timid new acquaintance a once over.

“I guess I could come be your body guard for a little while,” he sighed and grabbed his key card and took the liquor from Roland’s hand, “as long as you promise you’re not going to have a nervous breakdown.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that. I’m fine. I just get anxious when I’m bothering people.” Roland readjusted one of the many bracelets on his wrist, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Jake gestured to the door, “Lead the way, Miss Cleo.”

“Sure thing, but I’m a medium, not a fake fortune teller.”

“Well fake or not,” Jake followed Roland out of the room, “this had better be entertaining.”

“It should be.” Roland opened the door to the stairwell and started walking down.

“Why are we taking the stairs?”

“We’re only going down one floor.” Roland was already pushing through the door on the fourth floor, “The entrance to this unused portion of the hotel is in the back of the storage room.”

“Of course it is.”

Jake followed Roland into the storage room and paused to look around. Reaching up and grabbing a handful of free shampoo bottles, he shoved them into his pockets before meeting Roland's gaze once again.

"Don't judge me! The maids won't clean my room anymore so I never get refills."

"No judgment here." Roland casually grabbed a few free pens and a notepad, "Just in case I need to take notes."

"Sure thing, Boss." Jake gestured to the second door in the room that didn't happen to have a card scanner on it, "Do you have a key?"

"No." Roland jiggled the knob to make sure it was actually locked before reaching into his pocket to retrieve his key card.

Jake started wondering if he was dreaming this peculiar turn of events as he watched the medium wiggle his card between the door and its frame for only a few seconds before the bolt gave and the door swung open.

Coughing as dusty, stale air wafted into his face, Jake waved his hand over his mouth and nose before speaking, "So, are you really a medium or am I an accessory to breaking and entering now?"

Roland shrugged as he shone a small flashlight into the cramped room beyond, "Do you really care?"

"You have a point there."

Jake turned the flashlight app on his cell phone on and looked into what appeared to be a disappointingly average break room. A card table and six mismatched fold-up chairs sat under an inch of dust in the center of the room. The sink and counter top were in a similar condition to the left, and yet another door led out to the right.

Turning to face Roland, Jake watched him clear part of the surface of the mirror over the sink off before staring into it. Jake was just about to move to the next door when he heard Roland gasp and jump backward to look frantically around the tiny, dark room.

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Roland was trying to maintain his cool as he couldn't believe the moody author had agreed to come with him on this adventure into the walls of the Moorsfield. He knew he probably would have been fine alone but the nagging internal voice of his anxiety had 'what-if'd' him into asking for company.

Turning to face the mirror over the sink, Roland silently noted that mirrors must have been in style in the early nineteen-hundreds as this hotel had at least one in every room. Wiping away some of the dust, Roland felt his heart nearly stop as, in the silvery reflection, he saw a woman standing directly next to Jake.

Gasping as he turned around, Roland felt a little guilty as he watched Jake throw himself into a corner.

"What did you see?!" Jake's eyes were wide and scanning the room.

Roland held up a finger to silence Jake, "Hello?" He waited to see if the spirit was still around for nearly a minute before speaking again, "It's okay, Jake. She's gone."

"She?" Jake still had his back pressed into the wall.

"I didn't get a great look at her but I think it was a maid. She was really small and was just standing there," he pointed, "next to you."

Jake ran a hand over his hair nervously, "Rude."

Roland chuckled as he stepped toward the next door, "They're usually just curious to be honest. This does prove that my ability might be dampened, but hasn't been completely blocked out though."

"That's good... I think." Jake was hesitantly walking behind Roland who had revealed an incredibly narrow hallway behind the door.

"It's good." Roland shone his light around a corner before turning, "I wouldn't know how to function without it. It would be like a normal person suddenly going deaf or blind."

"You were born with these extra senses?"

"Yup." Roland nodded as he looked up to see nothing but completely normal pipes overhead, "It runs in the family."

"Then why do you seem so anxious all the time?"

Roland paused and leaned against a wall, “It’s that obvious, huh?”

“Were you trying to hide it?” Jake was floored.

“I thought I was.” Roland huffed and continued walking, “It’s not about the ghosts. It’s an actual disorder so...”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I would never intentionally call someone out on something like that.” Jake shifted guiltily.

“Don’t be sorry.” Roland finally saw an exit door at the end of the hallway, “It’s not your problem to deal with.”

“If you say so...” Jake ran his hands over his hair again as Roland pushed through the next door.

“Now we’re talking!”

“Oh! What is it?!”

“I’m not totally certain, but it looks like one of those old smoking rooms.”

Roland looked around a sizable room that was adorned in crimson and gold like the rest of the hotel, but was in much better condition, aside from the dust. Five large, ornate armchairs were placed in a semi-circle around a massive fire place that Roland could definitely have stood upright in, even though he was nearly six feet tall. Looking up to the ceiling, Roland muttered under his breath as he stepped out from under yet another unnecessarily massive chandelier.

“I wouldn’t stand under that thing either.” Jake coughed as he walked around the room, “Is it okay if I try the light switch?”

“Oh um... Sure, as long as there aren’t any exposed wires or anything.” Roland was embarrassed that he hadn’t even considered looking for lights in the first place.

A soft click arose seconds before a buzzing noise. Looking up, Roland watched as the lights overhead blinked a few times before a soft glow lit the room. Turning back to Jake, Roland couldn’t help but be glad the other man was more observant than he was in that moment.

“You are coming on all of my investigations from here on out.”

“I will be forever known as the man who turned on the lights in a dark room!”

Roland stuck his tongue out at Jake, who returned the gesture; flashing a rainbow tongue stud.

“Nice.” Roland chuckled as he walked over to observe some of the art that hung on the walls around the room.

“So, what are we looking for?”

“You should be looking for any objects or marking that seem strange or out of place.”

“And you?”

“I am looking for any apparitions or vibes that might lead me to...” Roland winced almost as if something had shocked him.

“Roland?!” Jake felt all of the hair on his body stand on end.

Roland was staring intently at nothing in particular as he was trying to connect with a strange presence in the room. To an outsider, it would appear he was listening for a voice but, in reality, he was using his gift to search for telepathic messages or any sort of vision. Eyes widening as a strong, sinking feeling came over him, Roland shouted to Jake.

“Cover your eyes, now!”

Jake ducked just in time to shield his face from glass that started raining down from the chandelier as, one by one, the bulbs started exploding. Roland used his arm to cover his face as he started shouting.

“I demand you stop that! If you have a grievance, speak to me! I can hear you and am willing to work with you! If you want us to leave, we can’t very well do that with our heads covered like this!”

Almost as if Roland had cast a spell, the bulbs stopped exploding and the room fell silent. Looking up, he saw that Jake had curled up behind one of the chairs with his arms over his head.

“Are you okay?”

Jake didn’t move as he spoke, “I’m fine, but could you kindly get the giant chunk of glass out of my hair before I move.”

“Of course.” Roland reached down and plucked a few shards of glass from Jake’s hair before offering a hand down to help him up, “You’re not hurt, are you?”

“I’m physically okay, though, I may need to change my underwear once this adventure is done.” He seemed unbothered by this, “Did the thing give you a message?”

“Nah.” Roland glanced around the room once more, “I just know he wants us to leave.”

“So, let’s go then.” Jake looked to the door.

“About that...” Roland shifted nervously, “I understand if you want to go back, but that tantrum means we’re onto something in here and I need to look around some more.”

“Oh!” Jake’s excitement was renewed, “I’ll help!”

“Are you sure? You could get hurt.”

“Well, if I go back to my room, I’ll just be abusing my liver anyway. I might as well mix it up a little.”

“Okay then. Would you do a huge favor for me and take all the paintings off the walls to make sure there isn’t anything behind them?”

“I’m on it.”

Roland couldn’t help but smile lightly as he spent a few seconds watching Jake lift the first painting off the wall. It was starting to blow his mind how laid back his quasi-partner was, even after two close encounters with spirits.

Shaking his head as he turned away, Roland tried to get his mind back on track as he started moving the chairs off of the rug in the middle of the floor. Once it was uncovered, Roland grabbed a corner and flipped the rug over. Letting out a sigh, Roland kicked the side of the offensively blank hunk of fabric.

“Bummer.” Jake’s arms were crossed over his chest, “I didn’t find anything either.”

Roland’s eyes were scanning the room that was otherwise empty. He was nervously rubbing his hands together as he was starting to think he might have been wrong about the exploding bulbs when Jake walked across the room and up to the fireplace.

“Give me your flashlight.”

“My w...” Roland saw that Jake was about to step into the fireplace, “Oh!” He handed over the tool, “Be careful though, okay?”

“I will.”

Jake shown the beam of light directly upward into the chimney before a quiet ‘ah-hah!’ left his lips.

“What is it?” Roland hovered a few feet outside of the grate.

“I’m not actually sure, but you did tell me to inform you if I saw anything unusual.”

Roland took a slow, deep inhale and balled his fists before stepping in next to Jake who was gesturing straight up the concrete shaft. Eight feet off the ground, placed on the wall in what appeared to be simple black paint, was a cross-section of five, perfectly circular spots.

“Fantastic!” Roland stepped out of the narrow space.

“Is it?” Jake looked straight up once more, “It doesn’t look like much to me. I’ve seen better graffiti in a public bathroom”

“It’s a Quincunx. A five-spot symbol used in Hoodoo for many purposes but, I would bet money in this building, it was used to bind the spell that is blocking my abilities.”

“So, what do we do about it?”

“If I boost you up, will you scratch one of the circles off the wall? That should break the spell.” Roland offered up a pocket knife.

“Why do I have to do it?”

“You’re smaller and lighter than me so you’ll be easier to lift.”

“I will do it because you tried and not because that was a sincere statement.” Jake accepted the knife and chuckled as he was, at most, two inches shorter and ten pounds lighter than Roland.

“Thank you.”

Cupping his hands together, Roland lowered his body to boost Jake up. Once the blonde had braced himself against the wall, he flipped open the blade and looked down to his companion.

“Does it matter which one?”

“No. Just cut a line or two through four of them and remove whichever one you can reach the easiest completely.”

“I’m on it.”

Jake deftly went about his task as Roland tried to watch without getting paint chips in his eyes. After a minute passed, his biceps were starting to burn from over-exertion. Taking a deep breath, Roland reminded himself that he had the easier part of this job.

“Alright, I’m coming down.” Jake carefully dropped the blade to the floor and braced himself against the wall before sliding off of Roland’s hands, “Shouldn’t we be able to feel if something changed?”

“We? Not necessarily.” Roland shook some of the tension out of his arms, “I can tell something has shifted, but this kind of thing isn’t normally as dramatic as movies make it out to be.”

“Bummer.” Jake handed the blade back to its owner, “Are we going to do anything else tonight?”

“I think this is a good stopping point. Do you want to get the hell out of here and call it a night?”

“Sure.”

Roland led the way back into the narrow hallway that would take the duo back to the abandoned break-room. The trip in this direction was somehow much less ominous to him than the previous one had been, even though further opening his abilities could potentially put him in more danger than he had been in before.

“So, if I’m correct,” Jake ducked to avoid a spider web that hung across the entrance to the break-room, “we bumped into two different spirits tonight?”

“Yes.” Roland let Jake into the storage room before making sure the door to the not-so hidden room locked behind him, “I intend to spend this evening looking at news reports on the internet to see if I can figure out how many people have died in this building.”

“That sounds enthralling.” Jake glanced down to his watch, “I was considering ordering in. Do you want to wind down with some Thai food and totally-not-stolen Patron before you start your research?”

“You seriously want to spend more time with me after all that?”

“We just pissed off a seriously cranky ghost. I’m being completely selfish in choosing to not be alone until I am certain it didn’t follow us.” Jake paused outside of the elevator as Roland kept walking, “Where are you going?”

“Do you want to risk an elevator after,” Roland air quoted, “pissing off a seriously cranky ghost?”

“You are really making me question the balance between my laziness and self preservation.”

“If you take the stairs with me, I’ll pay for the food.”

“Fine.” Jake rolled his eyes, “We need to stop by my room for the booze and the number to the restaurant though.”

“Okay.”

Twenty minutes later, Roland was unlocking the door to his room while Jake followed behind with a bag that contained six boxes of assorted Thai dishes and the bottle of Patron. Pushing in, Roland flicked on the lights and sighed as he noticed that his room had been ransacked.

“Every time!” He tossed his keys onto the bedside table before turning back to Jake, “Just get the food ready while I tidy up a bit, okay?”

“Would you mind explaining what’s going on?” Jake tossed Roland a t-shirt that was on the table.

“I didn’t make this mess.” Roland stated while haphazardly shoving his clothing back into the dresser, “This was most likely the work of whoever we pissed off tonight.”

“Ah.” Jake was pulling the boxes apart to flatten them into plates in an attempt to make a faux buffet, “It could be worse.”

“It could.” Roland noticed the book he had rented from the library earlier that day. Quickly shoving it under his duvet, he turned back to Jake who was busy unwrapping the chopsticks, “Will you pour me a shot to get the night started?”

“Definitely.” Jake quickly unwrapped the two paper cups that came with the room and poured some tequila in each. Handing one to Roland, he lifted the other and smiled, “Cheers!”

“Cheers.” Roland knocked back his shot before moving to sit down, “You sure set up a nice spread.”

Jake chuckled, “It’s not hard to impress you, is it?”

“You didn’t freak out and kill me for dragging you into harm’s way. I find you to be an incredibly impressive human.” Roland sank into his seat, “And no, it’s really not that hard to impress me when food is involved.”

“Ah, but, you see, if I killed you, you would apparently just turn into yet another spirit trapped in this hotel and I feel like you would haunt me for revenge.”

“Probably.” Roland took a bite of food and chewed thoughtfully for a few moments, “Did you actually believe in all of this before tonight?”

“Yes.” Jake slurped a noodle before continuing, “I never had any real proof, but a few odd enough things have happened to me

over the course of my life to keep me from being too skeptical.”

“Like what?” Roland looked up excitedly, “I mean, if that isn’t too personal.”

“When I was six, I apparently kept playing with my dog Snuffy for a full year after he died.”

Roland chuckled, “How scared were your parents that you were crazy?”

“Quite!” Jake chuckled, “Though just because ghosts are real, don’t assume I am sane.”

“Noted.” Roland was starting to feel incredibly comfortable around the blonde, “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Jake casually flicked a mushroom over to Roland’s side of the dish, “a few, but I feel like telling you what happened to me in this building would be the most beneficial to your cause.”

“Go on.” Roland refilled both of the cups with tequila as he leaned back to listen to Jake’s story.

“It was shortly after I moved into this place. I was having a shit night for writing so I decided to wander down to the billiards room for some new scenery and a drink or six.” Jake paused to take another bite, “It was empty which is pretty normal on a week night in this place, so I opened my own tab and started shooting pool against myself. I can’t have been in there for more than ten minutes when I thought I heard the door open, but no one was there.

I wasn’t too bothered by it as I’m well aware that old buildings make a lot of unusual noises, but it did make me notice that my drink was empty. Moving back to the bar, I reached over and grabbed the bottle and, when I looked up, I saw a man standing just behind me via the mirror.

Now, this startled the hell out of me so badly that I dropped my glass and turned around to confront him for sneaking up behind me but, lo and behold, no one was there.” Jake took the shot Roland had poured for him, “What was behind me, however, was the billiards table I had left mid play; now sitting cleaned and set up for the next player to use.”

“A ghost racked your balls up mid game in the time it took you to pour a drink?”

“Yep.” Jake nodded, “Not only that but when I turned back to the bar to deal with my broken glass, all the shards were gone and the bottle I had been using was back up on the shelf.”

“Jeeez.” Roland was amazed by how powerful some of the spirits in this hotel apparently were, “What did you do then?”

“I obviously ran the hell away.” Jake stated simply, “Now I only go in there in short bursts as you’ve witnessed with your own two eyes.”

“That does explain a lot of questions I had about that awkward interaction.” Roland set his chopsticks down and moved to get a soda from his mini-fridge, “Do you want one?”

“Sure.” Jake accepted the drink as Roland sat back down.

“You don’t remember what the spirit looked like, do you?”

“I didn’t get a good look, but I do remember assuming in the moment that it was a grown man.”

Roland nodded and grabbed the notepad from his pocket, “I should definitely take some notes if we’re going to keep drinking.”

“Now, now.” Jake wagged his finger at Roland, “Don’t you need to stay up tonight and do some research?”

“Meh.” Roland waved a hand, “I do most of my research during the day. Spirits seem to be more active at night so that time is set aside for investigating which we have done more than plenty of tonight.”

“If that’s true, when do you sleep?”

“Usually between five a.m. and two p.m., give or take.”

Jake chuckled, “Sounds like an author’s schedule.”

“I’ve always found night owls to be better company anyhow.” Roland took yet another shot and chased it with some soda, “You’re seriously not upset that I dragged you into all this?”

“Roland,” Jake took a hit straight out of the Patron bottle, “if this turns out well, you might very well be my next book. Tis I that is using you.”

“Oh.” Roland scratched at his stubble and mulled the idea over as the tequila had managed to significantly slow down his ability to think, “At least dedicate it to me, okay?”

“Sure.” Jake poured one more shot into each cup before lifting his up to toast Roland’s, “To both of us hopefully being in the midst of

a successful career move right now!”
“Here, here!”

3

Roland was scrolling through a multitude of articles in a stupor as nothing of particular interest had cropped up in his investigation on the deaths that had happened in the Moorsfield Hotel. He had found a few names here and there but the manner and cause of the

deaths had been left just vague enough to make them useless as evidence.

Just as he was considering leaving the hotel to find some lunch, Roland heard a knock at his door. Glancing to his watch as he moved to look through the peephole, he noted that it was just past five in the evening. Peeking out, he saw a familiar set of blonde tipped dreadlocks. Swinging the door open, Roland's brow furrowed as he noticed Devon's expression was one of concern.

"What did you do?!" Devon's voice was accusatory, yet somehow still friendly.

"What do you mean? What happened?" Roland moved and waved Devon into his room.

"Since midnight last night, we've had three rooms check out unexpectedly; demanding refunds for being harassed by some sort of 'evil force'."

"Oops." Roland rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, "Yeah, well, we sort of stumbled upon a binding sigil that was blocking out a great deal of my natural abilities and broke it. It may very well have un-dampened some paranormal powers too."

"We?"

"Oh, I couldn't find you and didn't want to get stuck in a hidden room alone so I persuaded Jake to come with me."

"Ah." Devon's expression flashed to one of uncertainty before snapping back to his normal, chipper demeanor, "I must have been on a job. I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Roland readjusted his messy-bun, "Did any of them tell their stories before leaving?"

"Nah, they were all pretty panicked, but, if you have some spare time, there are some interesting CCTV clips."

"Oh, hell yeah!" Roland grabbed his keys and gestured to the door as he was excited to finally have some real proof in this case, "Lead the way!"

Once down in the little office behind the main desk, Devon gestured to one of the two swivel-chairs, "Get comfortable. I'm not fantastic at working this equipment so it might take awhile."

"That's fine."

Roland sat down and let his gaze wander around the cold, cramped room. Before him sat a wall that had six small TV screens built into it. Each screen was glowing in shades of green, giving the room an eerie tint as they changed every thirty or so seconds between different cameras on each floor. Turning back, Roland saw that Devon was holding a notepad and laptop.

“Alright, I think I’ll start small and save the really great one for the end.”

“That sounds good to me.” Roland leaned back in his chair and got comfortable.

“Alright first...” Devon awkwardly typed a command into the program as he sat in the chair next to Roland, “It’s not a huge deal, but we did catch some definitive activity on the second floor.”

Roland waited patiently as the screen simply showed an abandoned hallway. The time-stamp in the corner stated that it was four-thirty-two a.m. and was absolutely the only proof Roland had that he wasn’t simply looking at a photograph. Long second ticked by; leaving Roland unsure if Devon had opened the clip correctly. He was just about to say something when a flickering light bulb caught his eye.

Leaning forward, Roland couldn’t help but smile in excitement as a maid’s cart slowly but surely rolled itself down the hallway. Each time it passed under a light, said light would flicker out of life for a few second before coming back on as if nothing had happened.

“So there IS a deceased maid here!”

Devon looked startled, “Yeah, though, that definitely wasn’t the reaction I expected.”

“Sorry, that footage is incredible and, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to rip a copy to my personal computer later.” Roland was having trouble forming coherent sentences around his excitement, “Last night I momentarily saw the spirit of what I thought was a maid in a mirror but I couldn’t make audible communication so I wasn’t certain I had seen her correctly.”

“Oh.” Devon nodded understandingly as he pulled up the next video file, “Her name was Lucille Porter and she had a heart attack on the job just over a decade ago.”

Roland typed a note into his phone, "Does she ever interact with the living?"

"Not really." Devon paused the next video, "She just quietly goes about her work. I think the most interaction I've ever heard relating to her specifically is that some guests have reported coming back to their rooms to find their clothing taken out of the suitcases, folded neatly, and put in the dressers."

"That is very kind of her, but it's also a really depressing way to spend the afterlife." Roland gestured to the laptop, "Roll on."

Devon pressed play without speaking and leaned back as a light smirk played across his face. Roland was now looking at a video of the severely outdated vending machine that was hidden half way down the hallway on the first floor. The time stamp in the corner stated that it was just past two in the morning. Leaning in, Roland noticed that the buttons were pressing themselves in one by one as if someone was trying to retrieve their treat.

After nearly a minute of button pressing, Roland jumped back as the machine began to violently shake back and forth. The force of the movement was enough that the little light inside the machine was blinking in and out of life as the metal flap over the retrieval slot swung violently open and closed. Slowly, some of the food items started to detach and fall into the slot below.

"Does it ever get what it wants?" Roland spared a glance to Devon.

"No." The man pointed back to the screen where an older man in an outfit similar to Devon's rounded the corner just in time for the machine to stop, "Poor Sal didn't know what to think about the whole ordeal."

Nodding as he typed a few new notes into his phone, Roland was absolutely elated at the incredible footage Devon had snagged for him. Making a mental note to go check out the machine around two the next morning, Roland made eye contact with his companion once more.

"That one seriously wasn't the 'good one'." Roland air quoted.

"Nope!" Devon was beaming, "You're going to have a conniption!"

"Bring it on!"

Roland leaned forward and rested his elbows against his knees. This time, instead of one screen, Devon had opened all six screens in a pattern that matched the overhead wall.

“Okay, these are all six of the above-ground floors. The top left screen is one and they go in order until six on the bottom right. Pay attention to camera one first...”

Roland looked to the time stamp and noted that it was ten-fifty-two. Tensing up, the medium noted that he and Jake would have still been in the smoking room when this video was recorded.

Before he could think too far on the subject, Roland’s eyes were drawn back into focus as a massive black shadow appeared to shoot directly through the floor and then up into the ceiling. Catching on to what was about to happen, Roland’s eyes panned to the second floor camera where the black mass continued its flight upward. In mere seconds, the spirit had hit the sixth floor where, Roland was horrified to realize, it faded through the door to the room he was currently residing in instead of moving up and out like it had done on every previous floor.

No longer smiling, Roland leaned back in his chair as he tried to get his pulse under control, “At least the cameras caught the bastard that tore up my room last night.”

“Did it really?!” Devon looked slightly concerned.

“It just threw my stuff around. It was a tantrum at best.”

“Your job is insane.” The handyman stated matter-of-factly.

Chuckling, Roland stood up to stretch his arms over his head, “It is rarely boring though.”

“You make a fair point.” Devon stood as well, “If you want, you can borrow the laptop until nine p.m. to do whatever it was you wanted to do. Just make sure it’s back before then as the night guard will be pissed if he finds out a lowly maintenance man touched his fancy equipment.”

“Thank you!” Roland couldn’t believe his luck with simple, outdated video cameras, “Seriously, I owe you one.”

Devon chuckled and shrugged, “Well, according to these videos, I might need the services of a medium one of these days, who knows.” The man looked to the clock on the screens ahead, “Want to grab a drink before you get back to work?”

“Thank you, but I really shouldn’t. Drinking alcohol is bad for my psychic abilities. I’ve slipped up far too often since I started this job. If you’re hungry though, I was thinking about grabbing a bite to eat.”

“Thanks, but I’ve already eaten.” Devon ran a hand over his hair, “Maybe next time?”

“Sure.”

“Oh! I know it’s a little outdated but, if you ever need to contact me and can’t find me in my room,” he flipped out a folded up piece of paper, “you can page me.”

“You seriously still have a beeper?!” Roland was floored, “Do they even *make* those anymore?!”

“You’ve met Vanhousen. If it’s not broken, he’s not going to replace it.” Devon rolled his eyes playfully and chuckled, “I’ve considered intentionally dropping it down the elevator shaft for years.”

Roland shook his head and sent a pitying gaze to the handyman, “That man is an unbelievable asshole.”

“You have no idea.”

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Running his hand over his face in a frustrated manner, Roland spared one last glance to Lucille and decided she was a lost cause. Over the last hour, he had been following her around the hotel as he tried desperately to get her attention. After half an hour, he had started to believe she was an imprint instead of a conscious spirit. This had been confirmed as, on two different floors now, he had watched her perfectly recreate what he had watched on the CCTV feed earlier that day.

Now, walking down the stairs with a rapid gait, Roland hoped to bump into the semi-violent vending machine ghost. He wasn’t yet sure exactly what he was looking for, but he had high hopes that a conversation with one of the conscious spirits in the Moorsfield would be able to set him in the right direction.

On the first floor, Roland quietly bypassed the front desk and sauntered down the hallway, glad that basically everyone in the building was currently asleep. Reaching a hand into his pocket, the medium opened an audio recording app and turned it on just in case anything particularly interesting occurred.

Turning the corner, Roland noted that the little room with an ice machine on one side and a vending machine on the other was empty. The only sound in the poorly lit room was the buzzing of the ice machine which was interrupted every minute or so by the sound of newly formed ice dumping into the storage slot.

Looking up to the yellowed light overhead, Roland grimaced as he noted the incredible number of deceased flies that resided in the plastic covering over the actual bulbs. Shaking his head, Roland was just starting to wonder how dirty the inside of the ice machine was when an unmistakable feeling of a second presence in the area crept over him. Rubbing the goose-bumps that had arisen in a thick sheet over the majority of his skin, Roland moved as far back into the corner as he could get.

Mere seconds later, Roland watched as a thin, oily looking man stumbled into the room and up to the vending machine. He was dressed in tight leather pants and a stained, ribbed tank-top that were both half covered by a hideous red and black zebra-striped, velvet trench coat. His receding bleached hair was long, stringy, and unkempt. Reaching into his pocket, the man pulled out a black wallet and started shoving quarters into the coin slot on the machine. A strong smell of alcohol, sweat, and a pungent odor Roland couldn't quite place filled the air; causing him to cough.

Snapping his head around to look, the man snarled at Roland, "Wot you doin' standin' in the corner like some kinda creep?!"

"Sorry." Roland moved forward, "You startled me when you came around the corner. I didn't expect anyone else to be awake so late."

The man twitched and turned back to lift one of his trembling hands up to the keypad on the machine. Shaking his head, he started hitting random buttons as he tried to get something to eat. It was at this moment that Roland realized the man had no idea he was dead. Biting his lip-ring, he started to speak again.

“I’m sorry, but you look really familiar. Where have I seen you before?”

The man turned back to Roland as a cocky grin stretched over his yellowed teeth, “I’m the drumma for ‘da band MaDog.” He held out his hand, “Monty Spades.”

“Ah!” Roland passed a false look of recognition across his features, “Good to meet you in person!” Roland looked the man’s face over, “Are you ok though? You look like you might be coming down with something.”

The man released a high pitched, wheezy laugh, “Yeah, I come down wif a craving for some brown suga.”

Roland’s brow furrowed as he knew that was a reference to something else, but didn’t know what it was off the top of his head. Unsure of what to say next, Roland looked to the vending machine, “I think the machine ate your coins.”

Monty’s expression turned forlorn, “That was the last o me money…” Roland’s breath caught in his chest as he felt the man’s mood change, “Now wot will I eat?!” He started pounding his fist against the glass over the machine, “GIVE ME MY FOOD YE RIGHT BASTARD! GO ON! SPIT ‘ER OUT!”

Realizing where this was about to go, Roland pulled his own wallet out of his pocket, “Let me try. What did you want?!”

“All I wan’ is somethin’ sweet.”

The man was clearly at the end of his rope as he scratched at the crook of his elbow. Roland pulled a crisp dollar bill from his wallet as his mind tried desperately to remember what brown sugar meant as slang. As the bill was sucked into the machine, Roland’s eyes went wide and he spun around.

“You’re on heroin!”

“Well fookin’ deduced kid.” The man’s arms were crossed over his chest, “Now ye gon’ push the buttons or leave me hangin’?!”

“Oh!”

Roland was so intimidated by this particular spirit that he knew in an instant that he wasn’t going to get any real information out of him on that night. Deciding to look the man up later, he pressed A-17 and watched as a pack of pink snowball pastries dropped into the

metal slot below. Pulling them out, Roland turned around to hand them to Monty, only to find that the spot was empty.

“Son of a bitch.”

Roland rested his face in his hands for a moment before deciding he needed to get some fresh air. Bypassing the front door as he remembered Jake’s offhanded warning about crime on the streets, Roland dragged his tired body up all thirteen flights of stairs to the roof. Lighting his cigarette as he pushed through the door, Roland didn’t notice that one of his new companions was already occupying the space until the other man spoke.

“You look like you’ve had a rough night.”

“What?” Roland looked up to see Jake gazing curiously over at him from the ledge of the building where he was sitting comfortably.

“You look like you’re about to have some sort of breakdown. Also, you’ve got a lit cigarette and a package of sugar filled, chemically enhanced pastries in the same hand.”

“Oh.” Roland moved over and sat next to Jake, but on the ground with his back against the ledge as he didn’t like the feeling that he might fall, “I tried to communicate with two spirits tonight. The first one was residual, which means that she’s just a visual echo of past events, so that was a lost cause from the get-go. The second one was conscious in mind but completely unaware he was dead. Also,” Roland sharply exhaled a lungful of smoke, “he was so fucked up on heroin that I panicked and got nothing useful from the interaction.” He held up the pastries, “I don’t even like marshmallow.”

Leaning over, Jake plucked the cakes from Roland’s hands, “Thanks! I was starting to feel a bit peckish.” Jake slid to sit next to Roland as he opened the package, “Also, I’m sorry your night sucked so badly. If it helps, I’ve been around druggies before and I didn’t get out much better than you did.” He slowly peeled off a bit of the coconut encrusted marshmallow coating and popped it in his mouth, “At least you know that what we did last night worked and you have the opportunity to communicate with some of them now. That sounds like a step forward to me.”

“I guess.” Roland leaned his head back against the cement wall, “I’m just so accustomed to working in smaller places with more clear-cut disturbances that I feel like I’m getting nowhere here.”

“Why not organize a list of everyone that has died in this place and try to talk to each of them individually in a planned order?”

“I’m having trouble finding who even did die here. There have been a few names, but the details were all vague enough to be completely useless. It’s almost like there’s been some sort of mass cover-up.”

Jake covered his stuffed mouth with his hand so he could speak without being rude, “Well, with all of these secret rooms, hallways, and apparently some spooky occult parties, who’s to say that the deaths weren’t just kept a secret inside the walls like everything else you’ve stumbled across so far?”

Roland turned to Jake with his eyes wide open, “You are absolutely brilliant.” He wrapped an arm around Jake’s shoulders, “How about you take my job and I’ll try to spin a tale of whimsy in your place.”

“I’m starting to get extremely concerned about how much you know about my career as an author.” Jake’s tone was light as he started in on the second pastry.

“Yeah well,” Roland rubbed the back of his neck, “I’m curious by nature and it was you that sent me to the library after all so, while I was there I sort of... looked up your name... and rented a book.”

“Oh gods, which one?”

“The minotaur one.” Roland was so embarrassed about divulging this information that he could no longer form a complete sentence.

“Bless you for not going straight for the dragon one. It was my first, so it’s not very good and, frankly, there are so many unsung and interesting mythical creatures to write about.”

“I actually think vampires are in right now. Dragons are old-school.” Roland was trying desperately to come off as calm and casual.

“I haven’t touched on that as the market has been a bit... tainted by some less than excellent work; both on TV and in books.”

“Good.” Roland chuckled, “There’s too much of that and they always get it wrong anyhow. I love your work, by the way.”

Jake waved the man off and shoved the entire cream filled center of the treat into his mouth at once, “Thanks, but don’t think

you can change the subject so easily. Do you think we could get into the basement?"

"Why do you want to go to the basement?"

"The creepy files are always in the basement," Jake shrugged, "and any psycho who is doing a cover-up will have creepy files."

"You really want to go down there this late at night?"

"I don't see why not." Jake stood up and offered a hand down to Roland, "We're less likely to run into any staff asking questions if we go now."

"It's irritating how often you're right." Roland stomped out the butt of his cigarette and started walking back to the door.

"It's a gift."

Jake followed Roland down the stairs, complaining loudly the whole way, only to be met only with a wall of stubborn determination from his companion. Finally giving up around the third floor, Jake crossed his arms over his chest and pouted.

"We are not taking the stairs back up."

"You can take the elevator if you want to, but you'll never get me in one."

"Why not?!" Jake whined.

"Haven't you ever watched a horror movie? Bad things always happen to the protagonist in an elevator."

"Well then, start being an antagonist! My legs are tired."

Roland chuckled and stopped on the first floor landing, "You're just a sidekick. You can take the elevator if you want."

Jake stuck his tongue out at Roland, "You're a jerk." Jake stopped a few steps up from the basement door to watch as Roland became stumped as it, like the door upstairs, didn't have a key-card reader, "Can you break into a door that needs a code?"

"Nah, but I have an app that will let me text Devon's pager and he can give me the code."

"Who?"

"He's one of the maintenance guys." Roland waved one hand in a vague gesture while texting with the other.

"They really should wear name-tags or something."

"Good point." Roland lowered his phone and waited for a reply, "Though, you not knowing his name is less weird than my being here

for three days now and not once having seen a maid... not a living one at the very least.”

“Yeah, they’re grossly understaffed.” Jake was picking at his fingernails as Roland’s phone beeped, “Sal has been working here longer than I’ve lived in the building and I just met him for the first time a week ago.”

“Ah-hah!” Roland opened the text and shook his head, “You’re never going to guess this one.”

“One, two, three, four?”

“Nope.” Roland stepped up to the key pad, “Nine, nine, nine, nine.”

“Fancy.” Jake waited for Roland to pull the door open, “It is a little less obvious than my guess though.”

“Only slightly,” Roland nodded as he started feeling around for a light switch, “but not by much.”

Jake started running his hand over the walls in an attempt to help Roland out, “Don’t you find it weird that your maintenance buddy doesn’t want to escort you? You seem to have a lot of freedom here.”

“He mentioned awhile ago that,” Roland found the light switch and flicked it up, “the basement creeps him out. Vanhousen probably has no idea I’m down here unescorted.”

“Won’t you be caught on the CCTV tapes? I’ve noticed the cameras everywhere.”

“There aren’t any in the basement.”

“That’s weird, but okay.”

The two stopped to look around the room. Where they were now standing was clearly just the antechamber to the basement as the room felt more like a storage closet. Shelves full of cleaning chemicals, spare parts, and assorted tools lined the walls that led back about fifteen feet to yet another door.

“Great!” Roland rubbed his hands together nervously, “This is the labyrinth of basements. I hope you didn’t have any more plans for your life as we’re never going to get out of here.”

Jake snickered, “You’re a bright little ray of sunshine tonight.”

Pulling out his cell phone, Jake grabbed Roland’s out of his hand and typed a number into it. After waiting for a few moments,

the phones synced up and Jake handed Roland's back to him and hid his own on the top shelf to his left.

"Now your phone can find mine. If we get lost, just open that app and follow it back to this room."

Roland was stunned, "You're hired."

"Maybe." Jake led the way through the second door, "We'll need to talk about wage and benefits first. I really can't leave the ever-so-lucrative and fulfilling job of lying to gullible people in the newspaper every single day of the week."

"Writing horoscopes does sound like a dream job. I can understand why you wouldn't want to leave. They don't give that job to just anyone."

"Nope! It's going to take an incredible offer to sway my loyalty."

"I'll see what I can do." Roland was looking around a cement hallway that had a series of unmarked, solid metal doors in it, "Do you want to pick one?"

"Can't you use your psychic powers to vibe out which one will be the most useful to us?"

"Jake, I'm a medium, not a diviner."

"Oh." Jake reached into his pocket and pulled out a penny, "I've got this one then."

"But there are six doors in he-." Roland was cut off as Jake held up a finger.

He pointed to the first door on their left, "Heads..." He pointed to the next door down, "Tails."

Flipping and catching the coin, Jake nodded, "Okay, tails, so we're not going through the first door. He then moved and pointed to the door that had not been taken out and the third one on that side of the hallway. Pointing to the middle one he stated, "Heads..." And then to the one on the end, "Tails."

"Oh!" Roland nodded and waved Jake on; somehow more comfortable in the idea that, if the door they chose ended up badly, neither of them would technically be to blame.

Less than a minute later, the two were standing at the third door back on the right side of the hallway. Roland was chewing on his lip ring as he jiggled the knob and hoped nothing too insane was behind the door. Pushing forward before Jake could give him any



grief, Roland was surprised to see that the single light bulb hanging from a free-swinging wire on the ceiling was already lit.

“Water heaters. Fantastic!” Jake stated in a sarcastically over-exuberant tone, “One again, my divination steers me away from danger!”

“Unless there’s a carbon leak, of course.”

“That’s furnaces, dear.” Jake patted the top of Roland’s head as he did a quick sweep around the room, “There isn’t even a bit of graffiti scratched into the wall by a handy-man. Bummer.”

“On to the next room then?”

“Yeah.” Jake walked out and looked at the coin, “Heads for clockwise, tails for counterclockwise.” He flipped the coin, took a step to the right, and pulled the door open, “Oh, this is so much better!”

“I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or not.” Roland followed Jake into a room that was packed floor to ceiling with broken bits of furniture, “Someone could definitely hide something in here pretty easily.”

“If they did, it would be in the back.” Jake was already squeezing through a small footpath that led down the center of the room, “I recognize this crap up here and it’s definitely been broken in the last year.”

Roland took a deep breath before following his companion, “Do you really think we’re going to find stuff that is a century old back there?”

“There is only one way to know for sure,” Jake ducked under a twisted floor lamp that had been stuck in between two stacks of broken bed frames, “and stop worrying, if one of us does die, it’ll make this investigation much simpler as whoever could just ghost to the back.”

“You have an incredibly casual outlook on death.” Roland stated as he nearly tripped over a moldy shower curtain, “Should I be worried about you?”

Jake looked back over his shoulder, “You are the only person that has ever proven to me that there is something beyond the physical death of the body and you’re concerned about my well-being as an inhabited corpse?”

Roland chuckled, "Inhabited corpse, I like that." He bumped his shoulder into Jake's as the man paused to nudge an open dresser drawer shut so he could shuffle by, "To answer your question, though, yes I am. There are a lot of things you can do in life that you can't as a spirit."

"Like what?"

Clicking on his flashlight and handing it forward to Jake, Roland continued, "When you're dead, you can't taste or feel any physical sensation. This means you can't feel warm or comfortable or... um... anything sexy." Roland coughed, "You will be able to see, hear, and smell, but those senses will only act as a tease for some goal you will never be able to achieve. Most spirits I talk to that know they are dead are hanging around longing for something they wished they had done while they still inhabited their future corpse. You also wouldn't be able to speak to most humans."

"Well, the eating thing would be a problem, but I'm not really getting any right now anyhow."

"Sex or conversations?"

"Now that you and I are talking, sex, but before you came along, it was both." Jake paused and moved his flashlight beam around the room, "Ah-hah!"

"What is it?!"

"There is a busted up desk back here." Jake was trying to wiggle through a space that got even tighter as they neared the back wall, "It's all smashed up and looks like someone maybe tried to set it on fire or something. It's kind of scorched up and rough."

"Why does this excite you?!" Roland was baffled as they had already passed at least three desks already.

"One of the drawers is opened a little bit and I can see one of those big ugly yellow envelopes sticking out."

"Oh, shit!" Roland was trying to see around Jake and failing miserably, "Do you think you can fit back there?"

"I'm going to try, but I need you to stay here and hold the flashlight so that I can see where I'm going while still having both of my hands free."

Doing as he was told, Roland was surprised at how much his stomach was churning in this moment. Taking a deep breath, he tried

to convince himself that it was only because he was incredibly claustrophobic and this room was not conducive to his comfort level but, as he watched Jake nearly trip over a broken table leg, he realized that his anxiety was immeasurably worse when he thought about the possibility that the wall of broken furniture could turn into a death trap at any given moment, should it decide to bend to gravity's will and end his companion's life.

"Be careful, ok?" Roland was trying to will Jake through safely with his mind, "Nothing in this basement is worth you dying in an avalanche of dusty, broken, knockoff furniture."

Chuckling, Jake looked over his shoulder, "You're sweet, but I'm already here."

"Yeah? Can you tell what any of it is?"

"Kind of." Jake was trying to carefully pull something large out of the bottom drawer, "There are a buttload of these rubber-banded together in this drawer. They've been wedged in forcefully and I... don't have a good... angle."

Roland heard Jake make a few frustrated noises as he yanked at the bundle. After what felt like eons of the blonde struggling, Roland watched, as if in slow motion, as the envelopes released suddenly, causing Jake's elbow to shoot straight back and hit the side of a pile of stacked chairs. One by one each of the chairs started to shift and wobble as the integrity of the stack was compromised.

Reaching forward as pure adrenaline took over his system; Roland wrapped his hand around Jake's thin wrist and forcefully yanked him backward. As the chairs started to crash to the floor, more objects began to slide around as a domino effect turned the room into a hellish nightmare of cascading projectiles.

No longer paying attention to what he was bumping into, Roland focused on the light of the door ahead that looked to be the size of a postage stamp from his perspective down the rapidly shrinking alley he was in. Running forward, Roland used his left shoulder to plow past the smaller objects that were falling off the top of the pile, while his right hand remained virtually welded around Jake's wrist.

Breathing heavily, Roland's shirt snagged on something that nearly sent him flying to the ground, the motion only stopped as Jake paused to counterbalance the fall. The blonde was swearing up a storm behind Roland as the volume of the collapsing heap became deafeningly loud.

The last thought Roland had before finally ducking through the doorway that led to his safety was that he knew he was going to be in serious trouble for this racket if he and Jake didn't get out of the basement quickly enough.

As his body slammed into the wall on the other side of the hallway, Roland immediately turned to see how Jake had fared. The blonde's face was streaked with dust and trails of sweat, but he otherwise looked physically unharmed. Looking down, Roland found himself proud as he saw that, through the utter hell the duo had just gone through, Jake had managed to cling tight to the bundle that had nearly cost the two their lives.

Reaching out silently as he was still trying desperately to catch his breath, Roland opened one of the many folders and glanced inside. Looking back up to Jake, a wide grin split across his face.

"Jackpot!"

## 4

Roland was hanging the 'do not disturb' tag on his door and locking up as Jake dramatically collapsed to the floor. The duo had run up the stairs at an alarming speed as they didn't want to get pegged with the punishment for the immense noise disturbance they had created when the room full of junk had collapsed in on itself. Moving to sit on the end of his bed, Roland looked down to Jake who appeared to be about three quarters of the way into a coma.

"Are you okay?"

Jake nodded.

"Are you glad they don't have CCTV in the basement?"

Jake wheezed out a noise that sounded vaguely like 'yes'.

"Do you want to get some sleep before you find out what you almost died for?" Roland's tone had a teasing quality to it now.

Finally sitting up, Jake leaned his back against the foot of Roland's bed, "How are you not having trouble breathing?"

"I always take the stairs." Roland shrugged, "I'm in pretty good shape." He lifted up the bottom of his shirt to expose the lower half of his rock solid abs.

"Jeeeeeeez!" Jake shook his head before burying his face in his hands, "Warn a guy before you just whip something like that out."

Roland chuckled as he started sliding the rubber band off of the pack of envelopes, "My bad."

"You don't sound like you regret that at all but, whatever." Jake gestured to the envelopes, "What's in them?"

Roland was rifling through the stack, "Each one of them is labeled from one to sixty-three and then there is one in the back with no number." Roland pulled out envelope number one and then the unmarked one, "Choose wisely, my apprentice."

Jake plucked the blank envelope out of Roland's hand and started bending the wire that held it shut. Doing the same, Roland focused on the single page that was housed within the folder. The page in his hands had clearly been written out on a typewriter and

looked strangely official for something that had simply been hoarded in the basement of a rundown hotel. Reading it over quickly, Roland's eyes widened as he absorbed the story of the first recorded death in the Moorsfield Hotel.

"It is a deeply detailed death report." Roland spoke aloud as he carefully slid the document back into the folder, "But it..." Roland made a face as Jake didn't look up right away, "It was a murder."

"Yeah," Jake's face had paled excessively, "they were doing a ritual."

Instantly regretting bringing an innocent into this case, Roland grabbed the hand written pages from Jake. Running his eyes over them as quickly as possible, Roland scanned each step of the ritual and felt a knot form in his stomach as he read through the final steps.

"Jake, I don't want to ruin your day, but you might want to consider moving out. Immediately."

"I read the instructions and the person never managed to complete it." Jake scooted up to sit next to Roland, "Don't you think someone would have noticed if there was a demon running loose in this place?"

"Not necessarily." Roland ran a shaking hand over his hair, "The first murder was to summon the demon to this building." Roland held up the folder labeled 'one', "They murdered a hooker and used her blood to get the abomination's attention."

Jake's face scrunched up, "Don't you have to use the blood of a virgin or whatever?"

"Demons don't really give a shit." Roland shook his head, "The only thing the person has to have, in this case, is a soul."

"Ok." Jake nodded and stood to pace as he could no longer handle sitting still while Roland fidgeted, "When did that take place?"

"Nineteen-fifty." Roland was shocked at how well Jake was handling this.

"And you said the first murder summoned the demon here?"

"Yes."

"Do the other sixty-two folders contain more detailed death reports?"

"Most likely, yes."

“Why?” Jake had stopped pacing and was now leaning casually against Roland’s dresser.

“Whoever wrote these was trying to acquire a powerful demon without selling his or her own soul. To prove they were worthy of this demon’s time, they offered up sixty-six souls in return.”

“But they fell short?”

Roland was one step ahead of his companion and already opening the folder labeled sixty-three, “The most recent death was just last year.” Roland was nervously chewing on his thumbnail, “Did you ever hear about this?”

Roland held up a printed computer document that detailed the death of a forty-two year old man who had apparently been found drunk by the mastermind of this scheme and pushed down the stairs which lead to his death by way of a broken neck.

Shaking his head, Jake’s eyes looked sad as he sat down on the edge of the bed next to Roland again, “I was unaware of anything bad happening here. Hell, I’ve not even heard anyone mention having bad service.” He crossed his arms over his chest, “Well, I’ve had bad service, but I assumed that was because I’m a surly jackass and they didn’t want to deal with me.”

“Ah.” Roland patted Jake on the shoulder, “If it makes you feel any better, the service here is crap for me as well.” He stood up from the bed, “Now that this has gone from a haunting to a demonic case, I need to do a few things to better ward my room.” Roland was digging through a duffel bag he had stashed in the bottom drawer of the dresser, “You are more than welcome to stay for as long as you want.”

“If whoever started this is still killing people, don’t you think we should be trying to empty the hotel?”

“We don’t have that kind of power.” Roland shook his head and pulled a massive iron cross from the bag, “We would only draw negative attention to ourselves and, at most, paint metaphorical targets on our backs.” He stuck the cross to the only door into the room, “If you want, we can ward your room after mine.” Roland was now holding a bottle of rose oil and another of holy water.

“If it’s not too much trouble, can I stay here tonight?” Jake was suddenly refusing to make eye contact, “I loathe being a burden but

my specialty is fantasy, not horror.”

Roland chuckled, “I don’t know, that scene where the group of army dudes is trying to kill your Minotaur is terrifying.” Roland was splashing the holy water in cross shapes over the doors, windows, and walls, “I can’t even imagine being cornered by a metal-clad mob of drunken assholes who wanted me dead because my head was different than theirs.”

A slight blush came up on Jake’s cheeks, “You seriously like my writing?”

“Mm-hmm.” Roland looked over his shoulder to the blonde, “I might be your biggest fan.”

“You might be my only fan.”

“Which, by default, makes me the biggest!” Roland turned back to Jake with a grin across his face, “Now pardon me while I bless the room, yeah?”

“Okay.”

Jake watched silently as Roland walked around the room reciting something in Latin that sounded almost melodic to his ears. As he finished each round of the chant, Roland would put a small cross of rose oil on a door frame, a window, or a mirror. Once finished rounding the room, Roland stood up on one of the chairs and repeated his actions on the ceiling and then once again on the carpet under the bed.

Standing upright again, Roland smiled warmly, “That might have been overkill, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Yeah...” Jake was distracted by the smell of the rose oil and a strange sense of peace that had hit him somewhere in the middle of Roland’s warding.

“Are you okay?” Roland leaned forward in an attempt to get Jake’s glazed eyes to focus on him, “You’re not going into shock are you?”

“No.” The blonde stated simply, “I just haven’t felt this good in as long as I can remember.”

An incredible wave of empathy washed over Roland as a realization struck him about his companion. Reaching up around his neck, Roland unhooked a silver necklace that was hanging under his shirt and pulled it out. Reaching forward, he clipped it around Jake’s



neck and let the heavy charm shaped like a cross drop against his chest.

“I think you’ve been oppressed by the demon’s presence.” Roland held his hand up as he watched Jake’s eyes widen in fear, “It’s nothing like being possessed. It’s more like a veil of depression that clouds the general vicinity of the bastard. You should start feeling better the longer you stay around this room.”

“Doesn’t giving me this leave you up shit creek without a paddle?” Jake held up the necklace.

“Nope.”

Roland rolled the sleeves of his black pullover up to reveal the entirety of the incredibly intricate sleeve tattoos he had. Interwoven in a pattern that almost made Jake’s eyes cross were lines of script that, upon closer inspection, were definitely not in English. Mixed into the words were various symbols of faith and protection. Tilting his head to the side, Jake lifted Roland’s arms to see the part of the tattoos that went around the back.

“This is incredible! Did you really manage to cover all the protective symbols from every religion known to mankind?”

“Hopefully.” Roland replied casually, “Also, the words are a mix of spells and prayers that, hopefully, make me virtually untouchable.”

“Now when you say hopefully...” Jake looked suspicious.

“I’ve never personally gone head to head with one of the scaly bastards, but I did work with a series of professionals on the tattoo designs. I’m sort of a prototype.”

“It’s better than nothing, I suppose.” Jake circled back around to stand in front of Roland, “Either way they look really cool.”

Roland smirked and reached into his mini fridge, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Booze. Strong booze.”

Roland handed Jake the remains of the Patron they hadn’t finished consuming the night before and grabbed himself a soda. Cracking open the can, Roland took a drink before meeting Jake’s baffled stare.

“I can’t drink until this is solved.”

Jake’s eyes widened as his lips were already wrapped around the neck of the bottle, “You’re joking, right?”

“I’m afraid not.” Roland moved to sit in one of the two chairs by the window, “I shouldn’t have on duty at all but I slipped up.”

“Was it the demonic oppression?”

Tilting his head to the side, Roland shrugged, “It could have been. I was pretty bummed out about the whole case and that normally doesn’t happen to me, even when it’s going poorly.”

“Now that you know it’s happening, is there a way to fight the oppression?”

“Keep that iron cross on you at all times, avoid going anywhere inside the building alone, and tell me immediately if you, at any point, have a thought or feeling that doesn’t seem to belong to you.”

Roland took another long drink, “Seriously though, I wasn’t joking when I recommended you moved out.”

“Oh, I fucking intend to.” Jake took another long hit from the bottle, “*After* we get through this.” He held up a hand to stop Roland before the arguing could even start, “Look, you read my book, right?”

“Yes.” Roland wasn’t sure what a misunderstood Minotaur had to do with this conversation

“Well, if you were to read all the rest of them, you would learn many small lessons, but there is only one overlying theme in all nineteen of them.” Jake sent Roland an even stare, “Friends don’t abandon friends just because a situation gets a little deadly. I do actually believe that to the very core so, you can argue all you want, but I’m staying here until this is settled.”

Unable to stop the slightest of grins from crossing his face, Roland leaned forward to his notably tipsy companion, “We’re friends now?”

“Well, let’s see.” Jake held his hand up and started ticking off points on his fingers, “Yesterday, you brought me top shelf booze, took me on a wicked adventure, bought me real food, *and* ate it with me. Then today, you gave me chocolate cakes, took me on another exciting adventure, gave me a job offer, un-ironically complimented my life’s work,” Jake paused to hiccup, “and then, when the deathtrap was caving in, instead of abandoning me, you dragged my ass out at great personal risk *and then* gave me protection *while* explaining to me, in a roundabout way, that I’ve not been an utter failure for the last three years of my miserable life because of a

personal flaw, but actually because of a fucking demon that's living in this crappy building."

Roland was startled to see that Jake was fighting against tears that were welling up in his eyes.

"So yeah," Jake sniffed and took another drink from the bottle, "I've never in my life had a friend quite as great as you before."

Clearing his throat in an attempt to avoid getting overly emotional about his friend's outburst, Roland stood up and moved over to stand before Jake, who was tilting dangerously to the right. Reaching a hand down, Roland pulled Jake up to his feet and into a bone-crushing hug.

"You are not a failure in any sense of the word. You're the one that's actually accomplished every step forward in this case so far. All I've done is trespass and get bullied into buying snacks for a spirit. You're the one doing all the thinking on this job."

Releasing a wet chuckle, Jake returned the hug, "You are kind of a wreck."

"Rude," Roland chuckled, "but also accurate."

Jake pulled out of the hug and wiped at his face, "Sorry, I didn't mean to get all emotional on you. I just haven't felt much of anything in so long that it all sort of hit me at once."

"It's absolutely fine." Roland smiled and moved to sit back down, "I'm glad I could lift the evil little rain cloud from over your head." He paused to observe exactly how tired the man before him looked, "How about you try to get some sleep. You look like you're going to collapse."

"Nah," Jake was shaking his head, "you need the bed more than I do."

"Not tonight, I don't." Roland reached over and pulled the envelopes off of the bed, "I will be spending a vast amount of time reading through each and every one of these in an attempt to get a better handle on the situation before I call in my boss who just happens to be a high ranking demonologist."

"That's handy." Jake was rubbing his eyes, "I guess if you really don't mind the intrusion, I could try to nap for awhile."

"I wouldn't let you go back to your room alone right now even if you wanted to." Roland gestured to the window behind his head,

“Never be alone while the sun is down. Darkness is their domain.”

Shivering at the somber statement, Jake nodded and moved to the bathroom to wash his face before trying to sleep. Roland, on the other hand, grabbed the bundle of folders and his laptop where he intended to make a simple list of the basics of each victim as he knew this case would probably go more smoothly if he could get information from some of their spirits.

Looking up as Jake came back out of the bathroom, Roland sent him a half smile, “Rest easy, okay? I swear that nothing is getting in this room through my wards.”

Smiling back, Jake nodded as he kicked his shoes off and crawled into the bed, “I believe you.”

Reaching over to turn off all the lights in the room, aside from the small lamp directly behind the table he was working at, Roland hoped that he would be able to wrap this case up quickly and without the body count going any higher than it already was. Cracking open a second soda, Roland prepared himself to work harder than he ever had before.

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Jake’s eyes slid open as a beam of light from the window had become unbearable enough that getting up was less miserable than trying to avoid it. Sitting up, Jake found himself momentarily startled as he was in a tidy room that didn’t have a kitchen like his did. Turning to the right, the blonde couldn’t help but smile lightly as he noticed that Roland was fast asleep in the chair he had been sitting in hours ago when Jake had fallen asleep.

Standing up, Jake crept his way over to see how far the medium had actually managed to get before passing out for the night. Sitting open on the table directly in front of Roland was a laptop that had gone to sleep, four empty cans of soda, and the stack of all sixty-four folders that had toppled over and covered the

tabletop. Running his finger over the mouse pad on the laptop to wake it up, Jake noticed that Roland had also taken a few notes by hand.

Never once feeling like he was overstepping his boundaries, Jake gently lifted the pad of paper and read over the barely legible notes that had been scribbled out the night before.

-Room 415

-Find/seal sac. rm

-Call Jan

-Ward Ja rm

There was a fifth line of writing on the list, but Roland had thoroughly scribbled it out for a reason that was beyond Jake. Setting the pad of paper back down, Jake checked his watch and noted that it was just after ten in the morning. Leaning over again to see the now bright screen of his companion's laptop, Jake felt pride bubble up in his chest as he saw the end of a lengthy typed document that had all of the necessary details of each death on the hotel property neatly organized and presumably backed up in a way that was much more permanent than depending on the survival of the original documents.

Reaching into his pocket to grab his cell phone, Jake was startled to find that it was missing. Thinking back to the night before, the blonde sighed as he realized he had left the object hiding on the shelf in the basement. Muttering under his breath, Jake casually borrowed Roland's phone and snuck into the bathroom to make a call.

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Jerking awake as the smell of brewing coffee met his nose, Roland looked wildly around the room in an attempt to figure out who or what had turned on the machine. Off to Roland's left, he noticed

that, not only was his bed made for the first time since his stay had started, but also that Jake was talking to someone at the door. Standing up, Roland stretched his arms over his head as he realized that his entire room was pristinely clean at this point.

“Ah, you’re up!” Jake was walking back from the door with a large plastic sack that he placed on the dresser, “I ordered in breakfast.”

“What the hell, Jake?” Roland was rubbing his face as he wasn’t accustomed to anyone being this perky right after he’d woken up.

“We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us. I figured we should start it with a hearty breakfast.” Jake poured two Styrofoam cups of coffee, “You did a big chunk of the work last night, so I figured the least I could do was get you something warm to eat.”

“Thank you.” Roland rubbed his eyes and accepted some sugar packets from Jake, “Trust me, I do appreciate it. I’m just not accustomed to interacting with anyone, living or dead, this soon after waking up.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jake was opening a container of pancakes, “My mouth will be occupied post haste.” He pointedly crammed a massive bite into his mouth and gestured for Roland to open the other containers.

“Christ Almighty, are you eating for two?!” Roland was currently staring down his own stack of four pancakes, twelve slices of bacon, what looked to be about half a pound of scrambled eggs, a stack of flat potato cakes, and a small mountain of condiments.”

Jake shrugged, “I wanted to make sure we definitely had enough energy to deal with your list.”

“You read my list?” Roland was nibbling on a piece of bacon.

“You read my book.”

Roland rolled his eyes and grabbed a plastic fork to get going on some of the eggs, “You are really weird, you know that, right?”

Tapping his nose, Jake swallowed before speaking, “Reclusive fiction author.”

“Touché.”

“Seriously though,” Jake was dipping a potato cake in ketchup, “what’s up with that room on the fourth floor?”

“Oh, yeah!” Roland nearly dropped his fork in excitement, “It’s really gruesome, but it was the room this serial killer lived in long-term.” Roland made a grand gesture, “He wasn’t even hired by whoever orchestrated this whole mess; it was just a coincidence or some sort of attraction to the natural darkness. Within the confines of room four-fifteen, this sick bastard murdered ten hookers, two guests, and a maid. Chances are pretty high that I’ll be able to communicate with at least one spirit in there.”

Jake’s excited chewing slowed at this point, “That’s the room directly under mine, isn’t it.” It was not a question.

“Yes, but this all took place between nineteen-fifty-seven and nineteen-sixty-one.”

“Right.” Jake nodded as his anxiety eased slightly, “I thought the people had to be killed in the special demon sacrifice room with a ritual and all that mess.”

“Only the first and last sacrifices have to be ceremonially murdered by the person who started all of this. The other sixty-four of them just have to be in the building.”

“Well, that does seem fair.” Jake’s tone had a hint of sarcasm to it, “We wouldn’t want whoever set this up to have to go all the way to the same room *every* time they want to make a sacrifice to Satan.”

“You’re handling this alarmingly well.”

“I’m a bit twisted.”

Nodding, Roland started in on his pancakes, “We need to find whatever room that does happen in though.”

Jake hummed as he tapped his chin and chewed a large bite of bacon, “We did sort of run out on four basement rooms.”

“We did.” Roland nodded, “Also, the blueprints have a fair few more hidden rooms that I haven’t gotten around to yet.”

“So, we get to spend today wandering around until you can find a way into a room that may or may not be occupied right now?”

Jake’s tone was once again casual.

“Devon said they’re checking out today so, around eleven, there’s a good chance it’ll be empty for awhile.”

“Nice.” Jake nodded, “This place doesn’t allow check-ins until four p.m. to make time for the ridiculously small number of maids to get to all the rooms. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Speaking of time, what time is it?” Roland was stretching his arms over his head, “I didn’t actually intend to sleep at all last night.”

“It’s about ten-forty-five in the morning. It’s good you got some sleep seeing as we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“I guess.” Roland ran a hand over his chin, “We could go see if the room is empty already if you want.”

“Before we do that, could you maybe explain to me a little more about that ritual? I read the whole thing, but a fair amount went right over my head.”

“Sure.” Roland leaned back and handed Jake his coffee cup for another refill, “So, you do understand that some shitty human murdered another human to get the attention of one of Satan’s henchmen, yes?”

“Mm-hmm.” Jake nodded as he leaned back to get more comfortable as well.

“Alright, in this particular case, the human that decided to do this was aiming to bind a demon to be their slave. When the time of the sixty-sixth murder in this building comes, whoever is in control will have to take the living sacrifice to the same place they took the original and go through all the fancy ritualistic things before murdering the person.”

Jake nodded, “It’s really that simple?”

“Technically, they will need a sixty-seventh person to act as a vessel for the demon and the ritual isn’t exactly simple. Housing a demon is not a position most would be willing to do so the last sacrifice will probably be part of a couple.”

“If the first murder was in the fifties, wouldn’t this person be freakin’ ancient? What would the point be in selling all of these souls for maybe a few years of having a pet demon?”

“If you’ve got a demon at your command, you can much more easily access the type of dark magic that would help keep you alive and perhaps even reduce your age.” Roland ran a hand through his hair, “I’m not incredibly well versed on the exact temptations a demon can actually provide as that’s Janette’s job, but I know the big ones are all in there.”

“What are the big ones exactly?” Jake’s eyes were wide and shining.



“Money, sex, fame, youth, power, and revenge.” Roland stated simply.

“What about love?” Jake was running his fingers around the lip of his cup, “Don’t you think love would be a hefty temptation?”

Roland shook his head, “Lust maybe, sex definitely, but even the devil himself can not *make* someone fall in love. It’s one of the only forces on this earth so sacred that it can’t be tampered with.”

A light smile crossed Jake’s lips, “That’s beautiful.”

Chuckling, Roland tossed his once again empty cup in the trash bin, “I wasn’t being poetic. It’s just the truth.”

“Well, the truth is beautiful.” Jake nodded and sat up straighter, “Have you called your person yet?”

“My w.. oh Janette!”

“Yeah, that person.” Jake nodded.

“I will after breakfast.”

“How did you wind up having a demonologist for a friend? Doesn’t that mean you work for the Catholic Church?”

“Not at all.” Roland waved his hand, “Janette’s work is recognized by the church, but she’s what you’d call a free-lance demonologist. Her father, Donovan Schneider, was a scholar that was determined to figure out everything about spirits, demons, and the afterlife. While his work isn’t finished, and probably never will be, the facts were ingrained into Janette’s head from the very day she was born and now, at thirty-two, she is the youngest fully-fledged female demonologist to ever be recognized and supported by the Catholic Church.”

“Wow,” Jake nodded and gestured for Roland to continue, “and you ended up working for her?”

“Yup.” Roland nodded, “As I said awhile back, I was born with these abilities and they run in my family. My mother would often scope out cases for Janette’s father before he would travel across the country to ensure the haunting was actually demonic. I know he respected her in the long run, but I’m pretty sure he gave her the job in the first place because she was a single mother as my dad died in a car wreck when I was an infant.

When I was nine, my mom bumped into her first real demon and Donovan flew out that night and the two abandoned me with

Janette at this boring old church for the next three days while they settled the case. We wound up being friends and, now that I'm an adult and our parents are mostly retired, I do for Janette what my mother did for her father."

"Wow." Jake smiled, "That is incredible! Have you ever come across a demon before?"

"Not before this place, no. The nastiest thing I've ever dealt with previously was a mass Native American haunting that was affecting a ranch and killing off all their animals. It was a mess but, once I met with the elder of the remnants of the tribe and talked it out, he helped me hold a ceremony that made peace between the spirits and the homeowners."

"That sounds like it would be incredibly sad."

"It was." Roland nodded, "To this day, I'm not sure why the spirits were killing animals as they were said to revere nature and the earth, but I figure that spirits have a hard time focusing on our reality after being dead awhile. Like..." Roland waved his hands as he thought, "Even the nicest spirit could get so focused on what's holding them back that they no longer remember their values as the desperation, despair, and frustration take over. It makes them an imprint of the worst parts of humanity."

"Are you *sure* you don't want to be a poet?"

Roland chuckled and rolled his eyes, "Shut up, Jake."

"Seriously! Your perspective and thoughtfulness..." Jake stopped as Roland threw a bit of cold scrambled egg at his cheek, "Oh, you're rude."

"Say I'm not a poet!" Roland challenged.

"Nope." Jake crossed his arms, "You have a beautiful soul and nothing from Heaven or earth could change my mind!"

"What about from Hell?" Roland's tone had shifted only slightly.

"Right!" Jake nodded, "We're working a case. You should call Janette to get her butt down here so we can get back to this investigation!"

Roland couldn't keep an amused grin from crossing his face, "If you insist."

# 5

Standing just outside the door to room four-fifteen, Roland was nervously chewing on his thumb nail, “How do we even know they’re gone?!”

“It’s eleven-thirty!” Jake rolled his eyes as Roland continued to look incredibly nervous. Stepping forward, he rapped his knuckles against the door and spoke in a falsetto tone, “Housekeeping!”

The two listened carefully for twenty seconds and heard nothing but silence. Jake sent Roland a pointed look as he gestured to the door. Nodding, the medium grabbed his all-access key-card and waved it in front of the censor that was attached to the room’s

door. Turning the handle as he heard a click, Roland pushed forward into the space beyond.

As soon as he entered, Roland felt like all of the air had been knocked out of him. Rubbing his hand over his chest, he paused to take a few pointedly deep breaths.

“Roland?” Jake’s voice was concerned.

Holding up a finger to let Jake know he needed a moment, Roland took another steadying breath before speaking, “I’m fine. There is just an insane amount of bleck in here.”

“Bleck?”

“Residual bad vibes left over from traumatic happenings in the past. I’m particularly sensitive to them,” he took another deep breath, “but I’m fine. I was just caught off guard by how strong it was after so many years of this room being dormant.”

Jake closed the door behind himself and locked it, “What do we do now?”

The question fell on unhearing ears as Roland stood in the middle of the disheveled room that the maids had not cleaned yet. His eyes had glazed over as he was hearing what sounded to be a crowd of voices shouting at him all at once from every possible direction. Tilting his head to the side, Roland tried to focus on just one at a time, but failed miserably as the entire group simply got louder.

“Quiet!” Roland snapped and startled Jake half to death.

“Roland, what the hell is happening?!” Jake had pressed his back to into a corner, “I don’t hear anything.”

“Of course you don’t,” Roland looked over to him, “but I do, and,” he looked pointedly around the room, “I will be glad to hear them all out if they would kindly talk one at a time.”

Jake slid into one of the two empty chairs in the room and gestured for Roland to continue.

“Alright, I’m here for information. I know that most, if not all of you, were murdered by a man named Geoffery Sanders and I am certain you’re pissed off and confused as to why you are trapped here.” Roland paused and listened, “I can fix it, but I need to know who is orchestrating the sacrifices to the demon, where they are

doing it, and anything else you can tell me about the demon or its master.”

Roland turned his head to stare into the corner of the room, pointing toward the calmest sounding voice, “You there, in the back. Come forward, please.” He could now focus in on the faint outline of a young woman, “What is your name?”

“Jenna.” The girl looked up from under a shock of pale blonde eyelashes at Roland, “I was the first murdered.”

“I am sorry about that, but what can you tell me about the happenings outside of this room?”

“It’s hard to leave this space.” She gestured to the crowd of wispy specters that surrounded Roland, “We are all fighting for a small amount of energy but, when I was newly dead, I did leave the room a few times. I don’t know where this demon is, but I do know that there is something wrong in the back of the freezer in the kitchens.”

“Jake, would you please take notes.” Roland glanced to Jake who was visible shivering by this point as the temperature in the room was frigid as the spirits all tried to draw in as much energy as they could at once, “Remind me to check the back of the freezer in the kitchen.”

“Okay.” Jake picked up the notepad that was on the dresser and started writing.

“Do you know what is happening back there?”

“No, I got scared by the bad feeling and left.” She looked sadly up to Roland, “Can you really get us all out of here?”

“I can.” Roland’s voice rose as he tried to draw in the attention of all the spirits once again, “The only thing holding you back is the deal made with the demon in this building. If I can break the binding on the demon, or get rid of the person who made the deal before it is completed, you will all be able to move on properly.” He glanced over to Jake who appeared to be fascinated by, what to him, sounded like a one-sided conversation, “Does anyone here know where the sacrifice room is?”

At this point, a man made his presence known just behind Roland’s right shoulder, “I may be able to help you.”

Roland focused some energy on the man to help his form solidify enough to be seen, "You were part of the couple that was murdered here, yes?"

"Yes. I am Jeff." The man gestured toward the door, "Doris is shy, but she is grateful you are here." He looked back to Roland, "We were staying here long-term while we looked for a house in the area. I was an out-of-work architect, so I spent many long nights walking the halls and feeling sorry for myself. I recall noticing that every floor above the basement in this building has thirty rooms, except on level three. The south end of that floor has a wall where the other floors have a hallway, though the outside of the building looks normal. I never found a way in, but maybe you two could."

"Write down that we need to check out the south wall of the third floor." Roland glanced to Jake who was scribbling away at the notepad, "That is incredibly helpful. Thank you, Jeff."

"It's you we should be thanking," the man nodded to Roland and then Jake, "I read of Hell in the good book many a times when I was alive, but never did I imagine purgatory would be just as bad."

Roland nodded understandingly, "I am sorry you have all been trapped within these walls for so long. With any luck, we will soon be able to break all of you out. Should we defeat this demon, and any of you can not find your way to the light, please feel free to find me and I will be glad to help you."

"Thank you," Jeff smiled and looked around the room, "from all of us."

"You're welcome." Roland managed a half-hearted smile, "We're going to go investigate the rooms you have told us about. Hopefully, we can get this wrapped up quickly." Roland looked to Jake, "We need to go back to my room and look at the blueprints."

"Alright." Jake stood up and looked around the room once more as if he would be able to see the spirits, "Bye, everyone."

Roland chuckled, "They all said bye back." He pushed out the door and came face to face with a surprised looking maid, "Sorry, we're leaving."

Awkwardly bypassing the woman and her cart, Roland gestured for Jake to follow him back to his room. Once on the staircase, Roland noticed that Jake seemed distracted.

“Are you okay?”

“I really need to get back to my room so I can send in the horoscope page for tomorrow. I don’t want to get fired, but I also don’t want to be alone in my room.”

“We can kill two birds with one stone.” Roland continued up to his floor, “Just let me grab my duffel bag and laptop and we can haul up in your room. I can check the blueprints and ward your room against the demon while you work.”

“Work.” Jake chuckled and patted his friend on the back, “You’re sweet for calling my bullshit ‘work’, but thank you.”

Over the next hour, the two men sat peacefully in Jake’s room and worked on their various projects. Roland, who had warded the room first, now sat on the edge of Jake’s bed as he looked over the blueprints on his computer. Glancing up, he watched the blonde send an e-mail before turning around with an expectant look on his face.

“Did you find anything good?”

“I did.” Roland cocked his head to the side, “Did you get caught up on your work?”

“I did.” Jake smirked and moved to sit next to Roland, “I also set the next five days to auto-send at midnight the night before so that I can focus entirely on the exciting part of my life.”

“You wrote all of those in an hour?” Roland was stunned.

“It’s not hard to vaguely lie to people when you’re a fiction author. Also, after all this time being an author, I’m pretty damned fast at typing.” Jake gestured to Roland’s computer, “What’s up with these hidden rooms the ghosts told you about?”

“The blueprints actually maintain the south wall on the third floor is made of completely normal rooms. There isn’t a marked ‘secret’ way to get into them so that adventure will take some physical investigation. The freezer, on the other hand,” Roland handed the laptop to Jake and pointed, “does have a second room behind the main walk-in that is used regularly. I definitely need to investigate that.”

“WE need to investigate that.” Jake corrected Roland and handed the laptop back, “I traded that bottle of Patron for my services as your second. I am not sending you into battle alone.”

“It might be gnarly...” Roland was unsure of what he would find, but knew that a hidden walk-in freezer was rarely a good thing.

“That’s fine with me.” Jake patted Roland on the shoulder, “I feel like if it was too terrible, someone would have noticed by now.”

“I hope you’re right.” Roland stood up as his text-tone sounded, “We’ve got to get down there now. Devon says the kitchen is closed between breakfast and dinner, but they’ll come down to start prepping the food at two so we’ve got about an hour to get in and out”

“You were hired for this. Shouldn’t you have unconditional freedom to roam any part of this building as you please?”

“I technically do but, as we do not yet know who is doing this, I’d rather they not notice me following leads.”

“Oh gods, I hadn’t even considered that.” Jake shoved his hands into the pockets of his skinny jeans as he followed Roland down the stairs, “How much danger does this put us in?”

“You should be afraid for your eternal soul.” Roland answered honestly, “I was serious when I said I was willing to do this part alone.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going to Hell anyhow.” Jake was staring at his feet, “I hear the big G upstairs isn’t a fan of transsexual gay men.”

“He doesn’t care.” Roland replied simply.

“What?” Jake stopped on the platform between floors two and one.

Roland turned to fully face his companion, “He doesn’t care. Anyone who has ever made you feel bad for being who you are is entirely more likely to go to Hell for their hate than you will ever be for who you love or how you altered your body to fit your soul. No human has the power or the right to cast judgment on you or anyone else.” Roland rested a hand on Jake’s shoulder, “You are not going to Hell for being either gay or trans.”

“So you don’t care that I’m... That I went through...?”

“Nope.” Roland started walking down the stairs again, “I couldn’t possibly care less what body parts you fixed to fit who you really are, nor do I care who you sleep with as long as it’s mutually



consensual.” He looked Jake straight in the eyes, “If it makes you believe me more, I’m pansexual. I, too, have been with men.”

“Where have you been all my life?” Jake’s tone was joking as he tried to forcefully hold back tears of relief.

“Skulking around moldy basements mostly.” Roland paused at the door that would lead them out onto the first floor, “Are you okay to continue or do you need a minute?”

“I’m okay.” Jake nodded and wiped his eyes on the neckline of his t-shirt, “Thank you.”

Roland winked to the other man, “Anytime.”

Sneaking into the kitchen, Roland was glad that his intel had been correct and nobody was around. Not even bothering to turn on the lights, he stood just outside the heavy metal door that led into the freezer and stared down at the handle.

“So, you know how in movies, people get locked in freezers because they only open from the outside?”

“Shit.” Jake muttered as he stood next to Roland, “What should we do?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t considered the technicalities until this moment.” Roland looked around the room, “I guess we could prop it open with one of these crates and simply hurry so it doesn’t ruin the food.”

“No.” Jake shook his head as he started looking through the drawers, “I’ve seen about every American and Japanese horror movie in existence and that bastard will definitely move the crate.” Jake pulled out a butcher’s knife, “We’re taking the door off its hinges.”

“Brilliant!” Roland moved to brace the door while Jake started prying at the hinges, “Seriously, if we both survive this, you should come work as my second.”

“And leave behind my lucrative career at the newspaper?” Jake carefully set one of the hinge-pins on the counter, “I’m not sure it’s worth it.”

Roland tilted his head to the side, “I had assumed that your newspaper job was just to cover the bills until your next book.”

“It’s comfortable.” Jake set the second of the three hinge-pins on the counter, “A guaranteed salary is a nice change.”

“You know I can read when you’re lying to me, right?” Roland braced the door as the last of the hinge-pins was pulled out.

“I had surmised as much.”

Jake helped Roland carefully open the door in a way that kept it from falling to the floor. Stepping into the front room, the two men wrapped their arms around their torsos as the frigid air hit their skin. Moving straight to the back, they stopped in front of a shelf that appeared to be propped up against a solid wall.

“Hidden door?” Jake inquired as a puff of misty breath escaped his lips.

Roland started looking around the sides of the shelf, “Yeah, come here and help me pull.” He waved Jake over.

With hardly any effort at all, the back wall of the freezer started to slide open. In mere seconds, the two men were standing before a sub-freezer that someone felt even colder than the one they were in now. The room beyond was dark, though Roland could see a faint reflection of the light from the first freezer in the center of the ceiling of the room beyond. Using his small flashlight, he saw that the bulb in the center of the room had a pull-cord attached to it.

“I’m just going to get the light on.”

Roland felt Jake’s hand tighten around his wrist, “I’m coming too.”

Shaking his head in good humor as he stepped forward, Roland decided it would be easier to simply deal with Jake’s clinginess than to fight it. Sliding slightly as the floor was apparently covered in a thin sheet of ice; Roland made his way to the center of the room and yanked the cord hanging over his head.

Flickering on and off weakly for a few moments as it warmed up, the light bulb sputtered slowly into life. Once it had fully succeeded, Roland spared half a glance around the room before wishing the bulb had been burnt out entirely.

A thick layer of off-colored frost covered the walls and parts of the floor. The back wall held a line of neatly placed, unmarked metal barrels. The center of the room was taken up mostly by a wooden table that was stained crimson with what Roland figured could only be blood. A small array of knives and saws were piled on the far end of the table; haphazardly left behind by whoever had used them last.

Heart rate rising as he spun around, Roland saw that the side walls were lined with large, transparent trash bags that, while frosted over as well, were clearly full of organic material. Bits of the frost around the walls were crystallized crimson liquid that, upon Roland's adrenaline spike reaching its peak, he realized had a faintly metallic odor to it.

"R-Roland..." Jake's body was shaking, though it no longer registered the cold.

"Jake," Roland was unable to move just yet, "you need to go back out into the kitchen now."

"I'm not le-leaving you, Roland."

"Jake, I need to see what's in these barrels. I don't want to put you through that. You should step out."

"That sounds like a dangerous plan." Jake's face was whiter than Roland had ever seen on a living person.

"I have to." He placed his hand on Jake's shoulder, "You should at least stop looking at it before you faint."

"I am in the process of..." Jake blinked hard as if he was trying to get his mind together, "Convincing myself that we are mistaken and that this room is simply being used to butcher animals so the meat served here is always fresh."

"Keep thinking that." Roland replied calmly, "I'm going to look in the barrels and I highly recommend that you stare at the ceiling and breathe."

"Wait!" Jake's voice came out louder than he had intended, "Sorry, but what if whatever is in those is toxic or something?"

Roland pointedly pulled his shirt up over his mouth and nose before walking forward. This was the worst thing he had ever encountered personally, though the small voice in the back of his mind was glad that it was in a freezer instead of somewhere where the smell of decomposition would be stronger.

Carefully grasping the handle on top of the cleanest looking barrel, Roland had to use a small amount of force to wiggle it loose. Looking down, he saw that the barrel was about four-fifths full of a disgusting, dark sludge that carried with it a strong chemical odor that couldn't be stopped by the fabric of his shirt. Shaking his head

as he gently replaced the lid, he took a step back just in time to see that Jake was moving toward one of the bags.

“JAKE DON’T!”

Roland’s warning came too late, however, as Jake had wiped away some of the frosted-over condensation to uncover the side of a man’s severed head.

Screaming outright, Jake slid on the icy floor and landed hard on his back. Crab-walking backward in his panic, Jake managed to get through the crack that led to the first freezer where he jumped to his feet and ran out to the kitchen.

Sparing half a glance at the mostly intact man’s face, Roland yanked the light cord and followed his companion back to the kitchen. Pausing to close the hidden door, Roland’s ears were assaulted by a violent retching from just beyond the freezer door. Feeling awful for his companion, Roland walked into the kitchen where he found Jake doubled over a trash bin in the back corner of the room.

“Ugh, I’m sorry.” Jake coughed and spit into the bin, “I had managed to convince myself that,” he paused to retch again, “it really was just a normal meat freezer.”

Now rubbing his friend’s back, Roland felt guilty that he hadn’t insisted that Jake leave the room sooner, “I’m so sorry, Jake.”

“It’s okay.” Jake seemed to have gotten his breathing back under control, “I just,” Jake accepted a hand-towel from Roland to wipe his mouth on, “recognized the guy from around the building.”

“Oh.” Roland’s own stomach was churning slightly as his empathy for Jake grew, “How about we get back upstairs so you can lie down for a little bit. You look like you’re pretty well in shock.”

Jake nodded, “Please, Roland, can we *please* take the elevator?”

“Yes.” Roland wrapped an arm around Jake’s waist as the man looked as if he might pass out at any given moment, “Hang in there for me just a little longer, alright?”

The only reply that rose from Jake was a grunt as Roland started walking him through the dining room that would lead into the billiards room which was just before the elevator. Flexing his muscles to keep Jake walking in something that resembled a straight line, Roland was just about to succumb to a panic attack when a familiar voice spoke over his shoulder.

“What happened?!”

Looking back, Roland saw that Devon was half running up behind him, “Oh, thank God! We had some bad stuff happen just now and I need your help getting Jake back to his room before I tell you, okay?”

“Uh,” Devon looked to Jake who was now fully in shock, “sure, I’ll get the elevator.”

Ten agonizing minutes later, Roland sat Jake down on the side of his bed and knelt before him; placing a hand on either side of his face, “Jake, are you still with me?”

“Meh.” Jake swatted at Roland, “Le’me sleep.”

“Alright. You go ahead and do that.” Roland turned to face Devon as Jake dropped down onto his side and passed out.

“So, you’ve clearly got a story to tell me.” Devon’s arms were crossed over his chest as his eyebrows lifted in amusement, “It looks like a good one.”

“Yeah, to cut to the chase, there is a second part of the freezer hidden behind the normal one and it is just full of butchered corpses and volatile chemicals.”

“You’re kidding!” Devon was no longer smirking.

“Not at all. I guess the absolute mass of corpses being created in this building is hard to deal with all at once as they weren’t cleaned out faster.”

“Mass of corpses?” Devon had stepped back to lean against the wall, “I feel like I’m missing part of the story here.”

Roland realized that he hadn’t spoken to Devon since before they had uncovered the cause of the mass haunting, “Oh, dude, you might want to sit down for this one.”

“No, I’m fine. Just hurry up and tell me why a freezer full of corpses didn’t send you running directly to the cops.”

“The nutshell version is that someone here has made a deal with a demon to trade sixty-six human souls for unimaginable power without signing their own soul over as a contract binder.”

Devon’s jaw clenched as he seemed to be fighting with himself over something, “How does this all work?”

“Whoever started this opened a deal with the first sacrifice and will close the deal with number sixty-six. Anyone in between who has died in the hotel is bound to the building as tribute until the last one is killed and the demon deal is finalized, at which point Satan will own the souls and the demon and its master will walk free.” Roland noticed how agitated Devon was becoming, “I’m sorry to be so blunt on such a rough subject. You might want to go and find a new job though. Like... now.”

“How close is this person to completing the deal?”

“Sixty-three people are dead and their souls all reside within these walls.”

The maintenance man ran a hand over his face, “Sweet Jesus, this is bad.” He started pacing, “Can you fix it?”

“My demonologist friend is flying in tonight. She will be here in the morning, but there isn’t much we can do until we figure out who is doing this and-or where the sacrifice room is.” Roland was now leaning against the wall opposite Devon, “I’m serious when I say you should probably get out while you still can.”

Devon took a moment to think it over. Rolling his neck as he looked up to the ceiling and shook his head, he appeared to be glaring at God himself before he turned back to Roland.

“You need someone who knows the building. I am here to help. Please, don’t argue.”

“Thank you.” Roland nodded as he looked down to his hands; surprised at how many random strangers were so willing to stand in the line of fire with him, “You should wear a cross or something iron at the very least.”

“I already am,” Devon pulled a small silver chain with a cross on it from under his shirt, “though, from what you’ve told me, it seems like the human is doing the damage, not the demon.”

“So far, that is true, but the closer we get to breaking this deal, the more agitated the demon will become and everything will get much darker and more dangerous very quickly.”

“Okay.” Devon was nodding as he thought over this new information, “How can I help?”

“Well, first off, can you please go back to the kitchen and put the freezer door back on its hinges? Also, we really need to find the room that the sacrifices are taking place in, but I assume that if you had noticed a dark room full of candles with a giant, bloody, inverted pentagram on the floor, you would have mentioned it.”

“I can do that and, yes, I definitely would have told you about that.” Devon shook his head, “I will start actively looking for it after I fix the freezer.”

“That would be incredible, thank you.” Roland smiled lightly, “We need to know who made the deal in the first place too. The person would have to be old. Like... nearly ninety years old as the first murder was sixty-eight years ago.”

“Roland, I don’t want to burst your bubble, but the oldest resident living in this building right now is a fifty-two year old widowed female Buddhist.”

“Ugh, of course.” Roland rubbed at his stubble, “I suppose the person doesn’t have to necessarily live here.” He huffed, “It actually would explain the amount of space in between the murders.”

“When did the last one take place?”

“Just over a year ago.” Roland rubbed his palms together nervously, “Jake had a close encounter with the guy’s decapitated head in the freezer and that’s why he’s out cold right now.”

“That would do it.” Devon looked over to Jake who was shifting around in his sleep, “I’m going to go see if I can get you any new leads.”

“Alright, thank you again for helping me get him up here.”

“No problem. Hit me up if you find anything else, okay?”

“Of course, and the same goes for you.” Roland nodded to the man as he stepped out into the hallway.

Nudging the door shut with his foot as he turned back to Jake, Roland winced as the door shut louder than he had been expecting. Looking over, he felt incredibly guilty as he saw Jake’s disheveled blonde locks shoot up into the air.

“Who’s there?!”

“It’s just me.” Roland moved over to sit on the bed next to his friend, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m freezing.” Jake held out his arm that was covered in goose-bumps.

“You’re still really pale too.” Roland threw the duvet over Jake’s shoulders, “Are you still dizzy or nauseated?”

“No. I’m just really tired,” Jake rubbed his hand over his eyes, “any my mouth tastes terrible.”

“Those are both pretty self explanatory.” Roland patted his companion’s back, “Why don’t you sleep a little more? I promise to be quieter this time.”

“I have a couple of questions first.” Jake shifted to lean against the headboard, “How the hell did we get up here?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you blacked out quite that early.” Roland felt slightly worse for what he had inadvertently put the other man through, “We bumped into Devon in the dining room and he helped me get you into the elevator.”

“Huh.” Jake accepted a glass of water that Roland had gotten up to get for him, “I remember entering the dining hall but I don’t remember much else.” Jake took a sip before a small grin crossed his face, “You took the elevator for me?”

“Yeah, well, I owed you one.”

“You owe me a million,” Jake pointed an accusatory finger at Roland, “but for now, I just want to know what was in the barrels.”



“They were full of some kind of corrosive chemicals. It was probably Hydrofluoric acid or Lye, I’m no expert chemist, but those are the two main chemicals used to dispose of bodies.”

“But there were... bodies.” Jake shifted uncomfortably.

“Yes.” Roland sat back down next to Jake, “The liquid in the barrels was fairly... sludgy.” He coughed uncomfortably, “I think they had been over-used to the point that the acidic properties were neutralized.”

“That. Is. Disgusting.”

“Definitely.” Roland nodded.

“So, we’re really not involving the police in this?”

“We absolutely will, *after* we deal with the demon. Having the police here will only obstruct our mission and give this place a ton of publicity that will draw in a crowd that would most likely be used to finish this in a hurry.”

“Okay,” Jake took a moment to accept this truth, “you’ve made me an accessory, but whatever.” There was a teasing tone to his voice.

“I’d take it to my grave that you were ever involved. No one would ever know.”

“Wow.” Jake turned to fully face Roland, “I was kidding, but you would really do that for me?”

“Obviously.” Roland shrugged, “Not that it will ever come to that anyhow. By this time tomorrow, we’ll have an incredibly credible witness who has worked with the police on many occasions before. Even if they did somehow find out you were involved, the police would never charge you with anything.”

“Your friend Janette really has that much power?”

“The field of paranormal investigation has a much stronger foothold in the real world than most people realize. You’d have to really work hard to find any law office in this country that hasn’t, at some point, used the assistance of someone in my line of work.”

Jake sighed and leaned his head over on Roland’s shoulder as his fatigue was sneaking back up on him again, “Have you ever solved a case for the cops?”

“I’m working on solving a bunch of them right now,” Roland chuckled, “but no, the most prominent person I’ve ever personally

helped was some rich guy that came from an even richer family down in Louisiana.”

“What did you do for him?”

“Don’t you want to go back to sleep?”

Jake shook his head, “No, I want to hear the story.”

Playfully rolling his eyes, Roland shifted into a more comfortable position as he figured he owed Jake whatever he wanted at this point, “The guy had been plagued by a slew of misfortune that he and his wife thought was a curse put on the family by a pissed off slave a few generations back but, when they called in a Voodoo Priestess, she said it was a spirit, not a curse, and that it wasn’t in her job description to make it move on.”

“Spirits can cause misfortune?”

“Honestly? Not really. They can push you down the stairs and scare the everlovin’ shit out of you, but this guy was actually just projecting the misfortunes of coincidence and the economy on the spirit.”

“So, did you get rid of the spirit anyway?”

“I sure did.” Roland grinned, “It was just some guy who owned the house before that didn’t want to move on because he was attached to his worldly possessions. I talked him through it and he moved on fairly peacefully.”

“That didn’t actually solve the man’s misfortunes though.”

“Rarely does a man’s misfortune come from the source he’s pointing his finger at.” Roland glanced down to his companion who was quietly looking over the tattoos on his left arm, “I did my job and I did it well so I can rest easy at night.”

Jake hummed lightly as he was clearly trying to read the Latin inscription on Roland’s forearm, “What was the most helpful you’ve ever been then?”

“Jake, seriously, wouldn’t you rather sleep than play twenty questions?”

“Answer that one questions and I’ll go back to sleep.”

Running a hand over his hair as he thought, Roland spent a few moments choosing a case, “I guess the most helpful I’ve ever been was to a little girl whose name was Marci. She was just over four years old and stuck as a spirit on our plane as she was

absolutely determined to find her mother. The issue with this was that her mother had died on the same night the little girl had, but the woman have moved on correctly.”

“What killed them?”

“A carbon leak.” Roland sniffed as he refused to get emotional, “The little girl was absolutely terrorizing the new family that lived in the house as, after years of confusion and loneliness, she had forgotten who and what she was and was releasing her pent-up emotions violently. It took a great deal of trial, error, and talking to get her to move on, but it was the first case I ever handled unassisted.”

“I’m not sure I’d ever be emotionally stable enough to handle your job.”

“You’re already more emotionally stable than me, honey.”

Roland looked down to the blonde who was clearly starting to doze off again, “You seem to have your anxiety at a normal level.”

Jake sleepily swatted at Roland, “Anxiety is chemicals, not *you*.” Jake gestured to all of Roland, “You as a person are the most stable and level headed individual that I have ever...” Jake paused to deal with a jaw-cracking yawn, “Had the pleasure of knowing.”

“You need to meet more people.” Roland allowed a light grin to cross his face as Jake glared up at him.

“Quit being a jerk, I’m serious. *You* are not anxiety, you just have it sometimes.”

“You know,” Roland patted Jake on the head, “that makes a weirdly large amount of sense.”

Chuckling, Jake pressed the back of his hand against Roland’s forehead, “You’re starting to understand my shock babbles, I think maybe you should nap too. After that, we can go looking for that missing part of the third floor.”

“Alright.” Roland looked down to his watch, “If you don’t mind sharing a bed with me, of course.”

“I’ve just had a violent visceral reaction to corpses. Leaving me alone right now would be reckless abandonment.”

“You make a fair point.” Roland wiggled away from Jake to kick off his shoes, “Don’t hesitate to wake me up if you need anything though, okay?”

Jake put a hand over Roland’s mouth, “Shut up and sleep.”

Nodding, Roland flopped down on his back and looked up to the ceiling of the unfamiliar room, hoping to God that he would be able to sleep ever again after the turn his case seemed to be taking.

## 6

“Roland. Rooo-laaaand.” The man in question felt someone shaking his shoulders as they attempted to pull him out of his deep

slumber.

“Ugh, what do you want?!” Roland snapped out as he had never been a particularly pleasant person upon waking up.

“Don’t be cranky.” Jake was sitting up and looking over to Roland, “Someone has been incessantly texting you for the last fifteen minutes and your phone is in your pocket so I can’t reach it and I feel like you should probably see what’s so important.”

“Oh!” Roland sat up and shoved his hand into his pocket, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m not exactly a cherub when I wake up either.”

Roland was half blinded by his phone as, while he was resting, the sun had gone down and the only light currently on in the room was streaming out of the half open bathroom door. Scrolling through his texts, Roland read through them quietly before pocketing his phone again.

“All that and you’re not replying?!”

“Nah.” Roland moved to re-do the messy bun he kept his long hair in near-constantly, “The first one was Janette telling me she was in the airport fixing to board the plane nearly four hours ago. The other few were pages from Devon who is trying to find a way into the hidden section of the third floor. So far, he’s been unsuccessful, so he suggested we keep looking elsewhere and he will contact us again if he finds anything useful.”

“Awesome.” Jake nodded and revealed to Roland that his hair was wet as he had apparently showered recently, “How about we get my phone and poke around the rest of the basement?”

“Oh, yeah!” Roland stood up and stretched his arms over his head, “I had forgotten about that. I’m sorry.” He rubbed his eyes and nodded, “Alright, we can do that as long as you are sure you’re feeling better.”

Jake hit the light switch at that moment to reveal that, not only had he showered and changed into clean clothing, but that he had also finally shaved away his stubble, brushed his hair, and cleaned his room, “I’m fine now, thank you.”

“Christ, how long was I asleep?!”

“You were out cold for a little over seven hours.” Jake gestured to the digital clock that read nine-twenty-seven p.m.

“Wow, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You didn’t exactly sleep last night so I figured you should get some decent shut-eye. I don’t want you messing up because you’re half dead while going up against a demon.”

“You chose an awful way to phrase that, but thank you.” Roland pulled Jake into a one-armed hug, “How about we go poke around the basement for awhile and then we can come back up and order something to eat?”

“I like that plan. Jake nodded and gestured to the door, “After you.”

~~~

Roland was casually watching Jake run his hand over the top shelf in the basement maintenance room in pursuit of the exact spot he had left his phone in.

“I think it was further to the left on the other side of that paint can.”

“Ah-hah!” Jake’s hand finally found the phone, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Jake’s face fell into a brief scowl before he shoved the phone in his pocket, “All that time and not one single missed anything.”

“That’s rough.” Roland patted Jake on the back, “Do you want me to start sending you messages every now and then so that you can get some semblance of the normal human experience?”

“Thanks, but no thanks, I think agreeing to that would be an even deeper low.”

“Right then.” Roland turned to walk through the door that led into the hallway beyond, “Do you think we should continue going clockwise?”

“I don’t see why not.” Jake grabbed the handle to the first door on the right, “Do you want to make a bet?”

“On what exactly?”

“What the other rooms contain. If that’s too hard, we can simply bet on if any of these rooms hold what we’re looking for.”

“I haven’t got a clue as to what is down here, but I feel like Devon or Vanhousen would have noticed if one of these rooms was a murder cell.

“Or, we’re being lured into a trap.” Jake casually pushed the first door on the right open and started looking for a light switch.

“Or that,” Roland blinked as the white room beyond momentarily blinded him, “but they need three more deaths so I feel like we’re safe until one more happens.”

“Until then, we can hang out in this spectacularly white laundry room.” Jake looked a little put off as he walked around the border of the room to ensure he wasn’t missing anything.

“Actually, now that we’re in here, I realize that I haven’t seen any laundry shoots in this building, but they clearly exist as they all exit into this room.”

“They’re camouflaged.” Jake was casually picking at his fingernails as he had given up looking through what had turned out to be piles upon piles of clean bedding and towels, “They’re all on the west walls and look exactly like the rest of the wall until you get right up on them and see the little hinges. I think it had something to do with the etiquette and prowess of a five-star hotel back in the day.”

“Those weren’t on the blueprints.” Roland turned to face Jake once again.

“Why would they be?” Jake started walking to the door, “They’re basically ventilation systems and I recall seeing nothing of the sort on the blueprints you have, even though we both know that this place has air vents.”

Roland froze in the middle of the hallway, “You’re right! I wonder if the entrance to the hidden section of the third floor is through something like a laundry shoot!” Roland’s cell phone was already out of his pocket as he prepared to send a message to Devon, “You are brilliant.”

“I’m just lucky in my scattered observations.” Jake’s tone was offhanded but his expression showed exactly how flattered he was by Roland’s compliment.

“I owe you... I don't know how many. I've lost count.”

“We can settle the tab after this is over.” Jake gestured to the first door on the left, “After you, Boss.”

Roland jiggled the handle of the locked door for a few seconds before grabbing the same card out of his pocket that he had used to unlock the door in the storage room, “I can't imagine why there would only be one locked door down here.” A click sounded as Roland pushed the door open, “Oh, that explains it.”

Leaping forward, Jake chuckled as he realized exactly why the door had been locked, “I would lock up my wine cellar too. You never know what kind of deviants are creeping around the unguarded basement.”

“It is an exceptionally good idea as there are no security cameras on this level.”

“That's right!” Jake's voice sounded much like it had when he'd come to his other epiphanies, “Which means that I think we're getting a bonus for tonight's work.”

“You are, anyhow.” Roland was reading over a positive reply from Devon, “I still can't drink.”

“In that case,” Jake grabbed a nice bottle of red wine, “we'll save it to celebrate with one another after this is all over.”

“Sounds good to me.” Roland led the way back out into the hall and over to the middle door on the left wall, “This one is locked too.”

“Maybe it's the hard liquor!” Jake was bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet.

“As if you would ever be so lucky twice in a row.”

“You have a valid point there.”

Jake was craning his neck around Roland's shoulder as he was determined to see what was in the room beyond the moment the medium got it open. Once inside, Roland flipped a switch to reveal an office space with paperwork scattered over the single desk that rested against the far wall. The walls had a few old and slightly damaged pieces of art hanging on them and one of the two lights above the desk was burnt out.

“It appears that Vanhousen takes care of his office about as well as he does his regulars.” Jake was casually rifling through

papers, "Thought there doesn't seem to be anything suspicious here."

Roland was flipping through a brown leather-bound logbook, "Except that he's paying his maids under the legal minimum wage."

"Is he a suspect in all of this?" Jake casually took a few photos of the pages within the book.

"Nah." Roland gestured casually, "He's a prick for sure, but I don't think he would have called in a psychic on his own devious plan; especially not this one as he called me specifically because I work with people who hold great power in this field of work. The only suspicious thing he has ever said was that we couldn't talk to the owner of the hotel. He's apparently some recluse that bought it and never visits. Vanhousen said the man is a religious nutcase that wouldn't like it if he knew a medium was in unless it would make him more money. This is not remotely uncommon, however, as a lot of people don't believe in psychics or mediums, so it's on the back burner."

"Touché." Jake put the book down and turned back to the door, "Then let's get out of here before I get evicted, yes?"

"Yeah."

Roland turned to follow Jake to the last door which was, not surprisingly, unlocked as the room beyond was simply another machine room that held wall to wall furnaces.

"That was anticlimactic." Jake shoved both of his hands into his pockets as the two men made their way back out of the basement.

"Would you have preferred to tango with a Satan soldier before our demonologist got here?"

"Well no, but I presumed something creepy would happen down here. As an author and avid fiction reader, I am disappointed."

"My apologi..." Roland stopped speaking as his phone started to vibrate in his pocket. Shoving his hand in after it, he read the number on the screen before answering the call on speaker.

"Have you landed already, Janette?"

"I have and I am on my way to the hotel in a rental car. Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No. Jake and I were about to order something in."

"Jake, do you like Mexican food?"

Jake jumped as he didn't think Janette knew she was on speaker phone, "Um, yeah."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Jake was left stunned as the call cut out, "Is she psychic?"

"No, she's just incredibly perceptive," Roland was leading Jake through the maintenance closet and toward the stairs, "and to the point. Don't mistake her blunt nature for dislike. If she didn't like you, she wouldn't have made sure you liked the food she was bringing."

"How does she even know about me?"

"I've checked in with her at least once a day while I've been here." Roland shrugged as he led Jake to the bar to wait for the woman to arrive, "She's impressed by your mortal fortitude."

Jake started laughing, "Now I know you're shitting me!" He pointedly set the stolen bottle of wine on the counter.

"Moral fortitude in the face of eternal damnation is worth much more than slacking off a bit hurts."

"You are just full of wisdom, aren't you." It was not a question.

Roland shrugged, "I just hate to see you so down on yourself about things that are either natural or nothing in comparison to your good aspects."

"If you say so." Jake shrugged while pulling his cell phone out of his pocket and trying his best to look like he was doing something important as he didn't really know how to deal with someone who was so kind to him this frequently.

Realizing that Jake was feeling uncomfortable under his continued flattery, Roland fell silent as he waited for Janette to arrive.

~~~

"Are you certain this is okay?" Janette was standing stationary just inside the doorway to the dining room.

"Even if it wasn't, Vanhousen only works from nine to five so there isn't anyone here to catch us." Jake noticed that Janette was looking up at the massive crystal chandelier in the same way he had

seen Roland do it on multiple occasions, “How about we sit in the back corner?”

The group of three moved to sit around the table that was covered in what appeared to be an expensive white tablecloth. Digging into the party-sized box of tacos, the three began eating without starting a conversation.

Jake spent a few moments taking in Janette’s appearance. He wasn’t sure exactly what he had been expecting the demonologist to look like, but the woman before him was one of the most average looking humans he had ever met. Tidy, bobbed, mousy colored hair sat above the woman’s pleasantly round face. Rectangular glasses resided over a small nose and half covered reserved, makeup-free, dark brown eyes. The woman’s thick build was accented with a solid black blouse and a pair of khaki jeans. To be blunt, Jake was surprised at how unimpressive the short and stocky woman before him appeared to be.

As he began to unwrap his second taco, Jake realized that Janette was somehow even more introverted than Roland. Feeling uncomfortable in the silence, Jake decided to speak up.

“I think we should start talking about this whole unholy Satan spawn problem.”

The corners of Janette’s lips turned up at this, “You’re blunt.”

“It’s just a little bit preoccupying.” Jake took another bite, “What should we do?”

“That all depends on what all you’ve discovered to this point.” The woman sent Roland a pointed look.

“To sum it up,” Roland spoke unabashedly around a mouthful of food, “we’re three murders short of an unknown, elderly civilian attaining the vast powers of a demon without risking their own soul. We know the method, the motive, and a theory on where the summoning room is, but we haven’t figured out how to get in yet.”

“Then why were you just sitting around when I walked in?” Janette’s tone was scolding, though her expression remained neutral.

“We have another guy working with us. He’s a maintenance man named Devon, who is completely aware of the risks, so don’t even start with me. He’s spent the evening trying to find a way in

while we concluded our search of the basement a mere twenty minutes ago.”

“I would like to meet this man.”

“I’ve been messaging him since you got here but he must be on a real job or something because he’s not responding.”

“Alright.” Janette stated, “After dinner, I w...”

The woman stopped talking as her gaze shifted to the center of the room. Feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, Jake immediately regretted sitting with his back to the rest of the room.

“What’s wrong?!” He looked over his shoulder.

“I’m not sure just yet.” Janette turned to Roland who was staring at something in the opposite corner of the dining hall, “Roland?”

“It’s...” He tilted his head to the side as if listening to something, “Listening to us.”

“W-what is it?” Jake’s breath had caught in his throat.

“You don’t wanna know, kid.” Janette’s voice remained calm.

Jake turned and pressed his back against the wall as he watched Roland take a step forward, only to be stopped by Janette’s arm.

“Jan...”

“Not now.” Janette muttered, “It is not our time.” The woman spoke to the corner of the room, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you leave this room immediately!”

The chandelier in the center of the room started swaying back and forth; the motion made more visible by the bits of dust that fell to the floor like snow.

“Stop that immediately!” Roland snapped, “This is your last chance to leave!” He pulled a small bible out of his pocket that Jake had somehow never noticed he kept there.

Jake watched the chandelier start swinging in wide circles as a low, gravely sounding growl arose from the corner, “While it’s here,” Jake hissed through his teeth, “ask what human it works for.”

Both Janette and Roland’s eyes widened as they turned back to face the corner where a black shadow was now attempting to solidify.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to give me the name of your master on Earth!” Janette’s voice had taken on an edge that made the hair on the back of Jake’s neck stand on end.

Overhead, the chandelier was starting to creak along with the tinkling of the shards of crystal knocking together as the swaying became more violent. Looking back to Roland, Jake saw that he was writing something on his hand in pen. Janette, on the other hand, was now stepping forward as she spoke in Latin.

The tension in the room that had built to an unbearable level as Janette’s chanting continued, suddenly dissipated, leaving Jake feeling like his ears had finally popped in an airplane.

“What the fuck just happened?!”

Janette and Roland gestured for the blonde to sit back down with them.

“Shouldn’t we leave?!” Jake’s hands were trembling as he reluctantly sank into his chair.

“Nah, the demon left.” Janette casually bit into another taco, “It probably ran off to tell its master about the whole ordeal, so you’d better get a full meal in before the shit hits the fan.”

“O-okay.” Jake looked to Roland, “What did you write on your hand?”

“Thanks to you,” Roland swallowed his bite of food, “we now know the name of the person we are trying to stop.

“And that name would be...?” Janette gestured pointedly as Roland paused to take another bite.

“Walter Riley. The name sounds vaguely familiar but I can’t put my finger on where I’ve heard it before. Once we finish eating, we can go upstairs and net-search him or something.”

“How are you so calm right now?” Jake had still not convinced himself to take another bite of food.

“He’s not.” Janette interjected, “He’s a little bit in shock, so don’t let him fool you into thinking he’s suave. He’s grounding out a panic attack through the floor.”

“Says the woman who is still side-eyeing the chandelier.”

Rolling her eyes, Janette grabbed another taco and pointedly started to eat in silence.

~~~

“Alright, so the internet doesn’t have anything on this Walter Riley.”

“Did the demon lie to you about the name?”

“Unlikely.” Janette was sitting at the small table in the corner of Roland’s room, “If it didn’t want to tell us, it wouldn’t have.”

“Wouldn’t it be counterproductive to tell us who we’re trying to stop?”

“Demons don’t work within the human boundaries of logic. They exist as a chaotic force and are looking to stir things up, no matter whose life they ruin.”

“Fantastic.” Jake nodded curtly, “What now?”

“Now it is time for Roland to come clean.” Janette held up the small slip of paper with five points on it that Jake had seen the morning prior.

Sucking air in through his teeth, Roland rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at the ceiling, “I hadn’t exactly told Jake about that yet.”

“Obviously. You told me and knew yourself so Jake was the only person you would scratch it out to hide it from. Go on and tell him. He’s earned the right to know.”

Roland huffed before looking up to meet Jake’s eyes, “Do you remember that Quincunx we destroyed?”

“The five circles I scratched off the wall?”

“Yes.” Roland sat up a little straighter, “Janette has pointed out to me, based on the reaction that was recorded on the CCTV, that the intended purpose of the mark was most likely to bind the demon into the basement and it was just a side effect that my abilities were being stifled.”

“Oh, for fucks sake, Roland!” Jake put his face in his hands and shook his head, “Can we put it back up?”

“Even if we did practice that kind of magic, which we don’t, it wouldn’t be worth the effort at this point.” Janette sighed.

“What is worth our time and effort then?”

“If we can destroy the sacrifice room and make it impossible for the last deaths to occur during a proper ceremony, the contract will break by default.”

“So, we need Devon.”

“We do, but he still isn’t responding. I wonder if his pager battery died.” Roland looked down to his watch, “I guess we could go to his room and see if he’s in.”

“Where does he stay?” Jake was already standing up, “I was actually unaware that any of the maintenance people lived here until just now.”

“In a room at the far end of the first floor hallway.” Roland stood as well, “Let’s get to it then.”

~~~

Roland was standing stationary outside of the door he had previously been told was the entrance to Devon’s living quarters. The small plaque next to the locked door that read ‘maintenance closet’ had made a strange, sinking feeling settle in the man’s gut.

“Maybe you have the wrong door.” Janette stated casually.

“I’m absolutely certain he said it was this one.” Roland pulled out his master key-card to unlock it, “Maybe it’s behind this room like the break-room behind the supply closet on the fourth floor.”

“You make a valid point.”

Jake followed Roland into the maintenance closet that was clearly used on a much more regular basis than the one in the antechamber to the basement. Freshly dirtied rags were piled up in one corner of the room, filling the air with a strong chemical odor. A small radio sat on a work bench against the side wall and was quietly recapping the previous day’s news.

“I don’t see another door.” Janette stated after walking a circuit of the moderately sized room.

“Yeah...” Roland’s shoulders fell as he tried to figure out where he had made a mistake, “I guess maybe...”

The radio clicked and turned to static for a few moments before settling on a static station. A faint, warped tune was playing under the white noise that was strangely familiar to all three of the people in the room. Words were also coming out amidst the noise.

*....lovely.... face... pipes...*

The hair on the back of Jake's neck stood on end as he took half a step back towards the door, "Roland... what did that?!"

"I'm not sure." He was looking around the room, "I can't actually see whoever changed the station."

A half empty can of paint slid off of one of the tall metal shelves at the back of the room; spraying a cascade of white paint across the trio as it hit the floor.

"We should go!" Jake was already touching the knob as the lights overhead started to flicker and the volume of the radio increased.

*... mirrors.... Pink..... prisoner.... **Help me!***

"Roland, PLEASE! Let's get out of here!" Jake's heart was pounding so hard that it had almost drown out the sound of the radio that was now blaring at a nearly unbearable volume.

"Not yet!" Janette shouted over the music, "We have to push through!"

"Through what?!" Jake was teetering on the edge of hysterics due to the sensory overload.

"The back wall!" Roland gestured the other two forward, "This wasn't a warning to leave! It was a clue as to where to look!"

"What if it's the demon?!" Jake's feet remained planted firmly by the door.

"We already met the demon and this isn't it!" Janette stated as she moved forward to help Roland look around the shelves, "There's a plank of particle board back here. I bet there's something behind it!"

*...master's... stab... beast... **pull!***



The group of three managed to wiggle the shelving away from the wall without knocking any of its contents to the floor. Once there was enough space to get to it, Roland pulled the large plank of wood away from its spot on the wall to reveal a section of concrete that was covered by a green tarp.

“Well this isn’t sketchy at all!” Janette stated sarcastically, “Maybe Jake shouldn’t be in here for th...”

Roland interrupted his boss, “He’s already been in the freezer of hacked up corpse parts. He will be fine!”

“Alright, let’s go then!”

Janette reached up and started tugging the tarp away from the wall. After almost no effort, the flimsy duct-tape seal holding it up came loose and the tarp fell to the floor to reveal a hole in the cement that was about six feet high and a foot and a half wide.

“That is just the right size for a slim man to walk through!” Janette pointed to the hole.

“Yeah, fine!” Roland took a deep breath as he lit his flashlight and stepped into the hole.

*...I remember... door... passage... **closer!***

The first thing Roland noticed was a dim, white light blinking about ten feet down the narrow passage between the walls and what he assumed was the foundation of the hotel. The smell of the space was an unmistakable odor of decay that let Roland know ahead of time what he was about to see. Lifting his flashlight, Roland’s eyes landed on a mummified corpse.

The body was wedged in between the two walls in an awkward manner that led Roland to believe it was caught up in something. A thick layer of dust sapped all of the color out of the clothing that covered the body and left no clues behind as to who it was or what had killed them.

Continuing to walk forward, Roland nearly choked on dust as he gasped at the realization of what the blinking light was. Clipped to the pocket on the front of the shirt the corpse was wearing was a small, black pager.

*...relax... receive... you can check out any time you want, **but you can never leave!***

With shaking hands, Roland reached out to pick up the pager; having to untangle it from a delicate necklace chain that held a small, silver cross. Wiping the dust off of the face of the pager, his fears were confirmed as he saw his own cell phone number blinking on the screen.

Lifting a hand to cover his mouth as he turned away from the corpse of the man he considered a friend, Roland came face to face with the man who had been helping him for his entire stay at the Moorsfield Hotel.

“I told you I might need the services of a medium some day.”

## 7

Roland’s hands were trembling as he looked at the apparition that stood before him in the dimly lit crevice between the two walls.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Honestly, it was nice to be treated like a person again.”

“Roland, what is going on in there?!” Jake’s voice broke the tension in the air, “Janette says she smells a dead body!”

“Sh-,” Roland’s voice cracked, “she does.”

“Well then, get the hell out of there!” Jake’s head popped into the crack as his gaze passed through Devon and straight to Roland’s face, “You’re not stuck, are you?”

“No, I’m coming.” Roland coughed and gestured for Devon to follow him.

Once out in the maintenance room, Roland was glad to hear that the radio had gone silent again as he looked into the faces of his friends, “We’re in slightly more trouble than I previously thought.” He held up the pager, “We are only two deaths short of losing.”

“Why do you look so sad?” Jake eyed the pager, “What happened?”

“I’m not actually sure yet.” Roland turned to Devon, “You might as well make yourself visible so we can all hear your story at once.”

Jake jumped as the translucent form of Devon appeared directly next to Roland, “Holy shit...”

“So,” Janette stated coolly, “you must be Devon. Roland speaks highly of you, though, it does seem he left out something important.”

“I am Devon.” He shifted awkwardly, “I really was a maintenance man here, but back in nineteen-ninety-four, I went into the walls to fix a leaky pipe, got tangled up, and never made it out again.”

“How did nobody notice?” Janette inquired, “I mean, you would think whoever covered the hole in the wall would have noticed the smell at the very least and I’m sure you were shouting for a good while before your unfortunate passing. Also, someone should have noticed that you never clocked out or showed up for work again.”

“I don’t think any of my coworkers cared much. They probably thought I finally got pissed off enough to quit on the spot. As for the wall, it was not an employee that covered the hole, at least, I don’t think it was.” Devon crossed his arms, “I couldn’t see much from way back there, but I could hear a fair amount of wheezing and, at the time, all of the maintenance men were young and healthy.”

“I believe our mastermind was unfortunately the first to hear you then. He made sure no one would ever find you.” Janette sent a regretful gaze to the spirit, “How did you keep Roland from figuring out you were a ghost? Shouldn’t you have been in the murder files at the very least?”

“That was sheer dumb luck.” Devon looked bashful, “Jake almost blew my cover twice but, the first time, Roland thought he was just being a jerk and, the second, he was in shock. As for the file... I don’t know. Whoever it was sounded really ill. Maybe they were incapacitated by that long enough that they simply forgot to add it or something.”

“We’ll just have to ask about it when we meet the bastard.” Janette stated as she noticed Jake looking accusingly to Roland.

“You thought I was a jerk?”

Roland held his hands up defensively, “I’m sorry. It was only the second time we’d bumped into each other and I thought you walked in, took booze, and dropped cash next to Devon without acknowledging him. From where I was sitting, I thought he was a normal, living employee here.”

“I kind of am...” Devon looked as if he felt guilty, “I do still try to help out with the understaffing problem.”

“Wait, were you the one that picked up my broken glass in the billiards room?!”

“Yes.” Devon nodded sheepishly, “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I just didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Alright,” Janette interrupted, “sorry to burst everyone’s discovery bubble, but we are all in significant danger if this guy only needs two people to finish his deal.” She gestured around the room, “If you haven’t noticed yet, there are more than enough of us to end it and we clued the bastard in a mere hour ago.”

“Devon, did you ever find the room?!”

“I did. It IS behind the walls in the missing part of the third floor, but I don’t know how to get a physical person in. I only got there by walking through the walls.” Even in spirit form, Devon had noticeably trembling hands, “What are the chances of me escaping an eternity in Hell for dying in this building?”

“We are going to help you.” Roland’s tone was intensely serious, “Jake, I’m not in charge of your life in any way, but I’m going to ask you one more time if you will leave while you still can.”

“No!” Jake stated stubbornly, “There is power in numbers and I told you I was staying, so stop trying to kick me out already!”

“You do understand the risks, don’t you?” Janette inquired.

“Roland has been abundantly clear, but I am invested now.”

“Alright.” Janette nodded, “Devon, we’re going to bust through the wall. Where can we find something like a sledgehammer?”

“They store the heavier tools in a little shed on the roof. The key is unfortunately on Sal’s key-ring and he won’t be in to work for another few hours.”

“Is it just a padlock and a chain?” Roland was trying to get his mind together around his worry for Jake.

“Yeah.”

“We can break in.” Roland started walking to the door, “Come on. We move only as a group from here on out.”

“I’ll meet you up there.” Devon phased back out of sight as the three living humans moved to the door.

“So,” Jake was hovering as close to Roland as he could without tripping the man up, “can we take the elevator for the sake of speed?”

“No.” Janette replied, “Elevators in haunted buildings are never safe. We take the stairs.”

Roland pushed through the door that led to said stairs, “I told you.” He side-eyed Jake.

“Remind me to move into a one story townhouse after this nightmare is over, okay?”

“Deal.”

Roland took off up the stairs at a pace that made speaking nearly impossible, slowing down only when he hit the top landing and needed to use his key-card to open the door. After pushing through, Roland looked over his shoulder, only to realize that Jake and Janette were still three flights of stairs behind him.

“Once we beat this thing, I’m celebrating by buying you both gym memberships.”

Janette hit the landing before Jake did, “We’re conserving energy. You’re springing; we’re running a marathon.”

“I like her,” Jake wheezed out as he followed the other two onto the roof, “she’s nicer than you.”

“Whatever.” Roland was now on a mission to find the shed Devon had spoken of.

“It’s over here!” Devon’s voice rose from Roland’s right.

“It’s over here.” Roland stated as he was pretty sure Devon had dropped his corporeal form for the time being as leaving it up long-term was incredibly difficult for spirits.

A small, weather-worn, wooden shack stood at the back corner of the roof. Roland walked a circle around it and was slightly put off to see that it was still well sealed. The padlock and chain on the front were in better condition than he had been expecting, leaving him to look up to his companions in desperation.

“I should have brought hedge clippers up.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Jake, who now had a lit cigarette in his mouth, was walking forward with a dense looking metal bucket that was partially filled with a mixture of cigarette butts and sand, “Step aside and I’ll show you how a fiction writer does things.”

Stepping boldly up to the padlocked door, Jake raised the heavy bucket over his head before bringing it down onto the padlock as hard as he could. Repeating this motion three more times, Jake smirked and exhaled smoke as the lock snapped open and fell to the ground.

“Continue.”

“Damn it all, I love you!” Roland stated exuberantly over his shoulder as he ran into the shed to search for tools.

Jake froze as his stomach seemed to drop down to his feet. Taking another drag off his cigarette, he mentally berated himself for even considering that Roland had been serious before shaking his head and stepping up to the door of the shed.

“Did you find anything good?!”

“Its slim pickings,” he walked out with an armload of tools, “but I think we can probably work with these.” Roland offered up a roofing hammer, a sledgehammer, and a claw hammer.

“They’ll have to do.” Janette took the roofing hammer, “Come on. We don’t have any time to waste here.”

“Back to the third floor!” Roland stated aloud just to ensure everyone was still on the same page.

“Is there anything you need out of your room?” Jake inquired as he followed Roland down the first flight of stairs.

“Nah, this is going to come down to a battle of wills if we can’t destroy the room in time. There isn’t a relic in our possession that would give us the upper hand against something this powerful.”

“I don’t know if you were trying to be comforting or not,” Jake started making his way down to the fifth floor landing, “but you failed.”

“I figured honesty was the best policy here.”

“I guess but ma...” Jake let out a grunt as he dropped his hammer and grabbed onto the railing.

“Jake!” Janette and Roland both shouted in unison as they watched Jake fly horizontally away from the step he was standing on and forcefully slam into the wall at the bottom of the stairs. Sliding down the wall, Jake fell into a crumpled heap as he tried to catch his breath after having the wind knocked out of him.

“Shit!” Roland dropped his hammer and ran down to the fifth floor landing to check on his friend, “Jake! Are you okay?!”

Jake released a wheeze as he glared up at Roland and continued trying to catch his breath.

“Janette?”

“I’m on it! You take care of Jake!” Janette had pulled a vial of water with a cross on it out of her pocket, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I demand you leave us be!” She started flicking droplets of water around the area where Jake sat.

Her chanting continued as Roland looked down to meet Jake’s eyes, “Do you have your breath back yet?”

Jake sucked in a pointedly sharp inhale before looking up to meet Roland’s eyes, “Take the stairs, he said. It’s so much safer than the elevator, he said!” Jake’s tone was dripping with so much sarcasm that Roland physically scooted back a few inches, “Bad things always happen in the elevator so let’s go down the spiky stone ledges where the demon has more space to throw us instead!”

“I’m so sorry!” Roland genuinely felt bad that Jake had been attacked, but was also comforted that the man had it within himself to be so biting sarcastic after a hit like the one he had just taken, “Do you think anything is broken?”

“Just my spine.” Jake coughed and started to stand up, “The bones may actually be protruding from the flesh by this point, but the rest of me is just fine.”

“You didn’t hit your head?” Roland helped pull Jake up to his feet.

“No, it took the majority of the blow to my shoulder-blades. I’ll be fine.”

“Let’s get moving then.” Janette said, “The ferocity of that attack means that it is definitely aware that we are a threat to it. There may very well be more attempts at our lives so maintain your vigilance.”

“Sure thing, Mad Eye.” Jake muttered as he picked up his hammer and turned toward the next set of steps, only to stop as the foulest odor he had ever smelled made him retch and turn away, “What is that?!”

“That’s the demon.” Roland had pulled his sweater up over his mouth and nose as the smell that was somewhere between spoiled eggs and rotting flesh filled the room, “This is not good.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Jake muttered as he pressed his back into the corner of the landing, “Seeing as it’s blocking our way down, or at least I assume it is via that odor, maybe we should take a different route.”

Before the last word had completely left Jake’s lips, the stairs that would lead the group from the fifth to third floor started to tear themselves apart in a manner reminiscent of an angry, invisible bear trying to break through them. Chunk after chunk of cement and carpet flew backward to the landings below, leaving the trio no choice but to evacuate the stairwell.

“What now?!” Roland was pacing back and forth as his anxiety over the situation rose, “We are NOT getting in the fucking elevator! I would rather go jump the giant gap over the stairs than set foot in that fucking elevator!”

“Get it together, Roland!” Janette snapped, “This is not the time to have a breakdown! Surely we can think of something else.”

“How safe are fire escapes?” Jake was looking at the door to his own room, “We could take it down to the third floor and break in through a window. I realize this is kind of an invasion of personal space if someone is actually occupying that room, but considering the circumstances...”

“That’s perfect.” Janette nodded, “Lead the way.”

Jake ran forward and opened the door to his room. Gesturing the two in, he slammed it shut and locked the deadbolt before pausing and taking a deep breath.

“Are you okay?” Janette’s voice had a mild air of concern etched into its normally neutral tone.

“I am, but I’ve noticed Roland is afraid of heights. I just thought he might need a minute to collect himself before we run out onto the rusty metal death-trap.”



“That is incredibly considerate of you,” Roland sent Jake an affectionate half smile, “and I do appreciate it, but I think this situation requires me to suck it up and get out there.”

“Alright.” Jake walked over to his window and unhinged the locks, “After you.” He opened the window and gestured for the other two to head out before him.

Janette was the first out the window, moving with a level of grace that surprised the blonde standing inside. By the time he and Roland had followed, Janette was already on the fourth level landing, showing no signs of hesitance or slowing.

Roland followed suit, leaving Jake a moment to think as he didn't find it wise to put the weight of more than one adult on the same set of rickety steps at a time. Looking out over the horizon, Jake felt a strange sense of peace as the rest of the town sat quietly below. Twinkling its lights into the still pitch black sky, it new nothing of the trio who were possibly running to their deaths inside a hotel that had been mostly forgotten by time.

“Are you coming?!” Roland's voice arose from the landing below as he paused to look up at his newest friend.

“Yes!” Jake turned and ran down the stairs as his mind quietly wondered if he would ever see another sunrise.

Janette was on the third floor landing; pounding on the window to the bedroom it connected with. After a few tense moments, the befuddled face of a middle aged man appeared through the crack in the curtains. Squatting down to appear less threatening, Janette shouted through the glass.

“There is a psycho upstairs shooting up the place! You and anyone else in the room need to take this fire escape and get out now!”

The man looked horrified as he pulled the curtains part way open and ran to the bed where a sleepy looking woman was now sitting upright. Jake and Roland managed to get to the landing just in time for the man to open the window while holding his car keys and his wife's hand.

“Shouldn't you all be going down too?”

“We're staying to get people out.” Janette stated hastily as she elbowed her way past the couple and into the room, “I need you and

your wife to get away from the premises. You can come back for your things tomorrow but, right now, you need to go get in your car and get as far from this place as you can.”

“A-alright.” The man boosted his wife onto the landing, “Godspeed to you all.”

“Thanks, we’re gonna need it.” Roland said over his shoulder as he slid into the room, shortly followed by Jake.

“Do we even know how many people are in the building right now?” Janette inquired as she moved to undo the locks on the only other exit from the room.

“Usually there are between twenty and fifty residents, though it’s not really tourist season, so the numbers should be low.”

“Not low enough.” Janette muttered as she stepped out into the hallway, “Which way?”

“Go left.” Roland pointed as he started walking with a rapid gait.

“Is Devon still around?” Jake was genuinely concerned about the man who seemed to have vanished.

“I’m up here!” The now foggy silhouette of the maintenance man was standing by a large painting that hung in the dead center of the wall that stood between the group and their target, “The sacrifice room is straight through here.” He pointed as he flickered in and out of sight.

“Thank you, Devon. Feel free to go incorporeal and just talk to me for awhile, okay? I don’t want you vanishing completely from overexertion.”

Jake watched the form vanish from his sight as Janette ripped the painting from the wall, “Focus guys!” She started throwing intense blows from her hammer into the wall.

“Alright, Devon, can you step through to the other side and let me know if anyone is in the room?” Roland picked up his hammer and thrust the largest one into Jake’s hands, “We’ll get to work out here.” He took a swing at the wall as he finished speaking.

Jake was slightly disheartened as only small chunks of drywall were crumbling away, leaving little more than dents in the wall. Heaving with all the strength he could muster, Jake swung his sledgehammer into the dead center of the wall. A satisfyingly resounding crack echoed as the head of the hammer met the wall.

Smiling to himself as he pulled the hammer back, Jake took another three whacks at the wall before his heart dropped.

“Oh no...”

“What?!” Roland and Janette stopped their pounding immediately and followed Jake’s gaze to his torso-sized hole in the dry wall.

“There is a brick wall behind this one.”

“New plan.” Janette flipped her hammer around so that the end with teeth was facing forward, “Roland, trade hammers with Jake. He and I will use the claws on the backs of these two to tear away the drywall. Once we get enough space open, I want you to go at the bricks with the big hammer as you are clearly the strongest person here.”

“Alright. You get started. I’m going to speak with Devon for a moment.” Roland looked over his shoulder to where the man was once again standing.

“What’s up?”

“There isn’t anyone in there just now, but the candles are lit. They’ve never been lit before.”

“And you still can’t find the entrance?!”

“No, I swear it’s just four solid walls with a wooden floor and a normal ceiling.”

“That’s alright.” Roland patted the spirit’s shoulder comfortingly, “You’ve already been incredibly helpful and I am indebted to you.”

“Devon smiled, “Alright, I’m going to go for a little while. I kind of have a back-up plan that I’m trying to get going so just keep working and I should be back soon, okay?”

“Okay. Be careful!”

“What do you think is going to happen?” Devon had a teasing smirk plastered across his face, “I can’t die twice, you know.”

Waving him off, Roland turned back to the wall where he noticed his comrades had managed to tear out a vaguely human sized hole in the drywall.

“Alright, back up and take a breather.” Roland lifted the sledgehammer and took a deep breath, “I don’t want you two getting shards in your eyes.”

As Roland started swinging, Jake noticed that their ruckus had cued in a small audience. Cursing under his breath, he gesture his realization to Janette.

“Damn.” The demonologist turned around and spoke to the people who were cautiously peeking into the hallway from their rooms.

“Alright guys, there may or may not be a gas line busted behind this wall. It would be in your best interests to evacuate the property to ensure your safety. We have a fire crew on the way, but we don’t know how volatile the leak is, though there has been an explosion on the staircase that has caused many of the steps to crumble.” Gasps and muttering arose from the crowd, “Please take the stairs and not the elevator. Please be careful of the fallen concrete on the stairs. If you see anyone on your way out, please take them with you. We will be out to let you know what is happening just as soon as we can.”

Jake spoke up as well, “Six blocks away, there is a public library that is open twenty-four-seven. If you would please be so kind as to congregate there, we will send someone to speak with you shortly.”

The crowd dispersed in a manner that felt to Jake to be lacking in speed, “These people really don’t seem that concerned.” He muttered to Janette.

“In their defense, it’s one in the morning and they have no idea we’re actually dealing with a psychotic serial killer and a demon.”

“Touché.”

Jake looked back to Roland who had unfortunately only managed to slightly shift a few bricks as they appeared to be cemented together unbelievably well. Trails of sweat were running down his temples and neck as his face had turned an alarming shade of red. Turning back to the hallway, Jake was slightly relieved to see that the residents of the third floor were finally making their way into the stairwell as a group. Janette, who had remained calm through the entire ordeal, was now holding a rosary and walking to the door.

“You keep an eye on Roland. I’m going to pray for the safety of the innocents in this building. Shout if anything even slightly off happens.”

As Janette dropped to kneel in the center of the hallway, Jake moved to press his aching back and shoulders against the nearest wall. Reaching under his shirt, he pulled out the cross that Roland had given him and held it tightly in his fist. Glancing over to ensure that Roland was still hard at work, Jake allowed himself a moment to think.

The first thought that went through the blonde's mind was one of his worries. Every possible 'what if' scenario spun through his mind like a raging tornado; cropping up half-formed images of everyone he cared about dying horribly and falling into the fiery pits of Hell. Trying to shake the awful images out of his head, Jake tried to think of anything else. Looking to his left, he saw Janette still kneeling in the center of the hallway, deep in prayer. To his right, he saw that Roland was starting to get noticeably hysterical as his blows failed to move even a single brick from its place in the wall.

Feeling his heart cramp up, Jake couldn't imagine anyone who cared more about spirits than the medium did. He was literally sprinting head first toward a demon in an attempt to help out a hotel crammed full of trapped souls; most of which he hadn't even met and none of which he had even heard of in their lifetime. The level of dedication was something that Jake had never seen before and, he was certain, he never would again even if he did somehow manage to survive this.

Looking back down to his hands as he started to feel utterly useless, Jake took a deep breath and sent up a silent prayer to any deities that may exist that somehow, Roland would be able to get through that wall and that, by sun-up, everyone would be alive, well, and out of harm's way.

Unfortunately for Jake, the gods had never been particularly fond of him.

A shout arose from Janette that shook Jake out of his own mind and back into reality. Even after only knowing the demonologist for the past couple of hours, Jake knew that an elevated volume coming from her mouth meant nothing good was happening. Pushing away from the wall, Jake was running to Janette before he had even registered what had caused the woman to raise her voice.

“Jake, stop!” Roland’s voice rose even louder than his boss’s had.

Skidding to a halt, Jake was horror-stricken as he watched the stocky form of Janette levitate slightly before sailing sideways and slamming into a wall in the same manner Jake had in the stairwell. Almost instantaneously, the strong smell of sulfur filled the hallway, leaving Jake no choice but to take a few steps back in an attempt to hold down the rapidly rising bile in his throat.

“What do we do?!” Jake was looking to Roland who had pulled his small bible out again.

“Stay behind me!” He took a bold step forward and started speaking the same Latin chant that Janette had been using on the stairs.

The doors up and down the hallway were now slamming open and shut with a force similar to that of a hurricane as the lights overhead began to blink on and off in a dizzying pattern that looked more like a strobe light than a natural electrical disturbance.

Across the hall, Jake watched as the elevator doors started to open and close wildly, revealing only the pitch black shaft and cables behind the flimsy grate as the elevator car was clearly stopped on another level.

The volume of Roland’s voice rose as Janette’s body was slowly pushed up the wall by the sill invisible force that was wreaking havoc throughout the hotel.

Panic rose in Jake’s chest, causing him to act without thinking, as Roland’s chanting was clearly having no effect. Running forward, he grabbed onto Janette’s ankle and started trying to pull her back to the floor.

“You let go of her, you absolute abomination! Get the fuck out of this building, you son of a bitch, and let. Janette, GO!”

“Jake, no!”

Roland’s shout was nearly drown out by the sound of Janette’s body falling from the ceiling and knocking Jake to the ground.

Untangling herself from the pile of limbs, Janette looked to Jake, “You shouldn’t have done that!”

“I couldn’t let that asshole hurt you!” Jake was shouting now as the blinking lights and slamming doors started to really grate on his

nerves, “None of this fucking praying or chanting your magic Latin seems to be working! If you haven’t noticed, the demon is still RIGHT THERE, completely undeterred from kicking our asses!” Jake pointedly gestured down the hall where a low growl had started up.

“Jake, you have to have faith and patience!” Roland was now leaning over the other two as he tried to see if they were okay without fully losing sight of the demon.

“We don’t exactly have time to spare here!” Jake stood up as a rage like he had never felt bubbled up in his chest.

“Jake, listen to Roland!” Janette was pulling herself to her feet, “Together, he and I have got this but, if you don’t calm down right now, you are opening yourself up to possession!”

Jake’s blood ran cold. He hadn’t even considered that, instead of dying, he could simply become the human suit for the formless abomination to parade around in.

“Oh gods...” Jake’s hands were shaking as he started walking backward, “I’m sorry... please just... fix it or something!” Fear was rendering his mind nearly useless.

“We will!” Roland turned back to the demon that was now starting to form a solid black mist similar to the form it had taken in the dining room, “Come on, Jan!”

Janette bent double to pick her bible up off the floor; the object held words she had long since memorized, but grasping the physical object always made her feel more anchored to the world. Just as her fingers grazed the leather binding on the spine, a brutal force slammed into her chest and sent her flying backward.

The wind left Janette’s lungs as her back connected with the metal grate that stood between her body and the elevator shaft. Gasping for air, Janette was scrambling to grab onto anything at all that would stop her from the fate the demon had chosen for her. Unable to get a hold on anything except the collapsing wall behind her, Janette looked up to Roland for help.

A scream was rising in Roland’s throat as he watched the demon slam his best friend into the weak excuse for a door that blocked off the elevator shaft. His heart was pounding so hard that he was certain it would explode at any moment and deliver him into

the arms of the devil who was about to receive his last non-ceremonial spirit.

Before he could even exhale the gasp he had sucked in, Janette's form slammed back again; finally knocking the faux-door into the abyss below. The woman's body flew back with enough force to hit the wall at the back of the shaft, forcing a sharp grunt out of the demonologist before her body gave in to gravity and slid down the shaft.

Screaming outright, Roland ran forward and looked down into the darkness where he could see nothing at all, "JANETTE?!" He started to pray that she had somehow survived the fall.

Jake's hand moved up to cover his mouth as the lights stopped blinking. Everything seemed to freeze for what could have been seconds or minutes before the most horrific sound met his ears. Slowly, and in a normal fashion, the elevator cart slid down from the floors above and headed straight to the bottom of the shaft that now appeared to be the grave of the demonologist known as Janette Schneider.

"Roland..."

The man in question took a step toward Jake, pausing as a gust of wind blew through the hallway. Head snapping to the side, Roland watched as the dark form of the demon came charging forward and wrapped tendrils of black mist around Jake's ankles.

As the demon pulled forward, Jake's body was yanked to the ground before being pulled along the carpet toward the elevator shaft.

Roland found that he couldn't even breathe as he desperately grabbed for Jake's hand in an attempt to pull him back. The entity, however, was faster than Roland could ever dream to be.

Jake's fingers slipped right through Roland's hands as his body was pulled up the shaft and out of sight into the darkness above.

Dropping to his knees, Roland released an animalistic cry of desperation, "GOD DAMN IT!" He threw his fists into the carpet, "GOD, HELP ME! DAMN IT!"



## 8

Tears of fear, frustration, and hopelessness were streaming down Roland's face as he realized that he had just lost everything that mattered to him. With Janette gone, he was certain that he could not stop the demonic plot that was about to reach its fruition. With Jake gone, he wasn't sure if he cared to try.

Pushing himself farther away from the elevator shaft, Roland didn't know what he was going to do. Sliding his back against the wall, he let out a pathetic sound as his cell phone stabbed him in the thigh. Yanking it out of his pocket, Roland's grief-stricken brain was determined to make him throw it down the elevator shaft, but paused as he saw that his leg had somehow opened the GPS app.

Roland gasped as his eyes landed on a tiny, purple blinking dot that had an even tinier capital J in it.

Releasing a jovial shout, Roland jumped to his feet and spent a moment trying to figure out where in the hotel his friend was. The dot was clearly blinking on the level above Roland's head and farther

down to the left. Without hesitation, Roland ran to the stairwell and threw the door open, only to feel his heart nearly stop as he remembered that the vast majority of the concrete steps that led up to the next floor were now lying in a pile of rubble at the bottom of the space.

Cursing under his breath as he started to panic, Roland turned back to the hallway he had just evacuated. His new plan was to get back to the fire escape and go up a floor but, as he stepped into the hallway, an even quicker method met his eyes.

Without hesitation, Roland took a running leap into the elevator shaft that had essentially taken his only friends away from him. Grabbing onto the cables that pulled the cart up and down, Roland started to climb hand over fist. Suddenly glad that his ingrained paranoia had given him the sheer physical strength to manage this insane maneuver, Roland was soon met with the light of the half-opened elevator doors on the fourth floor.

Thanking God that the demon had been in too big a hurry to shut the metal doors behind it fully, Roland started working up his every nerve to jump. Climbing slightly higher than the doors, Roland took a long look at the unfortunately shut metal grate as his mind briefly reminded him to urge Vanhousen to remove them from the building once this case was resolved. Using every fiber of his nerves, Roland inhaled and kicked off the taught cable and threw his body toward the light shining through the cracked elevator doors.

Desperately grasping for anything solid, Roland's fingers and the tips of his shoes managed to wedge themselves into the tiny metal diamonds that made up the grate.

Exhaling a sharp sigh of relief that he wasn't falling down into the seemingly bottomless abyss below, Roland took only a second longer to adjust his grip before slowly wiggling the metal frame away from the wall. The instant it was open enough for him to slide through, Roland forced his body through the cracked doors and onto the crimson carpet beyond.

Urging away his panic attack, Roland ran to the end of the hallway, realizing with a gasp that he knew exactly where Jake's blinking dot was coming from. Shoving his phone into his pocket as he no longer needed it, Roland exchanged it for his master key-card

before forcefully opening the door to the supply closet. Without hesitation, he ran forward to the next door and jammed the card into the slit between the door and its frame.

The trip through the long-forgotten break-room and into the narrow hallway beyond was a blur to Roland as he sprinted through the dust and darkness to the smoking room beyond. Now standing just outside of the smoking room, Roland took a deep breath before shoving the door open and running through. Freezing on the spot, Roland's heart nearly stopped as he noticed rather quickly that the room was completely empty.

"NO!" Roland screamed aloud as he stood in the middle of the room and started to fall into full-blown panic.

Yanking his phone from his pocket once again, the medium looked at the GPS app once more. The little purple dot that represented Jake remained stationary in the room that Roland was standing in. Shoving his phone back into his pocket, Roland looked to the floor where he noticed a long drag mark of disturbed dust that led from the door to the fireplace.

Following it, Roland looked up into the dark chimney. A churning sense of guilt knotted in his stomach as he looked at the black spots he had asked Jake to scrape away mere days before. Above his head was about fifteen feet of concrete that led to a solid ceiling. Confused as he noticed this for the first time, Roland didn't understand how a chimney could function without letting out into the roof unless...

"It's not a chimney!" He shouted aloud.

Roland hurriedly turned on his flashlight and pointed its beam to the left where it met nothing but more solid concrete. Shaking his head, Roland ran the beam of light over the floor to what should have been the right wall. Instead of finding that, however, the man's eyes landed on a small metal door.

Digging his fingers into the small groove at its side, the medium forced the door open to reveal what appeared to him at first glance to be a smaller scale model of the elevator shaft he had just climbed up. As he leaned forward to look into the pitch darkness, Roland's foot grazed against something small but solid on the floor. Bending over, Roland retrieved what was unmistakably Jake's cell phone.

“Alright.” Roland pocketed the device, “I have to go down the scary tunnel of blackness.” He took a deep breath, “Down the...?”

Reaching in, Roland tugged gently on the ropes that were fed through a pulley system over his head and out of sight. After a mere ten seconds of tugging the rope, Roland’s eyes landed on a small wooden box.

“Dumbwaiter. Of course. I mean, what could possibly be better than a narrow dark shaft but a tiny wooden death-box in that narrow dark shaft. Sure.” Roland took a deep breath, “It will take me to Jake, though...”

Roland refused to allow himself any more hesitation as he crammed his tall frame into the box and grabbed onto the rope. Sliding down the shaft as quickly as he could, Roland’s chest felt tight as his panicked brain convinced him that there wasn’t enough air in the small box and that this is where he would die. As the anxiety became overwhelming, Roland’s hands slipped from the rope, causing him to free-fall the last eight feet to the floor.

Groaning as he was nearly winded by the fall, Roland rolled out of the small box and into yet another pitch black room. Grabbing desperately for his flashlight as he remained sitting on said floor, the medium clicked it on and looked around the space he was in. A mere few inches above his head was the ceiling and just below him rested about six inches of insulation. This made him extremely glad that he hadn’t stood up.

“Good. Great even. I’m under a floor.” He muttered aloud to himself.

Raising the beam of his flashlight, Roland started looking for any sort of exit. As his beam moved across the room, it started to flicker in and out of life. Starting an internal mantra of ‘no, no, no, no, no, no, no’, Roland’s eyes landed on a slight discrepancy in the wood above his head before the batteries of the little plastic cylinder died.

“Dear God,” Roland muttered to himself as he carefully scooted his body under the trap door, “please don’t let me be stuck in here.”

Pushing up, Roland’s heart soared as the board gave away easily and a dim light shown from the crack above his head.

Without thinking beyond his claustrophobia, Roland shoved his body up and lifted himself into the room above him.

Roland was now standing in the corner of a room with a wooden floor and four solid concrete walls. The room appeared to have no electricity but was instead lit by hundreds of candles that had clearly been lit before as their drippings had cascaded into large chunks of congealed wax that pooled around the floor.

To his right, Roland saw the hunched figure of an elderly man who had clearly lived a hard life. His withered frame was dangerously thin and held gnarled joints that were covered by sagging, pale skin. Having only a few patches of shockingly white hair and noticeably fake teeth, the physique of the man was less than intimidating.

Turning to the center of the room, Roland saw that Jake was sitting upright in the center of the giant inverted pentagram that had been stained into the floor with blood that had long since dried and was now covered in flecks of dust. Jake's wrists and ankles had been bound together with rough looking pieces of rope and a line of duct-tape had been placed over his mouth.

"So," Roland was doing his best to remain calm, "you must be Walter Riley."

"I am." The man had a twisted grin splitting across his face, "You must be the medium."

"I am the demonologist actually." Roland lied in an attempt to intimidate the man.

"Liar." The man chuckled, "My demon threw that woman down the elevator shaft and then squashed her like the cockroach she is. Well..." He released a wheezing laugh, "Was."

"You sonofabitch!" Roland took one step toward the man before he heard Jake attempt to scream through his covered mouth.

Roland stopped and saw that Jake's cheek had been cut and was now bleeding down his chin and neck.

"If you do not cooperate, I am going to have my demon torture your lover before I send his soul to Satan."

"He isn't my lover," Roland was confused and frozen in place, "but either way I will not allow you to finish this blasphemous ceremony!"

“Oh,” the man looked slightly put off, “well that does take a little bit of the poetic irony out of the situation, but it just makes the whole ordeal more devastating for the boy. My demon does love the taste of a tortured soul.”

“What are you talking about?!” Roland was now more confused than ever, “How is you being a selfish, life stealing jackass ironic in the slightest?”

“I AM NOT SELFISH!” Walter’s voice came out at a volume that Roland thought would be impossible for a man with such a frail figure.

“You’ve murdered sixty-five people, Walter! You are selling innocent souls to the fucking devil so that you can obtain power! Honestly, I can’t think of anything more selfish than that!”

“I’m not doing this for me, you imbecile!”

“Oh, so it’s okay to slaughter because you’ve somehow found a way to convince yourself this is a selfless endeavor?”

Roland was attempting to stall as he realized he had run into this deadly situation completely without a plan. Glancing sideways, he could see that Jake remained in the center of the pentacle with the black mist floating just in front of him. Tears were running down his cheeks and mixing with the blood that was soaking into the collar of his shirt.

“Your GOD,” Walter was still shouting, “gave me love. He showed me pure love and light and then TOOK IT AWAY FROM ME!”

Roland turned away from Jake who now appeared to be discreetly attempting to wiggle out of his ropes, “Go on.”

“I am too old to waste time on a monologue.” The man scoffed.

“If you are going to murder my best friend and shove a demon inside me, I think you at least owe us an explanation.”

“You are just stalling.”

“Do you think it will work?” Roland was doing his best to keep his breathing at a steady pace.

“No, I do not.”

“Then what is a few more minutes after waiting nearly a lifetime?”

“Fine, you insolent brat.” The man started pacing, “When I was fifteen and still going to church with my family, I met a girl. Her name was Mariana and she was the sweetest thing I had ever seen.

I courted her and, by the time I was sixteen, I was certain we were meant to be together forever. She was my one and only twin soul. As soon as I finished my schooling, I went out into the world and got a job working at a bank in town. I had to work long hours every day of the week, but that girl deserved the best and I intended to give it to her.

The day she celebrated her eighteenth birthday, I proposed and she accepted. We started planning the wedding immediately, though, I did miss out on most of that while I finished saving up enough money to buy her a grand house that was for sale in town.

One week before our wedding was to take place, my sweet Mariana came to give me dinner as I was behind on paperwork and would be working late into the night. It was just me and her in the building as the sun had set long before and the other bankers had gone home to be with their families.

I do not wish to relive that night but, to make a gruesome memory short, a robber came in and shot her in cold blood. She died in my arms on the floor of my office. There was nothing I could do and the man got away. The bastard that took my darling from me never even paid his dues!” Walter spat, “I was inconsolable and my life no longer had a point so I moved away from my little town and found this place for sale. I bought it up with the money I had saved over the years, made a few secret renovations, and here we are.”

“You are really deluded enough to think that her murder was somehow God’s work?” Roland’s heartstrings tugged only slightly for the man before him.

“If God had given a shit about me, he would have sent that bullet into my chest instead,” Walter’s voice was rising in volume once again, “or stopped the thief from even coming in on that night! At least the demons area clear with their motives!”

“I still don’t understand how all of this is for her.”

“I’m going to have access to necromancy! I am going to bring my Mariana back to life and then the demon will grant me youth and power and I will give her the life she deserved to live!”

“You don’t think she’s going to hate you for how you gained this power? A good and pure religious woman would never stay with you, knowing you did something like this.”

“She will understand that I did it all for her.” The man was rubbing the palms of his hands together now as he stopped pacing and looked away from Roland, “You will stop bothering me now.”

“WAIT!” Roland snapped out, “I just have one more question.”

Walter rolled his eyes, “You are so obnoxious that I am considering trading places so that you will be dead and gone and the other boy here will take on the demon.”

Undeterred by this, Roland continued, “Who bound your demon with the quincunx and why has it taken you so many years to get these souls? Surely that would have been easy when you were younger. This hotel has more than enough people in a month to have settled your deal than you’ve killed in all these years.”

“Ah, that.” Walter looked like he had a bitter taste in his mouth, “I was doing quite well in the beginning. My demon would even draw in people to help me take lives in this place. Unfortunately, after a couple of decades, some of my maids caught on. They found the room that led here and used some sort of voodoo or hoodoo or some utter shit to bind my demon. I did not know it was so simple to break the spell, though I do thank you for that. It is why I locked off the private rooms. Unfortunately, they ran off before I could silence them, but nobody believed their stories anyway.

Over the years of working alone, I had to avoid suspicion as this town got larger and the police force got better. In my older age, as you can well see, I have taken quite ill and can only manage to continue my work in between hospital stays.”

“You were the one that sealed Devon into the wall.” It was not a question.

“I was.” Walter let out another wheezing laugh, “He was too nosy. He had to go and I needed more souls so I took care of the problem.” Walter gestured vaguely to his demon, “Alright, we are done having our chat. Make sure this one can’t stop me while I finish the job.”

Roland’s breath caught in his chest as his entire body locked up and he found that he could no longer move anything but his eyes



as the mist engulfed him, but did not enter his body. Turning his eyes toward the center of the pentacle, his heart nearly stopped as he saw that the ropes remained, but Jake was gone.

“Where in tarnation...” Walter’s head snapped around and his eyes widened as they scanned the room for his last sacrifice.

Jake stepped out of the shadows that covered the corner of the room diagonal to the one Roland was trapped in, “This is twenty-eight and I am a transsexual, gay man. I’m carrying a knife, you absolute asshole. Now, let Roland go or this is going to get ugly.”

“I don’t think so.” Walter released a wheezing chuckle, “I don’t think you quite comprehend that the power of the demon is stronger than any human weapon, you filthy pouf!”

Rolling his eyes, Jake released a scoff, “You really couldn’t come up with a better insult than that?” He was now twirling the switchblade in his fingers.

“That is not the point you were supposed to focus on, boy!” Walter’s cheeks and ears were starting to turn pink with frustration.

Jake was now walking forward, “It does matter. You release Roland and you let him leave, or I am going to stab you and then it really doesn’t matter who the demon belongs to as your death will break the deal.”

“Why risk the wrath of a demon for some idiot who doesn’t even feel about you the way you feel about him?” Walter took a step back, only to find his spine pressed into the wall.

“If you are asking me that, you don’t really understand love,” Jake was now standing only a few feet before the man, “and you don’t deserve someone like Mariana if you do not understand true love.”

Jake thrust his arm forward and sank the knife into Walter’s stomach. As the man howled in pain, his demon solidified into a three-dimensional shadow figure and ran at Jake.

Feeling his ability to move return, Roland only had time to turn his head and look to Jake before the demon lifted the blonde man into the air and slammed him into the center of the inverted pentagram on his back. The resounding crack of shattering bones that followed the motion nearly made Roland vomit on the spot but he managed to choke it back as his sense of urgency rose.

“Kill him now!” Walter yelled, “Finish this before I bleed out!”

A savage scream left Jake’s lips as the black mass lowered itself over him. Roland’s body froze for only a moment at the sound and started moving again only when he saw a trail of blood follow the sound out of Jake’s mouth. Roland’s feet hit the edge of the pentacle as another sick gurgling sound arose from Jake.

“GET OFF OF HIM!” Roland shouted and threw his own body under the demon and over Jake, “You will not kill him!”

Walter was outright laughing by this point, “The blonde will die soon enough! Possess the medium now!” He started reciting a chant in a tongue that sounded foul to even Roland’s ringing ears.

As the words started to flow, Roland felt an intense burning sensation on his arms. Grinding his teeth, he couldn’t manage to care that the demon was trying to possess him as his best friend was choking to death on his own blood below him. Understanding that his tattoos may only be a stall, Roland looked down into Jake’s face as he wasn’t sure if he would have another chance to speak to the man.

“He was wrong!” Roland winced as the burning got more intense and his eyesight started to blur, “I do feel the same way! I just hadn’t thought to say anything because I assumed we would have plenty of time after this was over.” The smell of burning flesh hit Roland’s nose as he looked into Jake’s eyes, “Hang on just a little longer for me, alright?”

Jake released something between a laugh and a cough as he turned his head to spit, “You piece of shit.” He sucked in a shuddering breath, “Don’t you know that near death admission of love are the worst? You would never make it as a writer.”

Roland felt his eyes flood with tears as the pain had risen to a level he didn’t even know was possible, “Then you gotta get out of here and write this story for me. It’s a pretty good one.”

“It’s not that good.” Jake’s voice was barely a whisper at this point, “There wasn’t even a kiss. Fans always want at least the first kiss.”

Even though he had never been more scared in his life, Jake felt completely at peace. He wasn’t sure if it was the blood-loss, the shock, or the admission that Roland had uttered, but looking up into

the soulful, dark eyes of the medium had eased his torment for the moment.

Reaching his hand up to caress Roland's cheek, Jake was determined to get his first kiss from the man before he allowed the black dots that were forming in the corners of his vision to take over. He was just starting to guide Roland's face down to his when Roland's body stiffened. Confused, Jake looked back to the medium's eyes in hopes of finding his peace in the warm irises before him, but only black remained.

"Oh..." Jake's breath caught in his chest as any semblance of comfort left him, "Roland, no!" Jake swatted at his cheek, "Roland, NO! You fight that thing! Kick it out!!!" Jake could feel hot tears streaking down his cheeks as the last of his hope left him.

A resounding growl left Roland's lips as he thrust his body into an upright position and away from Jake. The blonde watched as, what was now a demon simply wearing Roland's body, stepped back out of the pentacle and stood next to Walter who was staring at Jake. Roland's arms were no longer covered in sleeves as they appeared to have caught fire and burned away. Where the tattoos of protection had once been inked into the medium's arms now sat only angry red muscle-tissue that was leaking clear liquid and blood to the floor, though the demon didn't seem to notice or care.

"Would you hurry up and die already?" Walter's voice sounded weak, "I would like to finish this."

Turning away from the sight before him, Jake was certain he would die, but he was determined to not die looking at his murderer or the demon that had stolen Roland from him. His eyes landed instead on the concrete wall to his left that had a large spider web of cracks running across it. He was wondering if the cracks were from Roland's attempt to break through with the sledgehammer when he felt a strange static in the air.

Brow furrowing as a deep rumbling sound arose; Jake closed his eyes just in time to avoid having them impaled by concrete shards as the wall that led into the third floor hallway exploded inwards. Choking as the dust and debris in the air settled, Jake wasn't sure what had happened as he was now looking into the empty hallway beyond the room.

Staring into the lights above, Jake watched as they started to blink on and off as they had done when the demon had taken him. In the flickering light, Jake could make out the form of Devon who was half-solidified in the doorway and looking furious.

“You will not win, Walter Riley!”

As he spoke, the lights on the entire floor went out completely. The candlelight cast an ominous glow as shadows started to appear behind Devon in numbers that were staggering to Jake’s mind. One by one, each of the spirits that the man’s curse had trapped inside the walls of the Moorsfield Hotel sucked enough electricity out of the building to solidify in the same manner as Devon had.

“You will pay for your sins!” A second, clean cut man stepped up behind Devon with his arms wrapped around what appeared to be his wife, “Now release this man from your demon’s hold!”

Jake found himself struggling to sit up as he desperately wanted to see what was happening, but found that he no longer had the strength. As his head dropped back to the floor, he noticed that a nearly albino spirit was now sitting next to him.

“You are going to be okay, Sugar.” She knelt down and cradled Jake’s head in her now solid lap, “There is an ambulance downstairs and the men are coming up so you just hold on for me, okay?”

Nodding weakly, Jake turned back to see how Devon and his hoard of angry spirits were fairing.

The crowd was so thick at this point that Jake couldn’t make out Roland or Walter through the mass of half-solid bodies. Blinking to focus his eyes, Jake couldn’t help but feel some semblance of relief as he watched the crowd start ripping up the floorboards that held parts of the pentagram, led by an oily looking blonde man in a hideous red and black, zebra-striped trench coat.

Gasping as he looked up to the woman, she smiled and appeared to read his mind.

“That’s right. They can not complete the ceremony without this blood pentacle. You are not going to Hell,” a bright smile crossed her face, “and neither am I!”

Devon’s voice rose over the crowd, “Now command your demon to leave Roland and fix up Jake or your death will be as gruesome as all sixty-four of ours put together!”

“Will you let me go if I do?” Walter’s voice was trembling and meek now.

“You did not give us that kindness and we will not give it to you,” the crowd parted to reveal Devon glaring at the man, “but this is your last chance to leave the world with one good deed on your conscience. Maybe your maker will lessen your eternal torture for it. I do not know how it works on the other side, but I do know that none of use will speak a single word in your favor if you refuse to do this now!”

Walter looked into the faces of his victims one by one before turning to Roland, “Demon, get out of him and fix the other.”

A growl arose from Roland’s throat.

“I am your master until the moment my heart stops beating and I COMMAND you to leave this man and fix the other!”

Roland’s head rolled back as the black mist forcefully ejected from his chest and flew forward into Jake. Screaming in absolute agony at the intrusion, Jake felt all of his broken bones and ruptured organs start to shift around as they forced themselves back into place. Seconds seemed like hours as Jake could feel the sickening, pure evil writhing around inside his body. Just as he thought the agony would never end, the feeling lifted from him in the blink of an eye.

Standing up as his body now felt better than it ever had before, Jake looked around the room. Nearly all of the candles had been blown out during the commotion, but enough remained that he could see the conflict still happening in the corner.

“Do you have any last words?” Devon’s voice was calm, yet somehow incredibly intimidating, as he looked into the eyes of the man who had not only caused his death, but had tried to send him to Hell.

Walter’s mouth opened and then shut again before he lowered his eyes and shook his head no.

Nodding, Devon reached forward and pulled the ancient man into a headlock. Flexing just slightly, the maintenance man appeared to no more than twitch as he twisted and snapped the man’s neck in a smooth, rapid motion. As he dropped Walter’s limp body to the floor, the black mist of the demon sank and vanished from sight.

Now on his feet, Jake was walking around the holes left behind by the torn-out floorboards and over to Roland who hadn't moved since the demon had left his body. As he managed to stand next to Roland, the blonde was momentarily distracted as the wispy spirit of Walter rose from the body on the floor to stand before the crowd of spirits before him.

"What now?"

"You can choose to move on, on your own, or you can wait around for guidance that will surely come." Devon looked around the room, "You all have this choice."

One by one, the translucent forms started to dissipate as they finally left what had been their prison for so many years. Turning back to Walter, Jake watched as the man looked directly at him before shaking his head and vanishing.

"Are you okay, Jake?" Devon's voice snapped him out of his thoughts as the lights in the hallway flickered back into life.

"Yeah..." Jake turned to face Roland who was now paler than Jake had ever seen another living human, "Oh gods, Roland!"

Roland seemed to snap out of a trance as he heard Jake's voice.

"Jake?"

"Yes!" Jake looked into the once again brown eyes that he had fallen so hard for, "I'm okay."

"You're not another ghost pullin' one over on me?"

"No, I'm still alive." Jake wanted to both laugh and cry at the question.

"Good." The corner of Roland's mouth twitched before he looked down to his arms, "This is bad."

"Yes, yes it is." Jake felt tears welling up in his eyes.

Roland stumbled backward as the pain finally started to overpower the shock.

"Shit! Devon!!!"

"I got it." Devon helped lower Roland to the ground gracefully as he fully fainted, "Jenna," he looked to the pale blonde that had held Jake in the pentacle, "Do you think you've got enough energy left to lure some EMTs up here?"

“Of course.” The woman vanished as she presumably went to the ground floor.

“How are we going to explain this to the police?” Jake’s hands were shaking as he held up Roland’s body that had slumped sideways onto his torso.

“You tell them that this Walter asshole was a dark occultist who was sacrificing people to Satan. You tell them that he told you both everything about his plans while torturing you both in a ceremony and that will cover all of the weird information you know like the freezer and stuff. When they ask how he died, you tell them that both of you killed him in self defense to save your very lives.” Devon had placed a hand on Jake’s shoulder, “Any other missing pieces you can explain away with shock, trauma, and in Roland’s case, passing out.”

Jake nodded, “A-are you going to move on?”

“If you promise me you will come back after you check out of the hospital, I will stay and wait for you. I would very much like to see you both once more before I move on.”

“Are you sure?” Jake found himself crying once again.

“Of course!” Devon patted Jake’s hair which still contained a fair amount of blood, “I don’t want you to be so gross the last time I see you. I would prefer a better smelling memory.”

Jake chuckled, “You’re a jerk.”

“I know.” Devon smirked, “You take care of Roland, alright? Skin grafts are going to suck, but he is going to be just fine. I need to go before I get spotted by the cops.”

“Alright...” Jake watched as Devon vanished from sight.

Looking down, Jake noticed that Roland had come to and was now looking up at him with the most innocently bewildered look on his face.”

“What the fuck happened?”

“You fainted like a maiden.” Jake hoped that humor would distract Roland from the missing skin on his arms.

“Ah, shut up, you are totally the maiden in this story.”

“Dude, you’re the one with the bun in his hair.” Jake flicked the back of Roland’s head as he wrapped an arm around the man’s shoulders.

“Baah.” Roland let his head rest on Jake’s shoulder.

“Excellent comeback.” Jake rested his cheek on the top of the other man’s head, “The professionals are taking a really long time to get up here.”

“Maybe we should get them gym memberships too.” Roland hissed as one of his arms shifted.

“Perhaps.” Jake swiveled his head around to look Roland in the eyes, “Though I might leave this part out of the book.”

“Yeah, it is a little anticlimactic.”

“No, it’s not.”

Jake pressed his lips into Roland’s before the next retort could come out of his mouth. Humming as he felt Roland lean into the kiss, Jake’s heart soared. A strong feeling of invincibility washed over him as he deepened the kiss to the sounds of the EMTs running down the hallway in his direction; uncaring as to how many witnesses his intensely private moment now had.

## 9

It was dark. Roland felt as if he had been ejected violently off of a tilt-a-whirl and sent out into space where his body was now floating in a vacuum. His chest felt heavy and his head spun as he noticed an obnoxious, rhythmic beeping noise somewhere in the distance.

Sighing, Roland forced his eyes open only to be half-blinded by the sunlight that streamed through the open windows of the white



room. Cursing, he tried to lift his arms to rub away what felt like sand in his eyes, only to find he couldn't.

"Hey there, handsome."

Roland blinked and turned his head to see who had spoken. Standing over him was Jake who looked ethereal in a white shirt with his hair perfectly tousled to reflect the light in what appeared to be a halo. Allowing a smile to grace his features, Roland finally spoke in a dry, croaky voice.

"Are we in Heaven?"

Jake snorted, "I'm afraid not. We are in a hospital. You did try to go to Heaven a few times, though. I've been worried sick."

"My bad." Roland cleared his throat, "Did we beat the demon?"

"We did." Jake smiled, "I'll let you read the book first so you can fill in the blanks before the rest of the world knows."

"Cool." Roland tried to move his arms again and found himself afraid to look down as, once again, he could not, "Do I still have arms?"

Jake released a ringing laugh, "Yes, beautiful, but you're on a buttload of painkillers because the demon burned most of the skin off of your arms. You're going to be fine once the grafts heal though."

"Ouch." Roland vaguely remembered his encounter with the Satan-spawn, "He was a dick."

"He was." Jake smiled and ran a hand over Roland's hair.

The sound of shuffling paper distracted Roland. Turning his head to the right, he noticed that there was a second bed in the room and that it was occupied. The other person was sitting up and reading a newspaper that covered their face.

Blinking once again to focus his eyes, Roland's brow furrowed, "Is that a picture of... me?"

"Yes! We made the front page of the newspaper. I'd let you see it, but your roommate is kind of a jerk and I don't know if she'd part with it." Jake spoke in a mock whisper, "I think she has a crush on you."

"Would you shut up already?" The woman in the second bed lowered the newspaper to reveal her pleasantly round face that held up a pair of cracked, rectangular glasses.

Roland gasped as tears sprang up in his eyes, “Jake, I thought you said we weren’t in Heaven!”

“As if they would let any of us into Heaven after that fiasco.” Janette teased casually.

“But, how?” Roland shifted as he tried to hold back his oncoming emotional breakdown.

“I only fell three floors, Roland. I slid down the wall which slowed my velocity. I broke my leg and a few ribs at the bottom, but I had plenty of time to drag myself out before the elevator crushed me.” Janette flipped the blanket off her lap to reveal a cast that covered the entirety of her left leg and foot, “You’re also a complete asshole for not even looking for me.”

“I...” Roland looked to Jake, “I don’t even know.” He sighed and looked up at the ceiling, “I’m sorry, Jan.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry too.”

“For what?” Roland turned back to look at his oldest friend.

“I’m sorry for not realizing how easy it would be for a powerful demon to rid you of your protective tattoos.” Janette looked genuinely remorseful, “I will definitely get the word out to stop that particular practice before more people lose skin over it.”

“Better late than never I suppose.”

Roland yawned as a soft knock sounded at the door to the room. Moments later, an elderly nurse came in and smiled down to her patient.

“It is good to see you awake.”

“It’s good to be awake.” Roland replied as the nurse started to take his vitals.

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“Are you sure you’re ready to go back in here?” Jake and Roland were standing in the early morning sunlight outside the revolving door of the Moorsfield Hotel.

“I’m sure. Janette and Father Smith checked up on the place before they went back to Connecticut and it’s clean.”

“Alright.” Jake tucked a newspaper under his arm as he pushed the door forward.

Roland continued to speak as the two walked up to the front desk and rang the bell to call Vanhousen in, “Are you sure you don’t want to just take a massive dump on his desk instead? He deserves it.”

“Oh, Roland,” Jake pinched the bridge of his own nose, “your really are vindictive on pain-killers. It is adorable and all, but I think decorum is the better route in this case.”

“Fine.” Roland muttered as Mr. Vanhousen entered the room.

“Roland! It is so good to see you up and about! I was starting to worry about you. What’s it been; two weeks now?”

“Five.” Jake narrowed his eyes and reconsidered Roland’s prompt after being ignored, “We’re just here to collect the last of our things and leave.”

“Oh, you won’t be staying, miss?” Mr. Vanhousen wasn’t even trying to hide his glee at this point.

“No, I won’t be. I am a sir, by the way.”

“Pardon, miss, but I...”

“Sir.”

Vanhousen looked appalled that someone would speak to him in such a way, “Any business is allowed to choose whether or not to serve and respect...”

“You won’t be staying either.” Jake cut in.

The hotel manager faltered, “W-what?!”

“I’ve brought you a gift.” Jake handed over the newspaper he was holding, “You see, as I am a writer and all, the editor of the paper was just thrilled to have a meeting with me over what Roland and I found during our investigation of this establishment. She was just dying to put one of my stories on the front page.”

“I can’t be fired for working under a psychotic employer! I didn’t even know!”

“No, you can’t. You also can not, unfortunately, be let go for disrespecting your clientele,” Jake’s grin spread even wider, “but you do have an appointment with the St. Louis PD over some interesting photos we took of one particular book in your office.”

The man's face went ashen as his eyes skimmed over the article, "This room was locked!"

"Roland has this incredible talent of meeting people who can walk through walls, you know." Jake fibbed as he enjoyed watching Vanhousen squirm, "Your ex-maintenance man, Devon; the one who died in the walls while you were already working here... He was more than happy to talk to both of us about your dirty little secrets. It wasn't hard at all to acquire your accounting book and you, sir, have some sins of your own to answer to."

"But... this doesn't affect you!" The man threw the newspaper to the floor, "Why do you care if I underpay some pathetic slob?!"

"First off, because it's just wrong. Those people work hard in an understaffed building and deserve a fair wage. Secondly, I may have vouched for you to get a slap on the wrist instead of arrested if you had ever shown me one ounce of decency in my stay here, but as you have not..." Jake turned to the stairs as Mr. Vanhousen pleaded.

"Please, Sir! I'll do anything! I will even pay you to speak on my behalf!"

"Too little, too late." Jake continued to walk as he waved over his shoulder, "Take a closer look at the article. You'll never work in this town again you bigoted asshat. Ta-ta!"

"That was so brutal!" A familiar, tenor voice arose from just beyond Jake's line of sight, "I can die happy now."

"Oh, Devon!" Roland grinned, "I hate to tell you this, but you've already died."

The dark skinned man in question phased into the physical realm, "Ah, but now I can be happy about it. Well, content at least." Devon looked Roland up and down, "You look rough, buddy."

"Being in a hospital for a little over a month where I had to get new skin surgically implanted onto eighty percent of my arms wasn't exactly a walk in the park."

"I wouldn't imagine so." Devon watched as Roland reached for the door to the stairwell, "You have to take the elevator. They haven't replaced the stairs yet."

"That's not a fire hazard at all, is it now." Roland muttered, "You're sure no boogiemens are going to mess up the ride?"

“Seeing as I’m the only boogiemer left, I believe you will be just fine.” Devon smirked.

“I don’t know about that.” Jake side-eyed the spirit teasingly, “I was once told the only spirits that hung around had unfinished business and would eventually turn vengeful.” He pushed the brass number five and leaned back against the wall.

“Oh, I’m vengeful alright.” Devon put on a mock serious face, “I’ve spent the last month screwing with Vanhousen.”

“You have not!” Jake shouted excitedly.

“I have been his personal nightmare since the day he started up working again.”

“Damn, I am going to miss you.” Roland chuckled from his corner of the elevator.

“Where are you two moving to?”

“You say that like we’re moving in together.” Jake had an ornery glint in his eyes.”

“Well, I mean, after all that smooching in the face of death and all... I just assumed...” Devon awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck as the group stepped out of the elevator.

“Be nice to the guy, Jake.” Roland turned to look at Devon, “He’s moving in with me. I’ve got a place back in California.”

“With no stairs!” Jake chimed in happily as he opened the door to his room and motioned the two in.

“He’s got a publishing deal up and everything.” Roland was beaming at Jake “Wrote a whole book while babysitting my morphine’d up self in the hospital.”

“It wasn’t like I had anything better to do while you slept twenty hours a day.” Jake was now putting the last of his things into the duffel bag he had borrowed from Roland, “We fly out this afternoon.”

“Don’t you think you’ll miss this place?”

“No.” Jake glanced to his ancient computer, “I won’t miss that beast either.” He sent a warm smile over to Devon, “Though, I will miss the bartender.”

“Speaking of!” Devon walked over to the bedside table and pulled open the drawer, “I snagged you a parting gift for old time’s sake.” He handed over a bottle of Patron.

Jake moved over to hug the ghost, "You should have started talking to me sooner. We would have made great friends."

"You would have been way too freaked out." Devon glanced over to Roland who had gone quiet, "Are you alright over there?"

"Mm, yeah." Roland was rubbing the palms of his hands together, "Are you going to stay here or move on? I did promise to help all the spirits in this hotel before I left."

"Oh, I see. You're here to kick me out of your dimension." Devon winked to let the man know he was kidding.

"Not at all." Roland replied awkwardly, "I am just offering my services should you want or need them. You are more than welcome to hang around as long as you want to."

"You don't know what is on the other side, do you?" Devon had taken on a nervous stance.

"I haven't got a clue," Roland allowed one corner of his lips to turn up, "but even if I did, I wouldn't ruin the punch-line."

"I might as well find out then, huh." Devon shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at some invisible dirt on the floor, "I bet this hotel goes totally out of business anyhow."

"Yeah, now that Jake's spilled the beans on the shady underbelly of this place, I bet it becomes a macabre museum or something." Roland glanced to Jake who was silently watching the conversation from the corner.

"I never was one for museums."

Devon nodded as he looked up into something that neither Jake nor Roland could see. Smiling in a way that made the corners of his eyes crinkle, Devon nodded again and turned back to Roland.

"The punch-line is a good one."

Without another word, the spirit faded from sight.

Glancing over to Jake, Roland noticed that he was wiping his eyes on his sleeves.

"Are you alright?"

"I think so. That was just... really abrupt."

"He has been ready to go for a long, long time. I am glad he moved on smoothly." Roland wrapped an arm around Jake's shoulders, "Is there anything else you want to do before we go?"

“Nope.” Jake stuck the bottle of liquor into his bag, “Are you ready to go to the airport?”

“Yes.”

Roland leaned sideways and kissed Jake’s temple as the two made their way out of the Moorsfield Hotel for the last time.

Epilogue

A bell tinkled over Roland’s head as he used his back to open the door into the book store that currently housed his lover. Bypassing the moderately long line of people waiting to meet Jake, Roland winked at the blonde in question before setting a cup of coffee in front of him.

“I thought you might need this to keep yourself warm.”

“Thank you, but October in California isn’t exactly frigid.” Jake took a sip and wrinkled up his nose, “What is this?”

“It’s a gingerbread latte.” Roland took a sip of his own, “Why?”

“It’s autumn, why didn’t you get me a pumpk...”

“I’m gonna stop you right there. You know how I feel about those abominations.” Roland replied as he casually took a sip of his own drink.

“Whatever, you weirdo.” Jake looked up to the girl who was next in line, “Sorry about the interruption. This is...”

“Roland?!” The girl inquired breathlessly as if she was trying to hold back a shout, “Are you the Roland mentioned in the dedication for inspiring this book?!”

“In the flesh.” Roland smirked, “Well, most of it anyhow.”

“Wait... this is real?!” A masculine voice piped up from farther back in the line.

“It sure is.” Jake gave in and answered, “It happened just six months ago.”

“So, you really almost died?!” The girl in the front of the line inquired quietly as if she wasn’t sure if she was overstepping her boundaries.

“Should I show them?” Roland muttered down to Jake who sighed and ran his hands over his face mock-dramatically.

“You might as well get it over with.”

Roland set his coffee down on the table and started to roll up the sleeves of the loose, thick-knit sweater he was wearing to expose his forearms. Once they were completely uncovered, he held them up to show the crowd the patchwork of skin that made him look a bit like a rag doll. The new skin was slightly pinker than the rest of Roland’s skin and the seam-lines of the grafts had a reddish tint to them and were raised slightly at the edges.

The crowd had fallen completely silent as they stared down the man that they had thought was a fictional character until this moment.

“Well, this got awkward real fast.” Roland muttered down to Jake, “It’s your turn to save me.”

“If I remember correctly, I was the one that already saved you about a million times. You still owe me.”

“Can you come over to my house?!” Another woman shouted from the back, “I know it’s haunted! Maybe it’s worth another book!”

Jake chuckled as Roland’s face darkened with embarrassment, “Alright, everyone! Let’s get back to the signing. I don’t want anyone to miss out because the store is closing in half an hour. Roland isn’t taking any jobs until he is completely healed so, if you would please keep your questions on the subject of the book or me, I would really appreciate it!”

Sighing with relief, Roland sat down next to Jake to wait out the end of the signing that, in a surprise turn of events, now involved his signature as well.

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“Home, sweet home.” Jake sighed and flopped onto the couch, “You should gate-crash more of my signings. You are excellent for publicity!”

“I don’t know about that.” Roland sat down so that Jake could rest his head in Roland’s lap, “It was pretty funny, but I’m not exactly a charming ambivert like you are.”

“By the way, did you remember to call Janette back about that case she mentioned? I also hope I wasn’t out of line turning one down for you.”

“You were definitely not out of line. I really appreciate that you handled the situation for me. I could already read she was lying and just wanted us to come to her house, but I didn’t know how to reply without offending her.” Roland rubbed at his eyes, “I never meant to be in the spotlight. Also, yes, I did call Janette back and I’ll have to fly out sometime next week.”

“I’m happy you’re able to work again, but it is a bummer for me.”

“You could come too, you know. Quit your day job and become a paranormal investigator with me. You’re pretty handy in a pinch.”

Jake rolled his eyes, “And quit my lucrative job sitting around for hours on end with a numb ass signing copies of my own book? I don’t know if that’s worth it. We’ll have to discuss wage and benefit opportunities.” Jake had an ornery twinkle in his eyes.

“You don’t even get paid for the signings, dear,” Roland leaned forward and pecked Jake on the lips, “and everyone just brings in the copies they bought off of the internet. If you want to talk about wage, however, how about I let you live and travel with me, totally free of charge. As for benefits, I think you already know what the benefits are.” Roland wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“You suck and I’m definitely not dedicating my next book to you... but I do believe you have finally offered up a wage and benefit plan that surpasses the one I have now. I’ll take it.”

“Hey, be nice! If you join me again, you may be able to write another best-seller!” Roland sent Jake a teasing look.

Jake teasingly sighed as he finally relented, “You literally know already that I’m not going to let you go alone. You need me to solve the mystery for you.”

“I certainly do.”

“Also to let you know when you’re talking to a dead person, apparently.”

“Okay!” Roland threw his hands up in the air, “That wasn’t my fault! He was incredibly corporeal as you well know!”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask you why that was.” Jake sat up across Roland’s lap so he could more clearly see the man’s face, “The spirits up in room four-fifteen could hardly even show themselves to your psychic side, but I was able to actually hug Devon. He was fully solid and felt just like any other human.”

“It all had to do with the location of his body.” Roland adjusted his position to wrap his arms around Jake, “His corpse was tangled up in copper pipes and they were working as a conductor for the energy that made it possible for him to manifest so thoroughly. By the time his body was removed, he was the only spirit left in the building so he could draw as much energy as he needed from the electricity without causing disturbances; not to mention that he had twenty-four years to practice.”

“How do you think he kept his mind together for so long?”

“I’m not entirely sure on that one, but I believe it had something to do with him still having a purpose. He kept doing his job which he seemed to actually like pretty well. That may very well have helped him maintain his original personality.”

“I see.” Jake nodded along, “Last question.”

“Go on.”

“You mentioned that you had previously heard Walter’s name. Did you ever figure out where? I’m certain you would have remembered if Vanhousen had told you directly.”

“Ah, yes. I had read the name once before. It took me almost three months to realize it, but it was on some of the paperwork on Vanhousen’s desk in the basement that I rifled through. I let it slip by as it didn’t seem important at the time. It really should have been a massive tip-off that I wasn’t supposed to talk to him.”

“Well, we all make mistakes. At least yours ended up without any new deaths once you got in the building... you know, aside from the man who deserved it.”

“Yeah.” Roland ran a hand over his chin.

“So, that’s it then? There’s nothing left to do but move on to another mission?”

“Well, there is one more thing.”

“What is that?” Jake’s eyebrows lifted.

“This.”

Leaning forward, Roland pressed a passionate kiss against Jake’s lips; knowing that he would never again make a decision under the assumption that there would be more time. He had learned his lesson the hard way but, as Jake wrapped his arms tighter around Roland to deepen the kiss, the medium realized that he wouldn’t want it any other way.