

# Unfinished Business

Rob Glidden

*"My days of torment were over, but the damage was done."*  
- Alysia Abbott

*"Bullying builds character like nuclear waste creates superheroes. It's a rare occurrence and often does much more damage than endowment."*  
- Zack W. Van

*"I gave up tomorrow to spite today."*  
-The Offspring, "Trust in You"

# Prologue

The dog was barking at the door to the garage. It wasn't the aggressive sort of barking, the kind that would ring through the house every morning when the mailman came. It was a higher bark, almost like a squeak, that he used to notify nearby humans that he wanted to play. Winston had been doing this every night in the same spot for the last three weeks. Under normal circumstances, Andrea Giordano would have opened the door to the garage to try and find out just what the dog was so fixated on. But these were not normal circumstances. That garage was where her little brother died.

She had been the one to find him. After moving out of the house about two years earlier, she had found herself back in the family home after she lost her writing job at a nearby news station. Most people didn't think the nightly news had writers at all. The anchors just came up with that stuff on their own, right? Wrong. All the stories read on-air by the anchors had been written ahead of time, often under intense pressure. Andrea heard her producer shout "I need this story written and on the air in ten minutes!" multiple times each day. The stories were short but that didn't mean they ought to be rushed. It took skill to turn complicated news stories into short descriptions that would make sense to everyone watching the TV that evening.

She had come home from grocery shopping and put all of the food into the fridge before even realizing Adrian wasn't there. Embarrassed about living at home, she had tried to make herself useful to her parents by doing chores during the day while they worked. Every so often, she would stop and wonder why she felt so ashamed. After all, it hadn't been her idea for the station to lay off its entire writing staff. However, it had been her idea to refuse the follow-up offer of returning to her job and working just enough hours each week to avoid official "full time" status. All the stress of the job but without that pesky health insurance. Some of her colleagues had taken the deal, but she was nauseated at the whole affair. There must have been something better out there. Six months had passed and she hadn't found it yet.

She had been forced to make two agonizing calls to her parents once she did find her brother hanging in the garage. Just thinking about those moments caused her whole body to tremble with grief and she wished Winston would just go about his business so she wouldn't have to be reminded of what happened in that garage. Deep down, she knew she was fooling herself. There was so escaping it, especially now with the funeral over and all the family gone. The rest of the world was back to normal, patiently waiting for Andrea to get over it and resume the demeaning routine of writing cover letters and exaggerating certain elements of her resume for each potential job. Nine out of ten times, the businesses she applied to didn't even bother to let her know the position had gone to someone else. She was just supposed to figure it out after enough time had passed.

Adrian hadn't written a suicide note, which was a surprise given how much he loved writing. Both her parents couldn't get out of the house fast enough once all the grieving rituals were over. For weeks now, her mother had been staying with her sister, who lived with her husband on the coast of Maine. Andrea had been to visit once and didn't plan on going again. Her aunt and uncle had been far happier to see her than her mother, who put on her best smile but wasn't fooling anyone. Andrea drove back to New Hampshire feeling like she had hurt her mother deeply. She was a reminder of the horrible reality waiting for Ellen Giordano whenever she finally returned home.

Adrian had been acting strange for the entire week before his suicide and the hindsight was driving Andrea nuts. As for her father, he had been trying to get as far away as possible. At least he had been staying in touch. He called every few days and had sent a check that would be more than enough to pay the bills at home for a while. The last time they spoke on the phone, Sal Giordano had told Andrea he was calling from Northern Canada. She couldn't remember exactly where. Her father must have been the only New Hampshire native who wanted to go even farther north while in the midst of another rough winter. Two-foot snowbanks were all over the place in Lakeside; she couldn't even imagine how much snow was on the ground wherever he was. He always wanted to set off on some grand North American road trip, but there was always too much to do back at home. She couldn't help but suspect that he was taking advantage of the fact that this was a time when nobody would question his decisions. They would just write off whatever he did as the hasty actions of a grief-stricken man. Then again, she couldn't really blame him. If your life is in shambles, you might as well do what you want.

She wondered how much Winston, a little white American Eskimo dog, knew about all of this while he pranced around that door to the garage, lowering his head and sticking his butt up in the air. At least she could take a tiny bit of comfort knowing she wasn't the only one in the family without a job. She didn't know for sure if her parents had quit, but she figured only the most patient employers would put up with employees disappearing for weeks. When you were grieving, you were supposed to come back into the office earlier than expected so your co-workers can whisper to each other and your boss can gently tell you to take all the time you need. Of course, you weren't supposed to actually need a lot of time. That would be downright un-American. You tell your boss that even though you're suffering, you just need to work. Hadn't her parents seen any movies about loss? They were ripping up the whole rulebook.

She couldn't distract herself any longer. "Winston, knock it off!"

The dog completely ignored her. He ignored her commands most of the time unless she was trying to eat her dinner in front of the TV. Then he was very attentive. She sat on the living room couch for several minutes, twirling her index finger in her jet black hair while the inexhaustible Winston shuffled around that door like a tap dancer.

Then something happened that made her sit up straight on the couch and drop her jaw. Winston lowered himself to the ground and rolled over. There was only one person who could ever get Winston to roll over.

There had been other strange incidents, but she wrote it off as just her imagination running wild or some kind of subconscious refusal to accept that Adrian was really gone. She was done with that. She couldn't ignore this any longer.

It was time to call that group she had heard about.

# Chapter 1

“It’s not going to be like a horror movie,” Blake said as the car slowly turned left onto the tiny road where the Giordano house was located. “I figure you know that rationally, but I still don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

Gwen grinned. “You mean nobody’s going to get thrown against a wall?”

Blake laughed briefly. “Probably not.”

It was actually Gwen’s car that Blake drove into the long driveway that led to the large house where the Granite Ghosthunters were set to meet. Ever since she had slid off the road into a snowbank the day after she had gotten her license, driving on slippery roads was a scary proposition. She never missed a chance to hand over the steering wheel of her car to someone else. The major roads were usually cleaned up quickly after a major snowstorm like the one that had dropped a heavy white blanket on Lakeside two days earlier, but the smaller back roads they were taking to tonight’s destination were another story. Watching Blake’s face tighten as he strained to keep the car steady, she was grateful to be sitting in the passenger seat.

This would be the last winter break for Gwen before her final semester at White Mountain University. Blake had graduated one year earlier and was biding his time as he tried to figure out what to do next. Gwen, however, had a plan. Once she returned to Lakeside with a film degree in hand, she would put together a low-budget horror film that would utilize the beautiful scenery of her home state and hopefully gain some ground on the festival circuit. This was the primary reason she wanted to tag along with Blake to meet this group of paranormal investigators – potential inspiration.

Every time she and Blake wandered around Lakeside together, Gwen wondered why it had taken so long for them to become friends. At high school, they were barely aware of each other. She had her group and he was usually in the back of the room drawing weapons or monsters in little notebooks. At WMU, they had wound up assigned to the same dorm on the same floor. Her die-hard enthusiasm for horror films intrigued Blake, who liked classic monster movies but otherwise didn’t know a lot about the genre. She had been happy to become his unofficial professor, taking him through the 1970s classics as well as oddities from all over the world. Blake was highly receptive and the two of them still sought out new scares together, but his passion for horror wasn’t nearly as fiery as hers.

A group of six people stood outside the front door to the house. Four of them wore custom-made hooded sweatshirts with “Granite Ghosthunters” written in glow in the dark green letters. Upon seeing Blake, the tallest and broadest of them waved him over.

“Is this our new member?” he asked Blake. Gwen wasn’t sure if he was kidding or not. She only wanted to observe them tonight and hadn’t given much thought to actually becoming part of the group.

“Yeah,” Blake answered and turned to Gwen. “This is Sam. He and Sid over there are the founders of the Granite Ghosthunters. Then there’s Larry, Hannah, Dale and Melissa.”

Gwen smiled at the group, although the details of who was who were fading fast.

“Guys, this is my friend Gwen Miles,” Blake concluded.

One of them asked “Gwen? Like Gwen Stacy?” Maybe it was Dale?

“Yep, like Spider-Man’s dead girlfriend,” she replied without missing a beat. She was prepared for that one. Gwen enjoyed tracking down collections of the old EC horror comics from

the 1950s, but superhero comics weren't her cup of tea. Despite that, she had been compelled to find out just who this person was that everyone mentioned when she introduced herself. A quick google image search revealed rows of pictures of Spider-Man holding a blonde girl with a green jacket and purple skirt, raising an angry hand into the air. She couldn't help but get annoyed. This girl didn't look anything like her. She wore a pair of thick-rimmed glasses that she picked out specifically because they reminded her of a character she loved – Velma from “Scooby-Doo.” Given that she also had dark brown hair (although longer than Velma's signature bob), she was hoping to evoke that character instead, but the Gwen Stacy stuff kept coming.

“I feel your pain,” Sam said.

“You do?” Gwen remembered his name since he was the leader, although she couldn't think of anyone famous that he resembled.

“Sure,” he said. “I'm a black guy and my name's Sam. People always want me to say something about a tasty burger or Ezekiel 25:17 or something like that.”

Gwen laughed out loud. She loved *Pulp Fiction* but would spare Sam any impromptu quotes. He probably got that all the time.

“Let's head inside,” an older man suddenly said. Sid, Gwen remembered. “It looks like Miss Giordano's waiting for us.”

They all turned to face the house and sure enough, she was standing silently at the door. She had such a blank stare that Gwen briefly wondered if she was a ghost herself.

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After another round of introductions for Andrea Giordano, Gwen made more progress on remembering who everyone was. She was confident that she could correctly match the names and faces of two-thirds of the group. Shortly after Andrea endeared herself to the crowd by bringing out a tray of still-warm chocolate chip cookies from the kitchen, Sam got down to business.

“So can you give us an idea of what's been happening here?”

“Sure,” Andrea said quietly as she sat down in a nearby recliner. “My brother...um, my brother killed himself about a month ago. For the past week or so, I've had this...this strange feeling that he's still here. And the dog acts like he is! The other day I saw him roll over. I can never get him to roll over. He only ever listened to Adrian. That was when I decided to get in touch with you guys. I read about your presentation at the library and...”

She trailed off for a few uncomfortable seconds as her body slightly trembled. “I'm sorry...this is a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

“It's okay,” Sid said gently. “You don't have to say anything else.”

“I wish I had something more concrete, you know?” she continued. “Like a glass moving across the table or black writing on the wall, but it's mostly just this gut feeling. On the one hand, I've felt so lonely in the house...but I don't think I'm actually alone here.”

One of the other team members chimed in, a guy who looked about 40 or so. Gwen wished she could remember his name.

“We don't usually see anything that dramatic,” he told Andrea.

She paused briefly. “No, I suppose that's just...Hollywood, isn't it? Well, I'll get out of your way for a while. Let me know if you need anything.”

As she left the room, Sam looked like he was about to speak again until the guy who had just spoken to Andrea reminded him of something called the “Prayer of Protection.” Larry, that

was his name. Sam nodded and Larry motioned for everyone to come forward and stand in a circle. Before Gwen could determine exactly what was happening, Larry was asking God to protect everyone in the house. She wasn't sure exactly what to make of this. All the warnings that real-life paranormal investigating wasn't like a horror movie and now this? Was Larry expecting to encounter some kind of demon? It didn't make sense, but she was the newcomer and didn't think it was smart to challenge whatever rituals this group had.

"Thanks," Sam said, almost as an afterthought. Inside, he looked even bigger. If they did encounter some kind of hostile ghost, Gwen could imagine Sam rolling up his sleeves and beating the crap out of it. "This is a big house, so we're going to split into three groups. Larry, take Dale and look around this floor. Melissa, go with Sid and Hannah to check out the upstairs. Blake and I will handle the basement."

Gwen stood nervously and then Sam noticed her. "Oh, I'm sorry. Gwen, you can go with whichever group you like." She wasn't sure which option to go with until Melissa grinned and waved her over, a gesture that sealed the deal.

"Did you go to LHS?" Melissa asked as they walked up the stairs.

"Yep!"

"I think you might have been in the same class as my sister," she replied. "Maggie Truong? Do you remember her?"

"Oh yeah, Maggie!" Gwen said as her eyes lit with recognition. "We were on the softball team together. But you look about the same age, how come we never met?"

"I'm one year older," Melissa answered. "And I went to the magnet school."

At the top of the stairs, Sid opened a small briefcase and handed everyone a flashlight and a strange little device that looked like a cartoonish remote control. She would learn that this was a K-II meter, which measured electromagnetic fields (EMF). While often portrayed as a device that could detect the presence of ghosts, Sid explained that it was much more useful to determine areas cluttered with EMFs from electronic appliances. Paranoia was sometimes linked to EMFs, specifically a feeling of "being watched." If someone reported feeling a ghostly presence in an area where they were surrounded by electronic devices, the EMFs could be the culprit.

"So you guys basically try and disprove the claims you hear?" Gwen asked.

Sid nodded. He was a short, stocky man with not much hair on his head but plenty on his chin. Thin glasses rested near the edge of his nose. It was at this point Gwen realized the diversity of the group and wondered what it was about the mystique of ghosts that could draw such a variety of individuals together.

"Sam's a scientist at heart," Sid began. "He takes a very scientific approach to our investigations. It's research to him, not thrill-seeking. At the start of these investigations, we set out to see if what's happening has a rational explanation. Most of the time, it does."

Melissa chimed in. "But every so often you come across something that you just can't explain. By definition, that's paranormal." Gwen noticed just how thin she was, so thin that she briefly wondered how she could support the big fancy camera hanging around her neck. She pushed black hair out of her face, but it was clear that wouldn't help for long. Melissa's hair was just long enough to get in her way but not long enough to rest behind her neck and shoulders. Sure enough, she pulled out a thin hair elastic to deal with it.

"For now, let's have a quick look so we can get used to the layout of this floor," Sid said, before walking away from the group and towards the flashlight's little white circle.

Aside from one spot at the end of the hallway, which Gwen assumed was Andrea's bedroom, the lights on the top floor of the house were all out. This was surprisingly creepy just by itself – how often did anyone walk through a stranger's home in the dark? The first door down the hallway brought Gwen into a small bathroom.

She had seen this scene hundreds of times. People walked into a bathroom with a medicine cabinet behind the mirror. They would open up the cabinet to get some pills or toothpaste, taking the mirror out of view in the process. When they were finished and shut the cabinet door, a horrific face would be in the mirror right behind them. This would be accompanied by a loud metallic clang on the soundtrack, of course.

When the cabinet was shut, it was only her face in the mirror. She chuckled at herself for being disappointed about this. Back in the hallway, she saw Hannah coming out of a different room. She was probably the youngest of the group, short and with hair that flowed down her back in blonde curls. Even lit by just a flashlight, Gwen could see that she had on lipstick and eye shadow. Was a paranormal investigation something you wanted to put on makeup for? To each her own, Gwen thought.

“Are you having a good time?” Hannah asked.

“It's pretty interesting,” Gwen replied. “At some point, I imagine that you guys are going to try and talk to the boy who died here. How do you do that? With a Ouija board?”

“The group doesn't really like using those,” Hannah said with a slight grin. “Maybe they think it's too much of a cliché. Who knows if they really work, anyhow? We do EVPs instead.”

Gwen had heard the term, but couldn't remember exactly what it meant.

“Sid or Melissa can explain the science of an EVP,” Hannah continued. “That's not really my specialty. I suck at science and math.”

“Don't feel bad,” Gwen said. “I was never very good at that stuff either.”

Melissa and Sid were back at the top of the stairs, motioning for them to follow. They walked into a nearby bedroom with a distinctly male aesthetic. A huge poster of a snarling red dragon hung over the bed, which was covered with images of spaceships and laser swords. A nearby bookcase only had actual books on half its shelves. The rest of the space was reserved for various action figures and knick knacks. A small flat screen TV sat atop the dresser. The first drawer was pulled out and had all sorts of cords and video game controllers hanging over its edge. This looked more like a bedroom for a ten-year-old, not a senior in high school.

“This is the kid's room so we'll start here,” Melissa said.

“How does this EVP stuff work exactly?” Gwen asked. “I think I've seen it in some movies, but none of them were very good.”

“It stands for Electronic Voice Phenomenon,” Melissa replied. “It's the term for when you can record a ghost speaking, even though you don't actually hear it until you play the audio back. So if we think there's a ghost nearby, we turn on the recorder and try and get it to speak. Later, when we play the tapes back, maybe you hear something you didn't hear at the time.”

“That really works?”

“Sometimes,” Melissa continued. “It's hard to get a good one, though. A lot of times you think you're hearing a ghost talk but it winds up being someone in another room or just some ambient noise. You really have to rule out all other possibilities if you want to be taken seriously with EVPs. It's just too easy to get it wrong.”

Sid chimed in. “A lot of paranormal researchers think that ghosts speak at a frequency below what the human voice is capable of, which may explain why we usually don't hear it in person. But whatever the reason, I've heard some eerie stuff doing this.”

Gwen was intrigued. “Really? Like what?”

“We can talk about that a little later,” Melissa said. “Hannah, why don’t you take a few pictures and we’ll get this started. Sid, do you want to do the first one?”

Sid nodded and turned on the recorder. Hannah walked around slowly with her camera.

“This is the Granite Ghosthunters,” Sid said in a highly serious voice. Gwen wondered if his day job was as a radio announcer. “We’re at the Giordano house in Lakeside, New Hampshire on the night of January 5. The time is approximately 8:45 p.m. I’m Sid, and I’m here with Melissa, Hannah and Gwen. Hello Adrian. Are you here?”

As expected, there was no reply, but Gwen had a sense of how easily this kind of atmosphere could steer an overeager ghosthunter astray. The feeling of anticipation was strong and it would be easy to get carried away with the power of suggestion and convince yourself that there was somebody here answering these questions.

“Your sister asked us to come here and see if we could connect with you,” Sid continued. “Is there anything you would like to tell her? We’ll be able to hear it on this recorder, so go ahead and let us know and we’ll pass on the message.”

The three of them sat in silence for several moments until Hannah suddenly cried out.

“Something grabbed my hair!”

Gwen looked Sid and Melissa, eager to see their reaction. Curiously, both of their expressions remained almost the same as they had been a few seconds earlier.

“It was right over here, you guys!” Hannah called out again.

With a look of vague exasperation, Melissa stood up and waved the K-II meter in the back of the room where Hannah had been standing. The lit gauge at the top of the meter stayed in the same place.

“I’m not picking anything up,” Melissa said calmly. “But uh...we’ll make a note of it.”

After that, the group was ready to move to a different room. The routine continued until about midnight. The four of them walked all over the upper floor of the Giordano house, conducting EVP sessions in each room with Sid and Melissa taking turns talking to someone who may or may not have been there at all. Gwen found it all very thorough and respectable but also tedious. There was a good reason horror movies took such liberties with this stuff.

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The group said their goodbyes outside the Giordano home, promising to be in touch with more results of its research that evening. Gwen stared up at the full moon for a few moments before getting back in her car, with Blake once again in the driver’s seat.

She didn’t waste any time. “So do you think the house is haunted?”

Blake turned carefully out of the driveway and back onto the small road, which seemed a little more slippery than it had been when they arrived. “We still have to review the EVPs, but right now I would say no. Aside from a couple K-II spikes in the garage, none of us saw anything out of the ordinary.”

“Hannah said something pulled her hair.”

“I’ll bet she did,” Blake said with no small amount of contempt in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“The thing about Hannah,” he continued, “is that something seems to happen to her every time we go anywhere, regardless of the amount of other evidence we find.”

This was getting odd. “So she was lying?”

“Well, I guess I can’t say for sure,” Blake replied. “But I would take anything she tells you with a big grain of salt...maybe a whole shaker.”

“Why do you keep her in the group if she just makes shit up?” Gwen asked.

“She’s Larry’s niece and he thinks the world of her,” he answered. “I think she just wants more drama than we usually get in our investigations. She’s not that bad, I guess.”

“Oh, what a ringing endorsement,” Gwen said back, but Blake was distracted by the little light that popped up on her car’s dashboard.

“You’re almost out of gas,” he said. “We ought to fill that up or you might have a hard time getting it started tomorrow.” In less than a minute, a gas station came into view. Blake turned off the road and parked the car to the right of a pump.

“What are you doing?” Gwen asked.

“Uh...getting gas?”

“It’s the wrong side,” she replied.

“Oh god damn it!” Blake shouted when he realized his mistake. “That’s the most annoying thing on the planet.” Gwen laughed uproariously at his hyperbole as he started the car up again and circled around the property to get on the correct side. This might have been more of a nuisance during daylight hours, but in the dead of night they were the only ones there.

As he stepped out of the car, Blake seemed to have reconsidered his earlier statement. “Actually, it’s probably third behind insurance companies and black flies.”

Gwen was still chuckling about the outburst. Nobody did hilarious indignation better than Blake Ward. His theatrical outrage about minor annoyances like DVD packaging or dried ketchup on the bottle rim never failed to cheer her up. On some level, she expected he must have known how ridiculous he appeared. He just enjoyed making people laugh and venting at the same time.

“It’s so stupid,” he grumbled as he sat back down. “Why can’t all cars just have it on the same side?” He couldn’t stay in character for much longer and a chuckle came through. The car started again with a full tank of gas and they were back on the road.

A brief silence passed, but not an uncomfortable one. They had been friends too long for that. Gwen had so many questions she wanted to ask about paranormal activity and the group’s dynamics, but she figured there would be time for that later. For now, her mind turned to Andrea Giordano, who was probably not much older than her but looked like she had been aged twenty years by her brother’s suicide. She thought briefly about the agony she would go through if something ever happened to her little brother and became very angry with Adrian.

“What do you think got into that kid, anyway?” she finally said.

“You mean Adrian?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “Do you think he thought about Andrea at all? About what he’s put her and her family through?”

“He was too far gone for that,” Blake said. “When you’re that depressed, all you care about is trying to make it stop. I talked to her a little bit after Sam and I were done in the basement. It seemed like he had a really hard time at school with kids picking on him.”

That annoyed Gwen even more. “Everyone gets picked on in school.”

“Are you sure about that?” Blake asked. “I can’t remember you ever getting made fun of. You shouldn’t compare your high school experience to his. There’s a pretty wide spectrum, to put it mildly.”

“I must have gotten picked on at least once,” Gwen said.

“It couldn’t have been that bad if you don’t remember,” Blake replied. “I’m not saying it was right for him to pack it in, but I don’t think people give enough credence to just how miserable middle and high school are.”

“But he was a senior!” Gwen protested. “He was almost outta there! Why would he suddenly do it now?”

Blake seemed to be getting irritated. “Yeah, just look at all this world peace and economic prosperity he’s missing out on.”

That comment genuinely shocked her. “You know, sometimes I can’t tell if you’re serious or if you’re joking.”

“Yeah,” he said in a voice just above a whisper. “Sometimes I can’t either.”

There was silence for the rest of the drive back. This time, it was uncomfortable.

## Chapter 2

Even though Gwen still wasn't sure how she felt about her first paranormal investigation a few nights earlier, she decided to accept the invitation to a team meeting at Sam's house in Glenboro. Blake was heading there straight from work, leaving Gwen looking for other options to avoid driving herself. She and Melissa had been texting often since the investigation so it was time to see if Maggie Truong's older sister could pass her personal friendship test.

"Would you be willing to drive me to the meeting?" Gwen asked once she picked up.

"I guess so," Melissa replied. "Is your car okay?"

"Yeah, I just get nervous driving in snow."

"The roads are fine now," she said. "We've had sunshine for a couple days in a row."

Gwen didn't say anything. This was the moment of truth.

"But I'll drive you, I don't mind. It will be fun."

Gwen grinned. Melissa had passed the friendship test.

About two hours later, a big black SUV pulled up in front of the Miles household. As she gathered her things, she noticed that the school bus had also arrived. Spencer stepped off the stairs of the bus and crossed the front lawn with a strange look on his face that was somewhere between relief and frustration. Upon entering the front door, he dropped his backpack on the welcome mat and made a beeline for his room before Gwen intercepted him.

"Hey, how was school today?"

"Fucking terrible," he said without enthusiasm.

"Jeez," Gwen said. "I hope that's not the answer you're going to give Mom and Dad."

"I'll come up with something else for them."

Eighth grade was hardly a high point in Gwen's school career, but she couldn't remember ever coming home this pissed off. "So what happened that's got you in such a bad mood?"

Spencer began to walk towards his room. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want to talk about it!" he said just before slamming the door. Gwen might have persisted further but Melissa was waiting for her outside. Glenboro was about a 35 minute ride, mostly because of the nearby lake's jagged coastline, which resembled a gerrymandered Congressional district. As they drove past the water, Gwen noticed it hadn't completely frozen over yet, but icy tendrils were beginning to make their way inward from the coast. Glenboro and Lakeside had something of a friendly rivalry when it came to summer and autumn tourism, but the bleak winters left both of them pretty quiet.

"I'm glad you weren't too bored by the other night to come back," Melissa said.

"I figured actually seeing a ghost would be a long shot," Gwen admitted. "What's the weirdest thing you've ever seen doing that stuff?"

Melissa thought for a few seconds before answering. "It's a little embarrassing, but I've never actually *seen* anything all that strange. It's more about things I've heard. I've gotten some EVPs that still give me chills. One of them even used my name."

"No way!"

"It's true. I can show it to you later."

"Do you think you'll ever see a ghost for real?" Gwen asked.

“I hope so,” she answered. “The Holy Grail for a lot of paranormal investigators is what they call a full body apparition, when you can see someone’s ghost right in front of you. I would love to see that someday, but nobody in the group has...not even Sam.”

“Who is Sam, anyway? Did he go to LHS?”

“He did, but he’s about ten years older than I am,” Melissa answered. “So you wouldn’t have seen him there. I knew who he was mostly because we make up two of the five families.”

“The five families?” Gwen asked, perplexed. “What, like in *The Godfather*?”

“Nope,” Melissa said with a grin. “In Lakeside, we say that the five families aren’t the Mafia, just the amount of non-white families in town.”

Gwen covered her mouth with her hand as shocked laughter came out. She knew it was true, though; Lakeside’s demographics were as white as the snow all over the landscape.

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Sam’s house sat near the top of a curvy mountain road that yielded a gorgeous view of the snow-capped White Mountains in the distance. She was now exceedingly relieved Melissa had agreed to drive her. The only thing worse than driving in winter was driving uphill during the winter. Several cars were already parked in a shoveled out section of the driveway that looked like the result of some hard labor. The handle of a shovel poked out of one of the snow banks, evidence that Sam had done this by hand. The first person she met was actually Sam’s wife, Audra, who was almost as tall as her husband but not nearly as broad. She led them to the garage, where the group leader was placing hockey puck-shaped piles of raw meat on the grill.

“Hey, Melissa!” Sam called out when he saw them. “Glad you could convince Gwen here to stick with us!”

“You’re grilling during the winter?” Gwen asked.

“Grilling season never ends for me!” Sam replied cheerfully. “You want a burger or a hot dog?” Gwen opted for one of each while Melissa went with the single hamburger. “Why don’t you guys go inside and relax? I’ve got to get all this stuff cooked and we have a couple people who aren’t here yet.”

She and Melissa made their way inside. Opening the front door placed them right across from a staircase with a spacious living room on the left.

“Hey, Gwen Stacy! Come check this out!”

Gwen glanced over and saw the one member of the group whose name she still didn’t know. “Who’s that guy again?”

“Dale,” Melissa said. “You’re on your own.” She walked into the kitchen while Gwen made her way to the couch where he was sitting. Dale looked to be younger than Sid but older than Sam. He had most of his hair, save for one patch on the top. He also looked like he kept in fairly good shape and was wearing a short-sleeved shirt in January. Gwen had known a few people who could pull that off, but she was never one of them.

“How’s it going?” Gwen asked, sounding a little unsure.

“Not bad,” Dale said. “I called you over cause I wanted you to check this out. Have you ever seen this show?”

She looked at the big flat screen TV in front of them and saw the opening credits for whatever show he was referring to. A team of people were being introduced with rapid jump cuts and about 30 seconds later, she understood why he was so interested. The show was called “Ghosthunting Bros.” It was not an abbreviation for “brothers.”

“This could be us some day,” Dale said. “These shows are huge and they’re looking for more groups. I keep sending letters to the network but so far I haven’t heard back.”

The leader of the “bros” (even though there were women in the group) was a stout guy with spiked hair and a tight shirt that barely contained his rippling pecs. Gwen was half-expecting him to eat a bag of raw Creatine powder right in front of the camera.

“Today on Ghosthunting Bros, we’re going to the site of one of the most INFAMOUS workplace murders of ALL TIME!” he shouted during a shot where the camera was tilted for no discernible reason. The next shot was of an abandoned factory as dark clouds rumbled across the sky thanks to time-lapse photography.

“This was the place where a man named Shawn Jordan snapped on the job and KILLED two of his co-workers before turning the gun on himself. The jobs here were eventually outsourced and the building has fallen into disrepair, but there are rumors that Shawn Jordan STILL WALKS THESE HALLS!”

Even though the Granite Ghosthunters were mostly men, Gwen didn’t recall this much testosterone during their investigation. “Why does this guy always talk like he’s at a monster truck show?”

“Eh, it’s just television,” Dale replied. “They gotta play everything up.”

The not so humble host wasn’t through yet. “We’ve got everything ready to go. It’s time to find Shawn Jordan and TEACH HIM A LESSON!”

“Teach him a lesson?” Gwen asked. “What the hell does that mean? Do they think that just being there is some kind of punishment to the ghost? He’s dead, pretty sure he doesn’t care.”

“You gotta turn off your brain and just enjoy it,” Dale said, perhaps regretting his decision to show Gwen the program. She couldn’t stand it when someone told her to “turn off her brain.” Silly was one thing, and it could be fun. A “brainless” piece of entertainment was just miserable. She was pondering polite ways to escape when someone called out to her.

“Gwen!” Blake said from the front door. “I brought in the burgers and dogs, including yours. Dale, your chicken’s up next.”

“Thanks, buddy!” Dale called back. Gwen rushed off the couch and almost hugged Blake for getting her away from the television.

“Good timing, huh?” Blake said, as if reading her mind. “Sorry you had to be subjected to that shit. Did Melissa give you the update on the investigation from the other night?”

“No,” Gwen said as they walked through the kitchen. She grabbed a paper plate and napkins off a counter and poured a little dab of ketchup on her hamburger, followed by a narrow line on the hot dog. “I should have asked, but we got caught up talking about other stuff.”

“There wasn’t anything on any of the EVPs,” Blake continued. “Nothing showed up in the photos, either.”

“So I guess the house isn’t haunted?”

“Probably not,” Blake said. “Although something pulled Hannah’s hair. Must have been a demon. She believes in them, you know.”

“Demons?” Gwen asked, somewhat incredulous. “Like horned devils and all that?”

“Well, I don’t know what they look like exactly, but she believes in beings of pure evil. So does Larry. It’s really weird.”

“I thought Sam was all about the science,” Gwen said. “Demons aren’t scientific.”

“Believe me, he knows,” Blake said. “But Larry is a good investigator, so Sam’s willing to put up with some of his fire and brimstone stuff. That’s why we have that prayer of protection every time.”

Sam's booming but genial voice cut through the crowd's chatter. "Okay everyone, have a seat and we'll go over some business."

As a newcomer, Gwen found the first ten minutes of the meeting almost incomprehensible. There was a lot of technical jargon and a few in-jokes that had some of the group members cracking up. As her eyes glazed over, Gwen wondered why she was there. It was less than a month before she would have to head back to WMU for her final semester and then it would be awfully hard to come to any more investigations. She had been looking for inspiration for her planned post-graduate horror film, but it wasn't like she was going to make a movie about actual paranormal investigations. From what she had seen, a movie like that would end up putting people to sleep in their seats.

When the conversation turned to the Giordano house, Gwen snapped back into reality.

"We have another investigation there set for two nights from now," Sam declared.

"Really?" Blake asked. "But we didn't find anything."

"I know," Sam replied. "I went over our evidence, or lack thereof, with Andrea and she got pretty upset. I think she really hoped we would find something. I figured if she's so certain, we might as well give it another shot."

"We seem to run into this pretty often with suicides," Melissa added.

"What do you mean?" Gwen asked.

"When something like this happens, the family really wants some kind of closure," Larry answered. "They want to know why it happened. In this case, the kid didn't even leave a note so they have no clue what he was thinking. I think the need for an answer is so strong that it's easy to convince yourself that a ghost can give it to you."

"I don't think we'll find anything this time either," Sid said. "But I feel awful for that young woman and if another night in that house will help her through this grieving process, then I think it's the right thing to do."

Sam nodded in agreement. "Anyone have an issue with that?"

Dale chimed in. "Another visit there is fine and dandy to me, but how many nights are we gonna spend on a wild goose chase until she realizes he ain't in the house?"

Gwen didn't have anything in particular to add to the discussion, so she began to observe each member of the group. Hannah had been very quiet. Perhaps she was dejected that nobody was taking her hair-pulling claim seriously.

"I don't think she would ask us for a third time," Larry said, turning his head towards Dale. "It's something she has to figure out on her own. If we tell her to give it up, it's just too cruel. I just can't believe her brother would put her family through that."

Gwen's eyes turned to Blake. Would he challenge Larry the way he had challenged her the other night? He certainly looked agitated, but for now he was keeping his mouth shut. Maybe he was worried about being outnumbered.

"Maybe I'm just an old fogey or something but I don't understand it," Larry continued, now in the midst of a full-on rant. The topic was clearly personal to him. "Whatever happened to perseverance? 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?' You hear about these suicides all the time on the news. Why are all these kids just giving up?"

Blake's self-control was really being tested now. It looked like he was going to unleash a rant of his own any second now, but it was Sam who intervened.

"We're getting pretty far off-topic," he said. "But I would get this out of your system before we head over there again. This kind of thing is not what she needs to hear."

“You’re right,” Larry said, looking slightly embarrassed. “I just hate to see a kid throw his life away. It’s such a waste.”

Gwen didn’t expect anyone to argue with that, but that might have been where the consensus ended. Blake was seething in his chair and she wasn’t the only one who had noticed. This was out of character for him. While he enjoyed mocking and complaining about things that annoyed him, he was typically level-headed when it came to emotions. It fit in with the whole persona he cultivated; the guy who was invisible until he wanted to make an impression. His light brown hair sat in a mop on his head, probably only combed once every morning to get it out of his face. He always joked about not getting paid to be a corporate billboard, meaning that his clothes were free of logos or licensed images. He had once worn glasses but had undergone surgery to be rid of them for good.

She always knew Blake had a difficult time in high school, but the situation with the Giordano family seemed to hit a deep nerve and she had the sense that it was far worse than she ever imagined. Had he contemplated suicide while they were at LHS? If he had gone through with it, Gwen’s college experience would have been unrecognizable. She wondered about all the people who Adrian would never meet and suddenly felt the tragedy of the situation, which was much more intense than just thinking about it.

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Late that night, she lay still on top of the bed in her pajamas and stared up at the ceiling of her room for a long while. Maybe it was just too late and she was just too tired, but she began to feel that her newfound association with the Granite Ghosthunters would be an important crossroads. She could distance herself now and be done with paranormal investigations and the sad story of Adrian Giordano. If she didn’t do that, she suspected that she might walk away from this whole thing with some inspiration after all...just not the type she expected.

As Blake had reminded her the other night with no small amount of resentment, she didn’t have many bad memories of high school. What bothered her now was that the good memories weren’t especially prominent either. She had left LHS and never looked back. She sometimes exchanged pleasantries with her best friends from those days but never felt compelled to visit them while she was home. The one she saw the most was Blake, someone she and her clique had never given any thought to back in those days.

Perhaps there was something underneath the superficiality of her day-to-day high school experience that bothered her deeply, on almost a subconscious level. A profound ugliness just beneath the surface that had destroyed Adrian and left Blake scarred for life. Why else would her high school days feel so unusually distant when they were less than four years ago? Why was Blake the only person from LHS she wanted anything to do with?

It was easy to let her mind run away with her in the dead of night like this, but she couldn’t shake this feeling that she needed to see this investigation through. Something had to be reckoned with, but what? Before it was all over, she would know.

# Chapter 3

This time around, Gwen rode to the Giordano house in the passenger seat of Melissa's SUV with Blake in the back seat. She figured you could fit at least two more people into that monster, so maybe she could eventually persuade the entire Granite Ghosthunters team to carpool. That way, it would look as if she was looking out for the environment and reducing carbon emissions rather than just trying to avoid driving on slick winter roads. Perhaps someday the group would visit this house in the daytime and she might get a good look at the surrounding area. This would be her second trip here and she still didn't feel sure exactly where it was.

Andrea greeted them all at the door once again, looking genuinely happy to see the crew in their identical black T-shirts (except for Gwen).

"Thank you so much for coming back," she said, clasping Sam's hand with both of hers. "I know you weren't planning on it."

Dale noticed a plate full of warm chocolate chip cookies on the table. "Keep making these and we'll keep coming!"

She smiled briefly and there were a few chuckles, but Sam was all business. "Has there been any more activity since we were last here?"

Andrea nodded enthusiastically. "The dog is still playing over by the garage door every day at around the same time in the late afternoon. There's more than just that, though. I keep hearing these thumps in here...like someone's banging their hand on the table or something. It's like he...I mean, like someone is trying to get my attention."

Sam thought it over for a few seconds as he looked around the living room. "Has anything like this happened upstairs?"

"No, everything I've seen has been down here."

He nodded. "Good to know. In that case, we won't bother to investigate the entire upstairs again. We'll split into two groups and look around this bottom floor more thoroughly. I'll take Sid, Hannah and Blake and do one half. Melissa, you take Larry, Dale and Gwen and do the other. Everyone ready?"

While she still wasn't sure about her future in the group, Gwen felt good that she had been assigned a spot like the others. As everyone was about to move, Larry looked about to speak up.

"Oh yeah," Sam said. "Larry, do your thing."

He thanked Sam quickly and began the Prayer of Protection again. Gwen still found it somewhat awkward, but at least it wasn't like in a church where everyone chants together. She looked over at Sam, who didn't look annoyed but at the same time, looked like he was trying not to look annoyed. It was obvious he didn't think this was necessary, but it made sense that trying to stop Larry from doing it was more trouble than it was worth.

Although she didn't expect to find anything, Gwen was looking forward to the EVP sessions this time. When discussing the investigation with her parents a few nights earlier, her father had mentioned a digital recorder that was sitting in his desk. There was probably some app for her phone that could record sound, but it just didn't feel the same. Both her parents gave no credence to the idea that ghosts were real but appreciated the idea that she was doing research for a potential screenplay. They had always been supportive of her creative efforts. In college, she

had met several people who clashed with family over what to do with their lives and was grateful not to have dealt with that.

Her group decided to examine the garage first. Andrea casually mentioned that nobody (other than police) had been in there since her brother's suicide. Gwen felt uneasy as soon as she stepped in and attributed it mostly to the stuffy air. After all, neither the garage doors nor the door to the living room had been opened in weeks.

"What do this boy's parents think of us looking for his ghost?" Dale said. He sounded a little shaky himself.

"I'm pretty sure they don't have any opinion at all," Melissa said, peering through the lens of her monstrous camera while surveying the area. "Andrea says they took off after the funeral and haven't been back since. She's been here in this house alone all this time...no wonder she wanted us to come again."

That eerie feeling wouldn't go away and finally Gwen saw something that made her gasp. A small chair sat in the middle of the garage that had been toppled to one side. She instantly knew this was the chair Adrian had stood on at the moment before his death. She looked up to the ceiling, half expecting to still see a rope hanging overhead. That had been removed, but the chair was still lying there. The growing realization that she was standing only a foot or two away from where someone had died was making her feel queasy. She had to distract herself.

"Larry," she said weakly. "What's the story with that Protection Prayer?"

"I picked it up from another group I knew back in Maine," he answered. "That's where I'm from originally. I liked the idea so I figured I would try and introduce it here. It's nothing too formal and gives me some peace of mind during these things."

"Is it meant to protect us from demons?" Gwen asked, feeling proud about the lack of condescension in her voice. Not just anyone could pull that off.

"Oh boy," Larry replied. This was obviously not a new conversation for him. "I know what you're thinking. I must be afraid that I'm gonna get possessed and have my head turn all around. I don't believe in anything that over the top...but I do think there is evil in this world that we don't fully understand."

Melissa and Dale both turned their heads as Larry continued. "I've experienced enough at this point to be certain that ghosts exist. I think once you accept that, you have to wonder what else is around us that we can't see. So when I mention demons, I'm not talking about big horned monsters or anything like that. I mean evil forces that are beyond our understanding using their influence to steer us in some dangerous direction. We always hear that phrase 'inner demons,' but maybe they're not always on the inside. Does that make sense?"

Gwen nodded. There was something sincere about his answer that she admired. In fact, Larry seemed to be a very sincere guy in general. He was the only person on the team who tucked in his black Granite Ghosthunter T-shirt. His hair looked like a president in a movie, light brown with a few gray streaks coming through. While not as imposing as Sam, he was no weakling either and it was clear he kept in good shape. As he spoke, he made his points not just with words but with vivid gestures. Gwen could easily imagine him standing at a pulpit.

Melissa had a question of her own. "While we're on the subject, how do you reconcile the existence of ghosts with your faith? After all, they would be proof that you don't go to Heaven when you die."

"I don't see it that way," Larry answered. "A ghost is someone who hasn't yet left this world for some reason. If we can help them find closure, maybe they will pass on. But let's not get too deep into theology. We've got work to do."

“Can I try this one?” Gwen asked, proudly pulling her father’s recorder from her jacket pocket.

“You already got your own recorder?” Dale asked. “You’re a quick study!”

“Go ahead, Gwen,” Melissa said. “Say whatever you think might get him to respond in the slim chance he’s actually here. If you remember, just say your name and where we are first. Like you heard Sid do the other night.”

Gwen nodded and turned on the recorder. She noticed that Melissa turned on hers as well. “This is Gwen and we’re here in the Giordano house again on the night of January 10.”

She wasn’t expecting this to feel so powerful. After all, nobody in the group expected to find anything at all. Yet Larry’s comments on helping a lost soul find peace had touched her and for a few moments, she dropped her skepticism and imagined she was speaking directly to Adrian.

“Your sister asked to try and reach out to you again,” she said. “You didn’t say anything to us last time and we probably won’t come back again without anything to go on. If there’s something you want Andrea to know, please tell us. Nobody here is going to laugh at you or call you names or anything like that. You can trust me. Please tell us...what is it you want?”

There was complete silence for several moments.

“You should win an Oscar for that one!” Dale said loudly. “I got chills!”

“I did too,” Larry said quietly. “I think you’re going to turn out to be a natural at this.”

“Good job,” Melissa added, placing a hand on Gwen’s shoulder. “Try asking him some more questions. Simple stuff like what month it is, or his favorite food, things like that.”

Gwen followed those instructions and continued the EVP session for another ten minutes. However, she never felt as “in the zone” as she had when she asked that first question.

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“You should have heard Gwen doing that EVP in the garage,” Melissa said to Blake as they drove home. “It was unreal. She blew everyone away.”

“How about that, Gwen?” Blake asked. “You’re getting raves. Have you thought being an actress-director?”

She grinned shyly as the car moved slowly along in the darkness. It had turned out to be a very foggy evening. Melissa had been forced to turn on the high beams almost immediately to cut through the murk. As they drove farther away from the neighborhood where the Giordanos lived and into a stretch of road with very few streetlights, the headlights became increasingly ineffective. Melissa squinted and stared intently through the windshield while her two passengers kept quiet.

Gwen recalled a lot of movies where characters encountered ghosts in fog like this, but it wasn’t a ghost that wandered in front of the car that night. Melissa cursed loudly when she first saw the animal and then swerved hard to the right to avoid it. During any other time of the year, the car might have gone way off the road and into someone’s yard. Instead, the black SUV collided with a three-foot snow bank that had been hardened by days of cold weather and rain. White boulders flew in all directions, but the car’s momentum was slowed.

“Everybody okay?” Melissa asked once the vehicle was finally still.

“What the hell was that?” Blake asked. “A moose?”

“I think it was a deer,” Melissa said. “Moose usually only come out at dusk or dawn. Deer, however, are idiots at any time of the day.”

Gwen and Blake laughed as she steered the car out of the snow bank. After driving for less than a minute, Melissa noticed the red and blue lights in her rear-view mirror and the others heard the siren.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” she grumbled as she pulled the car over.

The three of them sat uncomfortably as the officer took his sweet time getting out of his own vehicle and walking over. Finally, he made his way over and stood near the driver’s side window.

“You know why I pulled you over?” he asked.

“I think so,” Melissa admitted. Gwen felt bad for her. Getting pulled over was miserable when you were by yourself, but in front of friends it must have been even worse.

“That was some interesting driving you were doing back there,” the officer said. “You had anything to drink tonight?”

“Of course not,” she replied harshly, perhaps too harshly. “There was a deer in the middle of the road. I couldn’t see it right away because of the fog.”

There was an awkward pause as everyone waited to see if he believed her. Thankfully, it seemed he did. “Yeah, this fog is awful tonight.”

Gwen glanced at Blake, who had a strange expression on his face. A few seconds later, he rolled down his back seat window. The cop glanced over and raised his eyebrows.

“Blake Ward?” he said. “Is that you? Wow, I haven’t seen you in ages!”

“You know this guy?” Melissa asked.

“This is Jason Hobart. He was in my class at LHS.” Gwen knew that name. She had heard Blake talk about him at some point, but couldn’t remember the details.

“It’s Officer Hobart now,” he said with a chuckle. “Blake and I were buddies back in school. I miss those days sometimes.”

“Let’s not overdo it,” Blake said under his breath. Jason didn’t hear it but Gwen did. That was when she remembered who this person was. She had encountered him briefly at LHS, but she knew him mostly from Blake’s stories. He was one of the LHS students who harassed Blake constantly. She couldn’t tell if Jason remembered those incidents when he described them as friends, but Blake sure did.

He took note of Gwen watching him and bent over a bit to see into the passenger seat. “Gwen Miles? You’re here too? This is like an LHS clown car!”

“Yeah yeah, small world,” Melissa said. “If you don’t mind, it’s late. Can we go now?”

Jason didn’t look too pleased with her insolence. “I don’t know...I have to decide whether or not to write you up for distracted driving.”

“Distracted driving?” she asked. “That’s bullshit. I wasn’t on my phone.”

“Watch your mouth, little lady. You don’t have to be on your phone for distracted driving. All it means is that you weren’t paying attention to the road.”

Gwen was getting a little nervous about Melissa’s defiance. It was a side that Gwen hadn’t seen before, but on the other hand, she wanted to get a little revenge on behalf of Blake. She wasn’t the type to be openly hostile, but suddenly she remembered an old joke that could be perfect in this situation if Officer Jason took the bait.

“Please don’t write us up,” Gwen said sweetly. “Couldn’t we just buy some tickets to the Policeman’s Ball instead?”

“What are you talking about? Policemen don’t have balls.”

The three of them burst out laughing as a look of embarrassed realization swept over the officer's face. "Oh, God damn it! I can't believe I just said that." That made everyone laugh harder.

"I don't feel like explaining this in traffic court," Jason said. "Get outta here."

Melissa wasted no time rolling up her window and driving off. She battled fits of chuckles for most of the way home. Gwen leaned her head around the side of her seat and saw Blake give his approval with a shy little smile. He had been unusually shy this whole time, now that she thought of it. If Blake had ripped into this guy the way he went after her car's gas tank the other night, it would have been a spectacle to behold. Yet he was mostly quiet during the whole exchange. It didn't make any sense. She briefly wished they were back at WMU. Things were so much less complicated there.

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Gwen figured a lazy Sunday morning was the perfect time to go over her recorded EVP sessions from the previous night. After sleeping in and having breakfast shortly before the rest of her family would be looking for lunch, she sprawled on the living room couch and plugged her headphones into the small digital recorder. With a pillow behind her head and a thin blanket on top, she was ready to listen in style.

They had done EVPs in three rooms that night and the garage was up first. Recalling her time in there made her a bit uneasy. She couldn't get the image of that toppled chair out of her head. How long would it sit there before anyone in the family dared to enter that garage again?

"This is Gwen," said an unfamiliar voice on the recorder. Why did she always sound so different on tape? Her message to Adrian played in her ears and she was suddenly baffled by how well the rest of the group reacted. Was it really that good?

That was when she heard it. A strange voice that made her sit up straight on the couch.

"What the hell was that?" she asked herself after a few moments of stunned silence.

She rewound the audio clip back a few seconds. There it was again. "It can't be..."

The voice was still too quiet to make out any words, so she rewound it again and turned up the volume as high as it could go. Her own voice was now so loud it was making her wince, but this was the only way to be sure.

"What is it you want?" said her voice on the recorder.

Then she heard it loud and clear. The answer to that question was a single word.

"Justice."

# Chapter 4

Gwen yanked the phone off the nearby coffee table and frantically searched for Melissa's name in her contact list. She had turned her own recorder on shortly before Gwen started her EVP session in the garage. Still reeling from what she heard, Gwen tapped her foot on the ground impatiently as Melissa's phone rang. It wasn't possible, was it? Did the ghost of Adrian Giordano actually answer her question last night? If it showed up on Melissa's recorder as well, there would be no mistaking it.

As soon as she finally picked up, Gwen begged her to listen to the EVP session immediately. Melissa was clearly perplexed by her insistence but it was something she had planned to do anyway. With Gwen waiting on the phone, she grabbed her own recorder and listened.

"Whoa," she finally said. "Is that what I think it is?"

"I think so," Gwen replied. "I am *freaking out* right now, Melissa!"

"But what does it actually say?"

"You gotta turn it up real loud to hear."

"Okay, hold on." It was so loud now that Gwen could hear her own voice through the phone. When the "what is it you want" question came, she held the phone closer.

"Holy shit!" Melissa said. "Justice? Is that what he said?"

"That's what I hear too."

"What does he mean by that? Justice for what?"

"I don't know," Gwen replied. "What do we do now?"

"Sam's gotta hear this as soon as possible," Melissa said. "I'll let him know we're on our way and then I'll be over there to get you."

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The lazy Sunday had stopped feeling so lazy once Gwen heard that voice. The day was turning into a blur of disbelief and anticipation. Melissa was telling all sorts of stories about famous EVP examples and various other legends from the annals of paranormal research, but they were going in one ear and out the other. She felt a little guilty about this. After all, some of this could be very useful in determining what kind of story she would tell in her planned horror film after graduation. For the moment, however, all she could do was imagine herself sitting in that dank, dark garage just the previous evening. The memory alone had the potential to be upsetting, but the idea that an unseen young man (who was supposed to be dead, by the way) may have been watching her the whole time was downright chilling.

For all her years of watching horror movies religiously, she had never arrived at a definitive opinion on whether or not ghosts really existed. She liked the idea, mostly because it made the world a little more interesting. It meant there were still aspects to life that humans had very little understanding about, plus offering some hope for life after death, even if that "life" is just hanging around your old house. It was still better than outright oblivion. She had given the whole issue a great deal of thought, but never truly decided on one viewpoint over another. What was the point? In the era of Photoshop and Instagram and other sophisticated technology, was it

even possible to prove that ghosts were real without accusations of digital manipulation? Especially to a populace that was already mostly skeptical?

Gwen's increasingly large-scale train of thought came to an abrupt end when they pulled up to Sam's house in Glenboro. As they stepped out of the car, Sam appeared at the front door and waved them inside. The house looked different with less of a crowd, although Gwen recognized the large television where Dale had forced her to watch that horrendous ghosthunting show. This time it displayed four men in suits sitting on a very colorful set discussing sports. The coffee table between the TV and the couch was adorned with a bowl of tortilla chips, a smaller bowl of salsa, a small plate of buffalo wings (with a dab of blue cheese) and a beer bottle resting right in the center of a coaster. It was so well-arranged that she could imagine it appearing in a sports magazine. Sam didn't seem to do anything halfway.

"This better be good," he said with a mischievous smile. "The game's starting soon."

Melissa turned and held up her digital recorder. "We've got to check out this EVP on your supercomputer or whatever you call it."

Sam laughed. "You mean my research station? Sure, let's have a listen."

He led them into an office and Gwen let out an impressed chuckle. Sam's "research station" had three computers sitting on a long wooden desk, two laptops and one desktop PC with an enormous CPU that barely fit underneath. Also sharing space on the desk was a printer, webcams, a small microphone, a headset, a stack of blank CDs and a little bowl filled with USB flash drives. It reminded her of editing stations she had used during her film production classes at WMU, rooms where you would have to navigate a veritable briar patch of tangled cords to get to a seat. This was not the case here. Sam had them all contained in two enormous power strips.

He grabbed a USB cable out from a desk drawer and plugged Melissa's recorder into one of the laptops. A few keystrokes and mouse clicks later, some kind of sound editing program opened up. Gwen didn't know sound work as well as other parts of the filmmaking process; she tended to defer to those with more experience in that area. Sam clearly had some experience. The audio clip from the recorder became a line that stretched and contracted at various points across the screen.

"Let's see what we got here," Sam said quietly.

Gwen's introduction played once again. She was beginning to get sick of that 30 seconds or so before the big moment. No doubt Sam would be able to chop it down.

"What is it you want?"

"Justice," said the ghostly voice once again.

"Hmm, I'll have to up the volume on that part."

A few clicks later and Gwen heard the "justice" more clearly than ever.

Sam put a hand to his chin and pondered the clip for a few moments before speaking. "Definitely a male voice. Is there a chance that it was Dale or Larry talking in the background?"

Gwen was about to speak up, but Melissa was faster. "No, definitely not at that point. Everybody was quiet after Gwen started her session. We were kind of blown away."

"You mentioned that," Sam replied. "I can see why. You were really into that, Gwen. Pretty impressive since none of us thought we were going to find anything."

"Thanks," Gwen said. "Do you think it's really Adrian?"

"I don't know," he said back. "His sister might be able to recognize it. I think we should schedule another investigation at that house immediately. We'll focus exclusively on the garage and I'll bring some extra equipment now that we may be dealing with something legit. If this is the real deal, it's one of the clearest EVPs I've heard in a long time. We'll need more time in the

house before I can really be sure. Don't mean to rain on anyone's parade, I just don't like to get excited prematurely."

"I totally understand," Gwen said.

"I'm going to work with this volume on this clip to make a version we can play without blasting it," he continued. "Plan for another investigation in the next couple of days. Oh, and try to come up with some more questions for him. If he's there, we've got to get him to talk again."

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When Gwen and Melissa arrived at the Giordano house the next evening, it was clear that Sam wasn't kidding about bringing more equipment. He was in the process of setting up full surveillance of the garage with several small digital cameras to get every possible angle. All of the video feeds could be seen on one of Sam's laptops with a particularly large screen. The resulting checkerboard of images reminded her of hundreds of movies she had watched with surveillance footage.

Once his computer was ready to go, Sam played Andrea the "Justice" EVP and asked her if the voice could be that of her brother. She didn't directly answer, but her reaction told the group all they needed to know. She trembled and covered her mouth with her hand when that ghostly voice played through the speakers. Before anyone could try to comfort her, she abruptly said she needed to leave the room. Sam looked dismayed that he had upset her so much, but Andrea had asked for their help and Gwen figured that this situation was inevitable if they really did find something.

Everyone in the group was silent for a few seconds until Larry took advantage of the opening to lead his Prayer of Protection. Awkwardly looking around the room at the others had become Gwen's ritual for these few moments and this time she caught Sam rolling his eyes. Once the group was ready to get to work, Sam assigned Larry and Hannah to monitor the camera feeds in case something happened in the garage that nobody else saw. The rest of the group would gather in the garage and take turns trying to get Adrian to speak. This time, however, the recordings would be listened to immediately rather than after the night's work was done.

Blake was among the group members headed for the garage until he turned back and looked at Andrea, who was sitting on the living room couch with a freshly used pile of tissues on the cushion next to her.

"I'll wait out here too," he said. "You've got enough people going in there."

Gwen didn't hear any objections as she and the others opened the door to the garage and slowly walked in. This time, she felt even more uneasy. There was significant evidence that someone was in fact in here, silently watching them from somewhere in the room, maybe even right in front of her face. Her eyes darted around nervously. Would he appear out of thin air and lunge at her with dark eyes and his mouth wide open like in so many movies she had seen? Probably not, but the possibility kept lurking in her head.

Sam walked the perimeter of the garage and checked each of the cameras, which he said were only recording video, not audio. With that in mind, Gwen sought permission to ask a question.

"Sure," he said. "What's that?"

"Why do we do the Prayer of Protection if you don't like it?"

"Oh boy," Sam said sheepishly while Sid, Melissa and Dale walked the room waving the K-II meters. "If it's that obvious, I'm going to have to start being more careful."

“You might as well explain the whole thing,” Melissa said. “If she’s going to be a member, she should get an idea of some of the dynamics in this group.”

“Larry used to lead his own group back when he lived in Maine,” Sam explained. “He had to change jobs so his family moved to this area. He came across our group’s website and when I spoke to him about his experience, I definitely wanted him to join. But it’s obvious he would rather be a leader than just a member. He used to constantly undermine the scientific approach I try to take with the Granite Ghosthunters...until I let him start doing that.”

“Science or no, we still don’t know a whole lot about ghosts,” Dale interrupted. “I don’t think it hurts to take a little precaution.”

“Your opinion is noted,” Sam said with a hint of aggravation. “Look, I don’t have anything against religious people. If you think about it, choosing to believe in ghosts isn’t all that different from choosing to follow a religion. Most people haven’t seen any proof so they just take a leap of faith because it makes the world look a little better to them. The thing is, I have found proof but I need more before I could really convince most people. Religion is about ideas that can bring inspiration or comfort or community and all sorts of good stuff and that’s fine. But science deals with what can be proven, not what sounds the best. I guess what I’m getting at is that I feel like looking at this stuff through a religious prism compromises our credibility.”

Melissa had a few thoughts on the matter too. “Not only that, the general public is already skeptical of ghosts. Once you bring demons into the mix, only crackpots will take you seriously. I can’t help but feel a little ridiculous listening to someone ask God to protect us from evil creatures...it’s just too cartoonish. But I know we have to throw Larry a bone in order to keep the peace. It could get pretty tense before we started that.”

Sid, who seemed to choose his words carefully, was quiet for the whole conversation. Dale was getting irritated. “Let’s get this started before we put the ghost to sleep!”

Sam was the first to lead an EVP session. After a handful of questions, he connected his recorder to his second laptop, sitting on top of a small cupboard that the family had left in the garage at some point. When he opened his sound editing program and looked at the line representing the previous few minutes, he immediately looked disappointed but still played it back for everyone to hear.

“This is Sam Lewis of the Granite Ghosthunters and I’m here at the Giordano house with Sid, Melissa, Dale and Gwen on the night of January 12. Adrian, are you here?”

There was no answer.

“We heard something on Gwen’s recorder last time we were here. Was that you?”

Still nothing.

“Can you say your name so we know it was you?”

Silence.

“Do you know what year it is?”

Nothing, although that one seemed like a long shot.

“You told Gwen you wanted justice? What does that mean?”

No answer.

“That was a bust,” Sam said after the recording ended. “Who else wants to take a shot?”

Sid volunteered next, followed by Dale and then Melissa. Gwen wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to try again. The idea was nerve-racking for a couple of reasons. Now that she knew she could actually be talking to a ghost, she felt extremely self-conscious. Not only that, but she would be under intense pressure to get him to talk again and who really knew if she could pull that off for a second time? Maybe it was just a freak incident that couldn’t be repeated.

Yet as she saw the disappointed faces of the others, particularly Dale, she knew she had to at least make an attempt. Otherwise, they would always wonder what might have happened. A few minutes later, the group listened to her recording.

“Hello, Adrian. It’s me, Gwen. We think you spoke to me the other day. Did you?”

No response. She felt a bizarre combination of relief and disappointment.

“Maybe you’re wondering why we keep coming here. Well, it’s because we want to help you, but we can’t unless we know for sure that you’re here...and that you’re the one who spoke to me last time. So I need you to say your name so we can be absolutely sure. Can you do that? What is your name?”

A short pause and then, “Adrian.”

“Holy shit!” Dale shouted loudly while the other three sat wide-eyed and mouths agape. “Did you hear that?! He said his name! That’s unbelievable!”

The rest of the recording couldn’t be heard over Dale’s shouting, but it might have been just as well for now. The group clearly needed time to get over the shock.

“Sid,” Sam said, his voice quavering. “We haven’t seen anything like this since...”

The old man rested a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “I know. Since back then.” He turned to Gwen. “I don’t know how you do it, young lady, but you’re responsible for a historic moment in our group’s work. Maybe even for paranormal research in general.”

“You got that right!” Dale bellowed again, having completely lost his inside voice. “We show this to any TV studio and we’re set for life!”

“One thing at a time,” Melissa said. “Let’s finish the rest of the recording and see if there was anything else.”

There was not. Gwen had a few more questions for Adrian, but he had chosen not to answer. Or perhaps he did answer and they just couldn’t hear it for whatever reason. There was no way to be sure.

“Gwen, there’s one more thing you could try,” Melissa said. “If you’re up to it, that is. You look pretty overwhelmed.”

“We all are,” Sid added. “So don’t feel embarrassed. This is not typical at all.”

“I can try,” Gwen said, trying to sound confident. “What do you want me to do?”

After Melissa gave the instructions, she positioned herself with a small video camera right behind Gwen’s shoulder. She was instructed to turn her recorder on again.

“Adrian,” she began. “Thanks for giving us your name. Now we know it’s really you. Since I know you’re listening...would you be willing to let us know that you’re here in some other way? Can you make a noise? Tap something in the room?”

At first, nothing seemed to be happening. The group members glanced at each other awkwardly; unsure of how much time they should give Adrian to act on the request. Just as Gwen was about to speak up, a thumping noise made everyone flinch. It sounded just like a fist pounding lightly on a wooden surface.

“Everybody heard that, right?” Sam asked.

Dale pointed to a wooden workbench against a nearby wall. “It came from there! That’s what he tapped!”

Melissa walked over and began examining the workbench. “I wonder if there’s any significance to him touching this. Probably not. We just asked him to tap something and this must have been the first thing that caught his eye.”

Gwen was in awe of Melissa’s bravery as she sat quietly in the folding chair they had brought into the garage. The evening was feeling increasingly surreal, to the point where Gwen

expected to suddenly wake up in bed. When Sam asked to check the recording, she handed it over without even moving her eyes. The rest of them were too worked up to notice, but she was becoming truly frightened.

“Can you make a noise?” her own voice asked from the laptop’s speaker, jolting her out of her trance. “Tap something in the room?”

The tense wait before the tapping played out once again, but this time there was something else. Even after the evening’s shocking events, nobody expected this.

“Need...help.”

“Was that him again?!” Dale yelled out. At this point, he looked like a toddler who had eaten too much sugar.

“I can’t believe this,” Sam said, fighting tears of joy. “He’s totally on board with what we’re trying to do. He wants our attention for some reason and if things keep going this well, we might actually be able to figure out why.”

Sid glanced at Gwen for a moment. “I think that’s enough for tonight.”

“What?!” Dale shouted. “We can’t stop now, man! He’s in the mood to talk! We gotta get all the EVPs we can!”

“We’ll have another chance,” Sid replied gently. “We need to give Gwen some time to digest what’s just happened here. I think we all could use that, frankly.”

Dale looked at Gwen’s pale expression and understood. “I’m sorry, Gwen. I just got so excited, you know? But you don’t need to be afraid! I don’t think he’s gonna hurt you. He seems to like you an awful lot!”

Melissa took Gwen by the arm and helped her stand up out of the chair. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah,” she said weakly. “Sorry, everyone. I’m still new at this and I don’t know what to think or how to feel.”

“No apologies,” Sam said. “We can’t ask you to do any more than you’re comfortable with. And if you don’t want to do this again, we’ll understand.”

“I’ll try it again,” Gwen said. “Next time, I’ll be more prepared for it. I want to find out more too.”

“Right on!” Dale said. “You hear that, Adrian? We’ll be back! Don’t go and disappear on us or nothin’!”

“It’s too bad EVPs don’t tell us if a ghost is rolling his eyes,” Melissa said quietly to Gwen, who chuckled. As they walked out of the garage, she turned her head briefly over her shoulder. The room still looked the same, but she knew he was still there, waiting for another chance to reach out. Frightened as she was, Gwen made a silent promise to find out why he had gone to such great lengths to make himself heard.

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“What on Earth happened in there?” Larry asked when they finally come out.

“He’s here,” Sam said. “We’ve got two outstanding new EVPs and a video where he actually follows Gwen’s instructions. This is a full-on intelligent haunting, Larry.”

“What’s that?” Andrea asked from the couch. Gwen looked over and saw her and Blake sitting there with a couple of empty beer bottles resting on the coffee table. She looked much less distraught than before they went into the garage. The others might have been a little surprised that Blake opted to hang out with her instead of join the investigation, but Gwen wasn’t. For all

his broadsides against the petty annoyances of daily life, she had seen on numerous occasions that he was capable of intense empathy. It could almost make him a nuisance when Gwen was upset. Sometimes she just wanted to be alone with her feelings, but he never wanted to leave until she felt better. He considered that empathy a weakness, and not just because it had made it pretty tough to get through some of the more extreme horror films she had shown him.

As Larry slipped on a pair of headphones to listen to the EVPs, Sam stood up and began to answer Andrea's question. If he had a chalkboard behind him, it would have been perfect.

"Most paranormal researchers classify hauntings into two categories, residual and intelligent," he began. "A residual haunting is a pattern of supernatural activity that repeats constantly like it's in an endless loop. Maybe you keep hearing steps in the same part of the house or if you do EVPs, you always get the same message. It's barely a ghost in the traditional sense, just this strange spectral energy doing the same thing over and over again. It can be weird to think about, but don't bother, because that's not what we're dealing with here."

"After tonight, it is extremely clear that we are dealing with an intelligent haunting. That means you have a ghost who is aware of his surroundings and can interact with other people and the environment. After tonight, we are positive he is in there and he knows what's going on. He gave us his name when Gwen asked him to. He tapped on the workbench when Gwen asked him to. For some reason, he's chosen only to communicate with her, but we can work with that. "

"He's really here," Andrea said quietly. "I mean, I thought he was, but...it just seemed so outlandish that I suppose I was waiting to be proven wrong."

"He's here," Sam replied with a warm smile. "We're going to find out what he needs to find closure, Andrea. You have my word."

Larry pulled off the headphones. "These EVPs are amazing! I've never heard any that were this clear! Hannah, you've got to listen!"

"What do we do now?" Andrea asked as Hannah took her turn with the headphones.

"There are a couple more things we can try," Sam said. "I didn't bring the equipment tonight and it will take me a day or two to get it in order."

Hannah yanked off the headphones and rushed over to Gwen. "These are unreal! I can't believe you got him to say his name!"

She tried her best to put on a genuine smile, but Larry saw through it. "Let her be for now, Hannah. She got pretty spooked by the whole thing."

"Oh, I totally know how you feel," Hannah said. "There's nothing like it."

With that, she started to pack up her stuff and Gwen wandered over to the couch. Andrea smiled ruefully at her.

"So, you're his favorite?"

"I'm not sure what's going on," Gwen answered truthfully.

"If you used a recorder, you might be able to get him to talk too," Blake said.

"I think I'd be too scared," Andrea replied.

Gwen hesitated for a few seconds before asking Andrea the question that was on her mind. "If I wanted to find out more about Adrian, where should I start?"

"We were talking about that," Blake said before Andrea could answer. "He was pretty good friends with Stephen Andrews, the English teacher at LHS. You remember him?"

"Yeah, of course."

"There's also his YouTube channel," Andrea added. "Nobody even knew he had it until after he died. I have to admit I went through his computer looking for clues about what was

going on with him. All I really found were those videos. He goes by the name Involuntary Loner.”

“I’m surprised nobody else from school had taken that name already,” Blake said, his voice full of loathing. When it came to LHS, his empathy vanished quickly.

“Gwen!” Melissa called from the other side of the living room. “You ready to go?”

As the two of them took yet another drive through the darkness, Gwen rested her head against the window and stared at the moon for most of the way home. Melissa knew better than to try and make conversation this time. A brief rub on the shoulder was all she needed to say. When they got back to her house, the two of them hugged goodbye and Gwen stood out on the porch for several minutes before finally going inside.

After almost an hour of lying on the bed trying to fall asleep, she recognized the effort as futile and grabbed her phone from the nearby end table. She winced at the bright light when it first awoke before opening up YouTube and turning the phone sideways so the video would look bigger. It was time to hear what the Involuntary Loner had to say.

# Interlude: Guilty of Something

YouTube listed Adrian's videos with the most recent one first, but Gwen wanted to go through them in the opposite order. Starting with him only days away from his death just felt like too much. There were only four videos listed, with the first one recorded around the beginning of the school year in September. Right before the video started, she realized that she had never actually seen him before, aside from a few photos around the Giordano house.

When the video began and she saw his head and shoulders sitting about a foot away from the camera, her heart ached as she remembered that she was watching someone who was dead. He looked so animated and engaged with what he was saying that the thought of him haunting the garage of the family home was almost incomprehensible. He had the same dark black hair as his older sister and he kept it fairly short; only a couple little strands fell in front of his forehead. He was tall and gangly in that typical teenage boy way, but Gwen noticed that he didn't have any of the obvious traits that made someone a target for bullying. He wasn't fat, didn't wear glasses, didn't seem to have a speech impediment, didn't have noticeable acne, and didn't wear clothing that looked unusual for any reason. Despite not violating any of the ironclad rules of the "teenage dystopia," as Blake was known to call it, he had still been targeted by his peers for a reason that wasn't apparent at first glance.

Gwen was so lost in thought that she missed the first thirty seconds of his video. She moved the cursor back to the beginning and did her best to hear every word.

*What's up? This is my channel. Mom says I need an outlet so I guess this works. I'm not going to tell anyone about it, so if you're watching this, I guess you just stumbled on it by accident. I've definitely found some totally random stuff after looking around YouTube for a while, so I guess stranger things have happened.*

*The big news right now is the school shooting that happened yesterday. It had a way higher body count than the one last week, so people are really going crazy about it. Every time this happens, people start giving me even more dirty looks than usual. They think I'm going to come in and waste everyone someday because I'm quiet and not very popular. It's obvious that I don't have any say in how popular I am, but I'm punished for it anyhow. Just another day at LHS. Even teachers sometimes follow me around for a little too long. Maybe they're afraid I'm gonna grab an AK out of my locker if they don't keep an eye on me. I've never threatened anyone, but that doesn't matter. Ever since middle school, I've been walking around guilty of something. Of what? Being me, I guess. They just fill in the blanks as needed. Today I was guilty of potential serial killer status.*

*What I don't get about the school shooters is that they're all so indiscriminate. You know what I mean? They just walk into the hallway and start spraying bullets all over the place. I don't get that. Are they really so far gone that they want everyone dead? If I was going to do it, I think I'd have like, targeted strikes or something. I'd have a pretty short list of people to take out. I mean, lots of people ignore me but I don't think that's worth killing them over. Oh, and by the way for you NSA folks, since I know you're the only ones watching this, I'm not going to kill anyone. This is just hypothetical for the sake of discussion. So please don't throw me in Guantanamo Bay, alright?*

*Everybody always brings up the same stuff, too. You've got people saying we need more gun control and that does make some sense, since guns rack up a higher body count than knives or whatever. But you'll never ban guns in America, we'd have a second Civil War first. Then some people blame it on video games or heavy metal, which is so stupid it sounds like something out of the dark ages. Sometimes you hear that it's because the media hypes up the shootings so much that they know they'll get some fame. I think that used to be true, but I'm not sure anymore. The market's just so saturated with shootings right now that you really have to make yours stand out if you want to get recognized. You've got to get the journalist's attention right off the bat and show them that your shooting is unique!*

*You know which one's my favorite? When people say it's an issue of "mental health." What the hell does that even mean? Does it mean that there aren't enough people locked up in mental institutions? Does it mean that too many therapists are slacking off? I don't think people really think about that before they say it. You know what I find is pretty bad for my "mental health?" Getting treated like dogshit every day for six years. So maybe the problem isn't too many guns or too many video games or too much media coverage or not enough depressed people behind bars. Maybe the problem is that life just sucks too much, especially in school.*

*I keep hearing people ask why these school shootings are so common. Frankly, I find myself surprised they don't happen more often.*

That was where it ended. No goodbye or any attempt to lighten the mood. Gwen had originally thought to watch all four videos in one sitting but now she decided that one was enough. It wasn't what she expected but then she wondered what exactly she had expected. Perhaps something more melancholy, but this was more angry and bitter than sad. He was a senior in high school when he died, but he sounded more like a grumpy old man. What did it take to make someone so disgusted with life so young? She suddenly felt a very strange guilt about having a comparatively simple time in high school. Then again, she remained unsure about that too.

The more she learned about Adrian Giordano, the more she felt she had to learn. If he wasn't able to find happiness in life, the least he deserved was to be peaceful in death. Relying just on EVPs, which impressed everyone so much but still yielded only a few stray words, wouldn't be enough. Gwen would have to go deeper. As she finally drifted off to sleep, she decided to drive to LHS tomorrow and chat with Adrian's favorite teacher.

# Chapter 5

As Blake drove down the road leading to Lakeside High School, Gwen was hit with intense déjà vu. She had been down this road several hundred times, first in a school bus and later in her own car. Aside from some new asphalt on the tennis courts, the series of fields and bleachers that dotted the road looked exactly the same. Gwen had timed their visit to coincide with the end of the school day and a line of yellow buses passed them on the opposite side as they approached the building itself.

“Did you watch any of Adrian’s videos?” she asked Blake.

“I went through all of them,” he replied. “To be perfectly honest, I regret it. I didn’t realize how much they would upset me. I had awful dreams last night.”

“I had to stop after the first one,” Gwen admitted.

“I probably should have done that too.”

The last bus left the school as the car pulled into the nearby parking lot. Gwen hoped that Mr. Andrews would still be in his classroom. Did she have to call him “mister” now that she had graduated? She decided she would just to be safe. As she stepped out of the car, she waited for Blake to step out as well. Instead, he remained sitting in the driver’s seat.

“You coming?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not going in there.”

Gwen was suddenly confused. “What? You said you were going to.”

“I am *not* going in there.” His face had been drained of some color.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Gwen said, trying to lighten the mood.

“I think I’m seeing a lot of them right now,” he said grimly.

Gwen turned around and was about to start walking towards the school, but she decided she didn’t want to leave him like this. He was trying to stay composed, but it was obvious being so close to the school was having a powerful effect on him. On another day, she might have considered this reaction over the top. It was a high school in New Hampshire, not a former concentration camp. That wasn’t how she felt today. After watching Adrian’s video the previous night, she had realized that Lakeside High School could be a very cruel place, even if she hadn’t been exposed to much cruelty herself.

She sat back in the passenger seat. “What else is bothering you? I know it’s something, so you might as well tell me.”

Blake paused for a while, thinking it over. “I guess I’m just feeling embarrassed about when Jason Hobart pulled us over the other night. I just sat there and let him do his usual alpha male bullshit. It was like I was right back in the halls of that school and I was just trying not to draw attention to myself so that people would leave me alone. I never stood up for myself in those days and then I get the chance to and I turn chicken.”

“Don’t worry,” Gwen said with a smile. “Melissa took care of that for you.”

Blake chuckled. “She’s not afraid of anyone. I wish I could be like that. I’ll tell you one thing, though. That was the last time I’m going to take that kind of horseshit without a fight.”

“I’ll tell Andrews to have the school declared a horseshit-free zone.”

This time he laughed. “I’m not sure it could still function.”

They both laughed again as she left the car. Blake pulled a tablet out of his jacket pocket and began swiping his finger across the screen. She walked down the concrete path to the school’s front door, zipping up her jacket all the way to her neck as chilly winds buffeted her

hair around. A sheet of paper was taped to the door instructing her to push the button on a buzzer and then identify herself and the purpose of her visit. She didn't remember this from her own student days and that was only four years earlier. Like Adrian had said on the video, there had been an awful lot of school shootings in a short amount of time. The pressure on the administrators to ensure the safety of the students must have been overwhelming.

Once the front desk staff buzzed her in, she had to go into the main office and sign in. Then she had to fill out a nametag and wear it. All that was missing was a metal detector and the way things were going, that might not have been far off. Walking the halls and seeing all the narrow green lockers brought another wave of déjà vu. She smiled briefly as a few pleasant memories came back of chatting in these hallways with friends. These memories were brief but still powerful. Yet the warm reminiscing was followed by a faint sense of guilt. She couldn't yet figure this out. Was it because of Adrian? Because of Blake? She didn't think so. Ever since this whole investigation started, her own time in the halls of LHS felt increasingly like a puzzle with a few pieces missing.

She finally made her way to the room where Stephen Andrews taught English. He was seated at his desk going over a few piles of paper and didn't notice her right away. He was one of the younger teachers that she had but he looked like he had aged more than four years. Several patches of gray swirled through his unruly brown hair.

"Gwen Miles," he said, looking up. "What a nice surprise! What brings you here?"

She grinned and walked into the classroom. "I'm just here on winter break and I wanted to drop in for a while."

"Feeling nostalgic for some Herman Melville or John Steinbeck?"

"Actually, I'm wondering about some things that have happened here since I left," she replied. "I heard that you and Adrian Giordano were close."

His smile faded. "Gwen, that's...that's still very hard to talk about. Why are you suddenly interested?"

She wasn't totally sure how to answer that. Obviously she couldn't be honest. *Well Mr. Andrews, his ghost is haunting the Giordano house and he only wants to talk to me for some reason, so I need to learn something about him so that a team of paranormal investigators can figure out why he's hanging out in his garage all the time.* That would certainly get an interesting reaction. She would have to go with something a little simpler.

"I've gotten to be friends with Andrea Giordano recently. It's been hard to see her struggle with this and I just wanted to understand it more. She was the one who recommended I talk to you, actually."

Mr. Andrews sighed. "Sit down, Gwen."

She sat down at one of the desks and briefly smiled. It was just like old times.

"Adrian was tough," he began. "I thought the world of him but he frustrated me like no other student I've ever had. He had the intellect of someone twice his age but not the maturity. I couldn't get through to him and I tried so hard."

"But I think you did get through to him," Gwen said. "At least, that was how Andrea made it sound. She said you were his favorite teacher."

He smiled at that, but it was a painful smile. "It wasn't enough, though. I couldn't help him in the end."

"What happened to him?" she asked. "Was it really just because he was picked on? Or was there something else going on?"

“I think he was clinically depressed,” Mr. Andrews said. “It tends to manifest during the teenage years...but don’t assume that the bullying wouldn’t be enough on its own. I heard stories about how people treated him, although I never saw it myself. Teachers don’t usually catch that sort of thing as it’s happening. Plus, I’m in charge of our anti-bullying programs so kids go out of their way to make sure I don’t see them.”

“That sounds new.”

“We started it the year after you left, I think. It was way overdue.”

Gwen had read about programs like that before and always thought of them as too good to be true. “Do those programs really work? Isn’t there always going to be bullying? It’s part of human nature.”

“There’s always going to be crime,” he said back, clearly having heard this claim enough times to have a ready response. “Should the police just pack it in? Take it from me, Gwen. I grew up in the 90s, when nobody gave a shit about bullying. Now enough kids have either killed themselves or their classmates that we can’t get away with ignoring it anymore. It’s better to have something than not to.”

But if Adrian had gone to school with these programs in place, why hadn’t they made a difference? She was worried that might be too hurtful of a question and didn’t ask it out loud. It would be better to go with something a little less specific.

“Have you seen a big difference in the years since you started the programs?”

“Not a big one,” he admitted. “I think the kids in high school now are set in their ways. If it makes a difference, it will be with the kids who are in elementary school now. They’re going to grow up with these programs and hopefully that will translate to more empathy by the time they get here. But even if it didn’t make any difference, the effort is what’s important.”

Gwen didn’t expect this to be the conversation they had when she decided to visit, but his passion on this subject was impressive.

“You have to make a visible effort to do something,” he continued. “You know why? Because otherwise it looks like the school itself endorses the bullying. That hurts much more than any individual insult. I speak from experience. That’s part of why I wanted to be a teacher at all. We’re supposed to protect kids for the time that they’re in here every day. If we don’t look out for them, why should they care about this place? Why should they care about society at all?”

There was silence after that and Gwen could tell Mr. Andrews was wondering if he had said too much.

“Adrian slipped through the cracks,” he finally said. “I tried to reach out to him, but he still slipped through. I don’t want to see that happen again.”

“What was he like as a student?”

“Great student,” Mr. Andrews said, smiling. “He was really taking an interest in current events. He talked to me about all sorts of things going on in the world. I just wish we had more good news to talk about. Sometimes I wonder if that hurt him a little bit too. He was already worried that his life wouldn’t improve once high school was over. He thought if he was a ‘loser’ now, the world would make sure he was a ‘loser’ forever. It almost sounded like those tinfoil-hat conspiracy theories, except instead of a fake moon landing or alien lizards infiltrating the government, it was a vast conspiracy to keep him miserable.”

“Is that what you meant before when you said he was immature?”

“He didn’t believe that what he was experiencing here was temporary. My life got a lot better in college and I think that happens to a lot of people. He wouldn’t accept that. I think he was so angry that he didn’t want to. Not until justice was done.”

Gwen felt a chill.

“Justice?” she asked hesitantly.

“The idea of justice meant a lot to him,” Mr. Andrews replied. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t happen much in these situations. There’s never much closure. People go their separate ways after graduation and that’s the end of it.”

“Yeah,” Gwen said quietly, although she wondered if that was really the case.

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Back at the parking lot, Blake hadn’t moved from the front seat. When he caught a glimpse of her, he tucked his tablet back into his jacket pocket and turned on the car.

“You ready to go?”

“Blake, what was I like in high school?”

He gave her a strange look. “You don’t remember?”

“I do, but...I wanted to hear it from someone else’s point of view.”

Blake thought that over for a few moments. “You’re asking the wrong guy. We hardly ever talked back then.”

“But what was your impression of me? What did you hear from other people?”

“It seemed like you had your clique and you didn’t really talk to people outside of it,” he answered. “One of the times we did talk was when I found out you had also gotten into WMU. I was back for my first winter break and I bumped into you at the deli. You told me you were going to major in film production, which surprised me because I had never heard you talk about movies. Did you talk about it with your friends?”

“No,” she said blankly, distracted by memories. “I didn’t. I knew none of them cared. But I was definitely into it back then. The mailman could barely keep up with all the Netflix DVDs I was going through.”

“DVDs? You didn’t have the streaming?”

“I had both,” Gwen said with a smile. “A real movie buff has to have both. There’s too much stuff that doesn’t stream. And sometimes you’re looking for a movie and Netflix doesn’t have it at all, so you have to try some other streaming services. If that doesn’t work, sometimes you can find it on YouTube, although the quality usually isn’t very good and you gotta watch it quick or else the copyright goons take it down. If none of that works, the last resort is pirating.”

Blake chuckled. “This is the real you talking right now. But I wonder how many people saw the real you back then.”

Gwen was startled by his insight. “Nobody did. That’s why I never got picked on like you and Adrian...I never gave anyone the chance.”

“I know someone else who might be able to help you out,” Blake said. “But you might not like what she has to say.”

“That’s okay. Who is it?”

“Anne Flaherty,” he said. “She’s a waitress at the Center Street Diner. Pretty close to your house, actually. I go there pretty often for lunch.”

“That name sounds familiar.”

“It should,” Blake replied. “She was in your class and you and your friends gave her a really hard time.”

“What?”

“Her family never had a lot of money. She would come into school with these clothes that were old and frayed. You and the other girls you hung out with would always laugh at her and call her ‘Raggedy Anne.’”

Gwen was aghast. “What?”

“You know, after that doll—”

“I know the reference, Blake! I just can’t believe that I did that!”

“I wouldn’t make something like that up,” he said.

“But why don’t I remember it?”

“Why would you?” Blake asked, as if he were saying something painfully obvious. “It wasn’t any major experience for you. You guys just made fun of her for a bit and then went about your business. It was just another day. I bet she remembers, though.”

“I have to apologize,” she said quickly.

“She’s at the diner,” he replied. “You can go anytime you want. Get the pastrami sandwich, it’s really good.”

It was starting to come back now. She still couldn’t remember any specific moment where she mocked another student, but images of Anne Flaherty and her raggedy clothes were flooding into her head. The girl already had enough problems to deal with and for some asinine reason her clothes had been offensive enough to warrant ridicule. After all the stories she had heard about what people went through at LHS, this nearly nauseated her with guilt. She had to face Anne. Not only to apologize, but to learn more about how people coped (or didn’t) with that sort of treatment. Perhaps that could help her find out if there was any way to grant Adrian his “justice.”

# Chapter 6

There was no getting out of it this time. Gwen had just gotten a call from her mother that Spencer was in the nurse's office complaining of a stomach ache. He needed to get picked up as soon as possible and with such short notice, it seemed unlikely that anyone was going to drive with her. So for the first time during her winter break, she drove her own car. The weather had been cold for the last few days, but there hadn't been any more rain or snow, so the trip to Lakeside Middle School proved to be extremely safe.

The rest of the day would be busy. After dropping Spencer off back at home, Gwen planned to have lunch at the Center Street Diner and look for Anne Flaherty. That morning, Melissa had called and invited her to dinner at her favorite restaurant, a place about a half hour outside Lakeside. She had asked permission to invite Blake as well, and although it seemed clear that wasn't Melissa's original plan, she acquiesced without an argument. "Girl talk" was all well and good, but Gwen felt like he could also use the cheering up.

When she pulled up to the middle school, Spencer was already sitting on the curb waiting for her. After tossing his backpack into the back seat, he sank into the passenger seat with his shoulders hunched up and his knees resting against the glove compartment.

"How's your stomach?" Gwen asked, knowing full well what was really going on.

"It hurts."

"Are you really sick or are you just sick of school?"

He didn't say anything.

"I'm not going to tattle or anything," she said. "I used to do that sometimes. You just need a break like anyone else."

"Okay, you're right." Spencer admitted. "I just needed to get away from the usual bullshit. Don't tell Mom and Dad."

"I already said I'm not going to," Gwen replied. "What's happening there that's got you in such a bad mood? Are people giving you a hard time?"

The response was familiar. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You really should talk to somebody, Spencer."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But not now. I just want to relax."

Gwen thought that was fair enough, so she let it go and dropped him off back at the house. He didn't look like a boy with a stomachache as he rushed through the front door, delighted by the additional hours of free time he would have today. After parking the car, she put on her gloves and hat and started walking towards Center Street. Even though it was about a ten minute walk from her house, she hadn't been to that diner in years. She was charmed to see that it looked exactly the same.

As she looked around the place, she quickly caught sight of Anne Flaherty. She was a little taller and not as scrawny as back in high school, but her face was unmistakable as she poured a cup of coffee for an older man sitting at the bar area. Her scraggly dirty blonde hair, which used to hang all the way down to her hips like a curtain, was shorter and tied back in a ponytail. In the midst of what looked like friendly banter with the customer, there was more lightness to her demeanor than Gwen remembered from high school.

She walked over to the other end of the bar and pulled off her hat and gloves. It wasn't long until Anne walked over.

“Hi, what can I...” her voice trailed off.

Gwen smiled nervously.

“You’re Gwen Miles,” she said. “From LHS.”

“That’s me. Hi, Anne.”

“Uh...hi. Would you like something to drink?”

“I’ll have some hot chocolate.”

“Sure,” Anne said, walking off. Gwen had only a few minutes to scrounge up enough courage to go beyond simple pleasantries and say what she had come there to say.

“Here’s the hot chocolate,” came Anne’s voice sooner than Gwen expected. “So how’s it going? How’s WMU? That’s where you went, right?”

“Yeah,” Gwen said. “WMU is great. I’ve had a great time there. But Anne, I stopped in here for a reason. I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“You know for what,” Gwen said. She looked right at Anne, whose eyes darted away. “I’m sorry for all the stupid mean stuff I said to you back in high school.”

There was a long pause as the other customers chattered away in the background.

“Well,” Anne finally said. “I always wondered if one of you would ever apologize, but I figured that would never happen. Why now?”

“I was talking to Blake Ward,” Gwen answered. “He was telling me about how he’s here a lot and that you worked here. I thought about what happened back then and I just felt terrible. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Sure I can,” Anne said with a shrug. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. You definitely weren’t the worst of them.”

Gwen realized she was right. She hadn’t been the one who instigated those incidents.

“You were one of Valerie’s lackeys,” Anne continued. “She’s the one who really owes me an apology, but I don’t think I’ll ever see her in here.”

“No way,” Gwen agreed.

“Where is she now, anyway?”

“Still at Yale. I haven’t seen her since graduation. She sometimes invites me down to Connecticut, but I...I just didn’t want to go.”

“You finally realized how much of a bitch she was, eh?” Anne asked bluntly.

“I guess so,” Gwen said with a laugh. “I think I always knew. It was just easier to be with her than against her. I took the easy way out a lot back then.”

There was another pause. It was obvious that Anne agreed with what she had just said but was too polite to say so. She had been much nicer in general than Gwen expected. She had come into the restaurant with a nagging fear that Anne was going to verbally tear her to shreds.

“What was it like for you after graduation?” Gwen asked. “Did your life get better?”

“You bet it did,” Anne said with a chuckle. “There was nowhere to go but up. I’ve been taking classes at community college for business. My boss says once I have the degree he’ll promote me to manager. It’s still not a whole lot of money but with a dual income, we manage.”

When she mentioned the dual income, Gwen noticed the engagement and wedding rings on her left hand. “Oh my God, congratulations!”

“Thank you,” she said with a big smile. “We’ve been married about a year and a half now. We live over on Wiebe Drive.”

“I’m really glad things are going so well,” Gwen said.

“What about you?” Anne asked. “You have a boyfriend?”

Gwen shook her head.

“No? Not Blake?”

“Not Blake,” Gwen said. This topic made her uncomfortable but she did an admirable job of not showing it. “It’s not like that with us. I’ve just never had any time for that sort of thing. When I’m on campus, I’m working on my film projects constantly and when I do get a break, I just want to relax. No energy left for dating.”

“I gotcha,” Anne replied. “So I suppose we should get you some lunch, right?”

She took Blake’s advice and ordered the pastrami sandwich, which was indeed delicious. Gwen was in such a good mood that almost anything would have been great. She felt like a weight had been lifted and while she didn’t get as much insight about Adrian as she hoped for, Anne’s magnanimous attitude was inspiring. Someday she would put a scene like this in a movie

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Gwen relayed as much as she could remember of the conversation to Blake and Melissa later that evening on the way to the restaurant. She found something satisfying about praising Anne behind her back, since it was the kind of behavior that was never popular in high school. She left out the part about Anne’s assumption that she and Blake were a couple. That seemed awkward for all sorts of reasons.

“That’s great that you actually found her and apologized,” Melissa said. “I didn’t think that kind of thing ever happened in real life. I certainly don’t expect to hear from anyone who gave me shit back then.”

“You got picked on?” Blake asked from the back seat. “At the magnet school?”

“They don’t put that part in the commercials,” Melissa replied. “Magnet schools aren’t exempt from that stuff, believe me. I knew a few guys who were certain that I only got accepted because of affirmative action and would tell me that at least once a day.”

“What a load of bullshit,” Blake said angrily.

“Certainly was,” Melissa continued without missing a beat. “There was another joke I always heard too. Gwen, you’re a movie buff, maybe you can help me out. What’s the movie with the Vietnamese prostitute who says ‘me love you long time?’”

“Full Metal Jacket.”

“You wouldn’t believe how many guys thought saying that to me was just the most hilarious thing of all time. If I ever meet the guy who made that movie, I’m gonna kick his ass.”

“Stanley Kubrick?” Gwen asked. “He’s been dead for a long time now.”

“Oh.”

Not long after that exchange, they pulled in to the parking lot of the restaurant. It was too dark to see the building’s general appearance, but the bright “Bubba’s” sign could probably be seen from the top of Mount Washington. With a spring in her step, Melissa led the other two through the doors and warmly greeted the waiter standing at the podium studying a little map of the table layout.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you so excited,” Blake said. “This place is that good?”

“The food is good but I mostly come for the sodas,” she answered. “I’m kind of a soda snob and this place has all these wacky choices. Wait until you see how many there are.”

When they were led to a booth, Blake began flipping through the menu and studying the beverage section. Melissa didn’t even glance at the menu. She had clearly been here enough time

to know exactly what to get. When the waitress came along to offer a drink, Blake instructed her to wait a few minutes. He was clearly overwhelmed by the amount of choice.

“Do you guys mind if I talk shop for a little bit?” she suddenly asked.

“Go ahead,” Blake said, not taking his eyes off the menu.

“Sam got all the equipment together that he wants to use for our next investigation, so we’re planning on going back to the Giordano house tomorrow night.”

“Is he doing ITC?” Blake asked, still studying the list of soda.

“What’s ITC?” Gwen asked.

“I’ll let Sam explain it tomorrow,” Melissa said. “For now, I’ll just say it’s a very strange and experimental method of trying to communicate with ghosts. We’ve almost never used it and we’ve never managed to get anything worthwhile out of it. I think Sam’s feeling very confident about Adrian’s responsiveness if he’s going to try this.”

“Sounds like an interesting night,” Gwen said.

“That’s only the half of it,” Melissa continued. “Larry’s bringing in Elise.”

This was finally enough for Blake to put down his menu. “Oh come on. Really?”

Melissa knew Gwen would need an explanation. “She’s a psychic that worked with Larry back when he led his own group in Maine.”

“She *claims* to be psychic,” Blake added. “I haven’t ever seen her do anything useful.”

Melissa answered him, but looked at Gwen. “In my opinion, that gives her a little more credibility. At least she doesn’t make things up all the time like Hannah. I’m not sure if psychics are the real deal or not, but I know Sam doesn’t buy it. He’s already pretty pissed off.”

“Why?” Gwen asked. “It seems like there’s not much to lose by bringing her.”

“That’s true,” Melissa said. “It’s not about that, really. It’s about Larry undermining him and inviting her along without asking him first. He knew Sam would have said no.”

“What kind of soda is this?” Blake said, once again examining the menu. “I’ve never even heard of this. Sar-sap-a-ree-ya?”

“What?” Melissa asked, finally opening up her own menu. A few seconds later, she burst out laughing. “You mean the sarsaparilla?”

Gwen laughed too. “I’ve had those before. It’s kinda like a root beer. I like the Mexican pronunciation, though. Get me some fajitas and a sar-sap-a-ree-ya.”

That got Melissa laughing even harder but it came to an abrupt end when Blake slammed the menu down onto the table. “Sass-pah-ril-uh? How the hell is that how you pronounce it?! What, we’re just ignoring that first R?”

This was not the usual sardonic commentary. Gwen could tell right away that he was truly angry and upset. “It’s okay, Blake. We’re just teasing.”

“You didn’t learn much from Mr. Andrews or Anne, did you?” he replied with an acidic edge that made her flinch. “Teasing? Bullying? It’s the same fucking thing. People just get away with teasing because it’s supposedly affectionate. Humiliating someone is a strange form of affection, but I guess that’s the bullshit society we live in.”

“You need to calm down,” Melissa said sternly. He ignored her.

“I’m sorry I mispronounced a word that seems designed solely to screw little kids over on spelling bees,” he ranted. “I guess that was worth making me feel like a piece of shit.”

“We’re not trying to humiliate you,” Gwen pleaded, feeling increasingly anxious. “We’re laughing because you’re right. The spelling makes no sense!”

That seemed to finally get through to him and the angry grimace left. Melissa and Gwen exchanged shocked glances and everyone solemnly perused the menu until the waitress returned.

Gwen had never seen Blake like that. He was so defensive, even desperate. Although the rest of the dinner was civil, she couldn't forget that painful anger in his voice.

## Interlude II: Nice

Melissa and Gwen had been texting almost non-stop once they were both home. Melissa had already dubbed Blake's outburst "the sarsaparilla incident" and seemed to find it strangely funny, but Gwen wasn't laughing. During their time at WMU, Blake only mentioned his bullying experiences sporadically and with ironic humor rather than rage. Tonight she had gotten an unfiltered look at the anger and hurt left from those days and it wasn't pretty. Had it been there for the entire time they knew each other in college, just sitting under the surface waiting to blow up? Or was there something about the investigation of the Giordano house that was causing Blake to relive those times?

Eventually, Melissa decided to go to sleep and end the texting marathon. Gwen changed into her pajamas, climbed into bed and pulled the covers up as far as she could without untucking them from the mattress. It quickly became clear that going to sleep wasn't going to be easy. She grabbed her phone off the end table and returned to Adrian's YouTube channel. It seemed like the right time. Once again, the dead teenager briefly returned to life and spoke to the camera. He seemed in a better mood than last time.

*Hello again. Welcome back to The Adrian Show. Our topic tonight – the "nice guy." Now I'm not talking about guys who are just nice. This is a different thing and I've been reading a lot about it on the internet and it's all pretty interesting stuff.*

*Basically, a "nice guy" is a guy who gets to be friends with a girl but he's hoping for more. It's like a weird long-term investment. They hang around, bide their time and wait for the perfect moment to take things to the next level. This probably works sometimes but all the stories I'm reading are about when it didn't work. The guy tries to get the girl to date him officially and she says no because she thinks of him as just a friend. Then the guy gets all pissed off because he's already put in all this friendship time and he's not getting a reward. He assumes his failure to score must be because girls don't like "nice guys" and only like assholes.*

*I'm gonna be really candid here and say that I could totally see myself falling into this pattern. I won't now because I've read this, but if I hadn't? Chances are I'd be a "nice guy" too. What did people do before we had the internet to identify and criticize all potential human behavior? Although in my case, nobody at LHS, male or female, seems interested in my friendship at all so it's been a non-issue.*

*I like these articles but I feel like they don't go deep enough. They don't really attempt to understand why these guys behave like this. They're just content to say it's bad behavior. It is definitely a toxic dynamic and it makes you wonder why guys avoid the more traditional approach of walking up to a girl you like and asking her if she wants to get dinner. That's a lot easier than all the frickin' subterfuge and manipulation of the "nice guy" thing, right? So why does this happen so often?*

*Well, I can only speak for myself here, but the "traditional" way is terrifying. Guys are supposed to be the ones to take the initiative with this stuff, but what if you're shy? You're really putting your feelings out there if you ask a girl out, it's nerve-wracking stuff! So does the "nice guy" approach stem from a fear of rejection? More often than not, I would say. That fear...no... that certainly of rejection drives just about everything. But even that's not deep enough. How did that fear get so powerful? Guys ask girls out all the time, what's the big deal? Why would it work*

*for them and not for you? It's because at some point, you have been taught by your peers that you are worth less than other people. The person that you are is not acceptable, so you should not expect to be accepted by women or anyone else. So now they set out to overcome this judgment in the eyes of a special someone by being a good friend even though friendship is hardly their main concern. That's why guys do this. I'm not saying it's the right thing to do, it isn't. But guys aren't doing this just to be assholes. It happens because they feel backed into a corner. You have to get a girlfriend in order to prove your heterosexuality but at the same time, you're being told that it will be impossible for you.*

*You know, every so often some dipshit over-privileged bro takes pity on me and asks me why I'm always alone or why I don't have a girlfriend. I'm not one of those guys that makes up fake girlfriends from other towns, like "Oh her name is Cindy, you don't know her." I tell the truth. I'm nervous about it, I'm afraid they'll reject me, the usual. You know what they say? "You gotta be more confident! Chicks love confidence!" I shit you not, that is what they say. It would be funny if it weren't so oblivious. This loss of confidence didn't happen in a vacuum, you fuckin' idiots. You tell me that I'm nothing for six years and then act like I can just get my confidence back like it's as easy as turning on a light switch. Well sorry, I'm not confident and being told that this is a problem does not make me feel better. Instead, I realize that in addition to all the other reasons girls don't want anything to do with me, my lack of confidence is another.*

*Sometimes I hear something that does make me stop and think, though. They say "you'll never know unless you try." It's true. I don't know for sure that I would be rejected if I asked a girl out, but...the odds don't seem good. You ever see those movies or TV shows where the girls ask the guys to a dance? What do they call it...a "Sadie Hawkins" dance. Man, I've spent all of high school praying for that to happen. Because then I would know. It might not be good news, but...at least then I would know. But unless prom suddenly goes that way, which I don't see happening, it looks like I won't get that chance to find out.*

Gwen found it impossible not to think of Blake when the video ended. Was it possible he was operating by this "nice guy" playbook? Every now and then, she saw him look at her in a way that suggested more than friendly camaraderie. Yet he had never tried to "upgrade" their friendship. He had never touched her in a way that invited any suspicion, never slipped an arm around her during the dozens and dozens of movies they had watched together. She had sobbed while on the phone with him and even in person a handful of times after her disastrous attempts at dating during her first two years at WMU, before the increasingly demanding film projects gave her a welcome excuse to give up. He had seen her so vulnerable (and on a few occasions, extremely drunk) but had never taken advantage of those moments to try and insinuate himself into some kind of romantic relationship, even if she occasionally sensed he might want that .

Suddenly she felt guilty for questioning his motives. What he was doing was the opposite. The friendship was what he wanted to preserve, regardless of whatever his true feelings were.

# Chapter 7

The garage at the Giordano house looked like an electronics shop. Actually, it looked more like an underground bunker from some apocalypse movie. In addition to the usual equipment, Sam had brought in a TV along with an old video camera and a VCR, a device Gwen hadn't seen since she was in elementary school. While Sam ducked behind the TV and managed various cords, the rest of the group was wandering the garage with the K-II meters. Gwen had yet to see those devices actually respond to Adrian's presence, although it would be hard to tell now that there were so many appliances in the garage giving off electromagnetic fields.

Andrea was also joining the group in the garage for the first time. Gwen watched her as she tentatively stepped through the door that connected it to the living room. It had become a familiar place for the Granite Ghosthunters, but she hadn't stepped foot in here since the death of her brother. Gwen looked at her face and saw the familiar expression of someone trying to keep their emotions under control. Sometimes she wondered if the group's work had made things easier or harder for Andrea. Sure, she got confirmation that a ghost really was in the house and she wasn't losing her mind, but what then? Even if Adrian was here, she hadn't managed to talk to him or see him.

As if reading her mind, Dale walked over and asked, "How come he only talks to you?"

In the past, Gwen wouldn't have had an answer to that question. But after watching some of Adrian's videos, she suddenly had a thought. "He's glad that a girl is finally paying attention to him."

Blake turned his head towards them with a faint grin. That must have been his theory too.

"What am I, chopped liver?" Melissa asked, sounding slightly offended.

"You're not very gentle with your EVPs," Sam said from behind the TV. "Gwen does hers and I feel like I'm reclined on a couch in a therapist's office."

Gwen blushed as the door to the garage from the living room opened again. She turned to see Larry and a woman she didn't recognize. It must have been the psychic Elise. She looked about Larry's age, with long dark curly hair tumbling down both sides of her head. Gwen had expected someone who looked a little more frail or ethereal but that was just that pesky horror film influence. Classic stories about psychics always had them physically weak in contrast to their powerful minds, but Elise looked like she visited the gym regularly.

"You must be Gwen," she said. "I'm Elise. It's nice to meet you."

"You too. Are you sensing anything in here?"

"Not yet," Elise replied. "This is where everything has happened, right?"

Gwen nodded. Sam rose up from behind the TV. "That should do it. Hello, Elise. Now that everyone has arrived, I'll lay out our plans for the evening."

Most of the group was already in the garage but Sam waited a moment for Sid and Hannah, who were watching the camera footage, to join them. Hannah had been consistently assigned to what Sam jokingly called the "surveillance station" ever since the first night at the Giordano house. Now that everyone knew Adrian stayed in the garage (with the occasional trip into the living room to see Winston the dog), it was unlikely she would try and make up any incidents. Gwen found it a little odd that nobody was ever willing to call her out on this childish habit of hers, but the group seemed very concerned about keeping the peace between Larry and Sam. She figured there must have been some intense disagreements before she came along.

“Most modern paranormal research is based on one phenomenon,” Sam began. “The connection between ghosts and the static and white noise of modern technology. We’ve seen it in EVPs, but that’s not all we can do. With the TV and VCR that I’ve brought in, we’re going to attempt something known as ‘Instrumental Transcommunication,’ or ITC.”

“The hell does that mean?” Andrea asked. This was followed by knowing chuckles from the rest of the group.

“What we’re going to do is point the video camera at the TV and then hook it up so that what the camera is recording appears on the TV as it’s being recorded,” Sam continued, gesturing at the equipment. “This creates an infinite loop of a picture within a picture. Something about the frequency created by that loop has been linked to paranormal activity. It’s been theorized that this is the same frequency ghosts communicate on.”

“But what happens?” Gwen asked. “What will we get out of this?”

“The tape in the VCR will be recording the footage of the infinite loop for several minutes,” he answered. “If we find anything, we’ll see it when we play the tape for ourselves and go through it slowly, frame by frame.”

“I’ve personally never seen this work,” Melissa chimed in. “But we’ve had such good luck with getting Adrian to communicate that we thought it could be worth a shot.”

“I’ve been skeptical too,” Sam said. “We’ve only done this two or three times and we’ve never gotten anything worth a damn. Not only that, most of the pictures I’ve seen online don’t impress me. I think they rely more on the power of suggestion than anything else. But this hasn’t been a typical investigation for us and I figure if I’m ever going to try it again, now is the time. We’ve been taking a lot of pictures of the garage over the last few nights and he hasn’t shown up there, so this is one more thing we can try.”

Larry spoke up. “I’ve also brought along Elise, an old friend of mine from Maine. She’s a psychic and may be able to help us get a sense of Adrian’s feelings. The EVPs have been great but we still don’t have much of a sense of what he really wants.”

Elise looked somewhat uncomfortable. He was putting a lot of pressure on her.

“That should cover everything,” Sam said. “Let’s get the prayer done and then everyone head to your stations.”

Sid and Hannah returned to the computer keeping track of the camera footage, leaving the rest of the group in the garage. Gwen hoped that Adrian really was intangible because the room had gotten very crowded.

Melissa placed a hand on Gwen’s shoulder. “Let’s try and get a quick response from him to make sure he’s paying attention.”

“Right,” Gwen said. She sat down in the now familiar folding chair and turned on the digital recorder. “Hi, Adrian. It’s me again. We’ve got a lot more guests here as you can probably see. They’re all very eager to hear what you have to say. Can you tell us if you’re here?”

A few minutes later, the recorder was connected to the laptop.

“Can you tell us if you’re here?” A brief pause.

“I’m...here.”

“Oh my God,” Andrea gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. “You’ve shown me these before, but...to see it play out like that...it’s just unbelievable.”

“You’re batting a thousand, Gwen!” Dale said cheerfully.

Larry turned to Elise. “Are you getting anything?”

“It’s faint,” she said. “He’s here, though. No doubt about that.”

Blake rolled his eyes but kept quiet. Then he turned to Andrea. “Do you want to try and talk to him?”

She stammered nervously. “You...you think I should?”

“Totally up to you,” Larry said. “But if anyone besides Gwen can get something out of him, it’s probably you.”

“I’ll try,” she said with a gulp. Gwen handed her the recorder and stood up out of the folding chair. Andrea sat down and looked around the room at the group. Everyone was watching her and that seemed to make her more nervous.

“Give her some breathing room,” Blake finally said. They took a few steps back.

“Um...hi, Adrian,” she said. “It’s me. I called these people here after I saw you play with Winston by the living room door. They want to help you...and I do too, but...I want to know why you did this. What happened? What happened to make you give up on your life? How could you do this?!”

Sam looked nervous about how emotional she was getting. If she upset Adrian, they might get any more evidence for the evening. Gwen began to think this was a mistake.

“I don’t think I can talk anymore,” Andrea said. “I’m getting too upset.”

“Sorry,” Blake said. “I guess I should have seen that coming.”

“Oh for God’s sake, don’t apologize. You’ve all been very kind. I just...I have a lot of feelings to reconcile about this.”

“Do you want to check your recording?” Sam asked. She nodded.

The moment was just as uncomfortable the second time, particularly the pause afterward. Gwen could practically hear the discomfort through the computer.

Then the voice returned. “Andrea...help.”

“He said her name!” Dale shouted. He really had no inner monologue.

“Help?” Andrea repeated. “Help with what? What is going on?”

“We’re here to find that out,” Sam said confidently. “And we will. I promise.”

“Don’t push yourself too much,” Larry added. “We’re professionals but if it were my loved one we were talking to, I would be in pretty bad shape. You did good.”

“Thanks,” she said softly. “I’ll stick around for now, but I think...I think I’ll just watch. You guys do your thing.”

Andrea walked towards the end of the garage and sat in a ragged-looking chair that had clearly been there for some time. Sam left briefly to confer with Sid and Hannah before the next stage of the investigation would begin. The rest of the group took a break as well, except for Dale, who was circling the room with his K-II meter. He waved it impatiently around the workbench that Adrian had tapped during the group’s previous visit but found no results.

“Damn things aren’t worth a lump of sally shit,” Gwen heard him mutter.

Sam returned to the room and addressed the group again. “At this point, we know that we can get Adrian to speak to us. However, he has never been visible to any of us...not even Gwen. That’s part of the reason we’re doing the ITC. But before that, I figured we might as well just ask him. If he’s as cooperative as he has been, that might save us a lot of trouble. Care to do the honors, Gwen?”

“Uh, sure.” She sat back down in her familiar folding chair. “Adrian, it’s me again. We heard your voice and so we know that you’re here. I’ve been talking with the group and we all really would like to see you. Is there any way you can make yourself more visible to us? Is that something you can do? We’ll give you a few minutes to try, okay?”

For about three minutes, the group was totally silent. Andrea sat up straighter in her chair and leaned forward. It didn't seem like anyone really expected him to appear but nobody wanted to miss anything if he did. Several people glanced at Elise, but nothing on her face indicated she sensed anything interesting. Finally, Sam picked up the walkie-talkie attached to his belt.

"Anything on the cameras, Sid?"

"Negative, Sam."

"Well, it was worth a shot." He put the clip on the back of the walkie-talkie at the edge of his pocket and walked over to the TV with the VCR and video camera attached. "We're going to let this run for about five minutes. Feel free to talk or do whatever you want, it won't interfere. Once it's done, we'll watch the recording and see if anything interesting comes up."

Sam pressed a few buttons and all the necessary parts of the ITC process began running. The series of pictures within pictures was hypnotic for a few moments before the image faded into a haze of what looked like white clouds of muck. There was a novelty to it at first, but it soon became boring. Gwen took her gaze from the TV and walked over to where Andrea was sitting. She also looked bored with the footage.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," Andrea answered quietly. "For a moment there, I thought he really might appear in front of you. I wasn't sure what I would do."

Gwen smiled. "I wasn't sure either, but maybe we were getting ahead of ourselves. Melissa says that actually seeing a ghost in person is really rare."

"Do you think we'll ever be able to figure out what he wants?" Andrea asked. "What does he mean when he talks about justice? What kind of help is he talking about?"

"I don't know. I hope so."

"It's strange how he says so little," Andrea continued. "He was shy, but when he wanted to, he could talk for an awfully long time. But all these clips you have of him talking...it's just one or two words at a time."

"I have a feeling he says more than we hear," Gwen replied.

Sam hit a button on the VCR. "I think that's enough for now."

He rewound the tape (Gwen couldn't remember the last time she had seen anyone do that) and disconnected the video camera. "We'll try watching it on half speed first."

The same images of white murk began to play again and Gwen could barely notice the difference in speed. The rest of the group was staring intently at the screen but Gwen turned her attention to Elise, who slowly turned her head towards that tool bench. Something was on her mind, but she didn't yet feel confident enough to say anything.

"Wait!" Melissa suddenly called out. "What was that?!"

"I saw it too," Larry added. "It was only there for a couple of frames, but it stood out."

Sam began to rewind the tape frame by frame to make sure he didn't miss anything. Despite having paused the tape almost immediately after Melissa's reaction, dozens of frames passed by with nothing interesting on the TV. Then they saw it.

"It worked!" Dale shouted. Gwen wasn't as sure right away. White and black clouds of static surrounded the outer edges of the TV screen like some kind of spooky Halloween trim. In the center was a different, almost skin-colored patch that definitely looked like a human figure. It looked like a medium shot from a movie, where a character was shown from the waist up. The image was still too indistinct to get a sense of facial features or clothing, but it was clear that if it was a human figure, his right arm was pointing to something.

"You guys think that's really my brother?" Andrea asked. "I can't tell."

“The image isn’t clear enough to tell one way or the other,” Sam admitted. “But it’s clearly a human shape.”

“Is he pointing?” Melissa asked. “What would he be pointing at?”

Nobody had an answer right away. Sam pulled out the walkie-talkie again and told Sid and Hannah to come see the image. Gwen looked at Elise, who didn’t seem to be reacting at all. Her eyes were shut and the fingers on her right hand were pressed against her temple. Something seemed to be going on with her, but she wasn’t making a big show of it.

“Didn’t think I would ever see something like this,” Sid said when he arrived in the room. “We’ve never gotten anything from ITC before and now we get this. We all better make the most of it, because I don’t know if we’ll ever see a case like this again.”

“Why do you think he’s pointing at the wall?” Hannah asked.

There was no response. Gwen noticed Blake staring intently in the direction the ghostly hand was pointing. He spoke up. “He’s not pointing at the wall. It’s something to do with—”

Before he could finish his comment, Elise gasped loudly in horror. Everyone turned around to see her rush out of the garage without a word to anyone. Larry hurried after her.

“What the hell was that about?” Dale asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “But I have a bad feeling that tonight’s investigation is about to go downhill fast.”

Elise had rushed through the living room and out the front door into the freezing night, almost tripping over Winston in the process. The group followed, causing a brief traffic jam at the door leading to the living room. Eventually, everyone wound up outside. The clear skies and bright moon overhead made it easy to find Elise and Larry.

“What’s going on?” Melissa asked.

“I can’t go back in that house,” Elise said, her body trembling from the combination of fear and the bitter January cold.

“But what happened?” Sid asked.

“That presence in there... whoever it is... has dark intentions. I felt them.”

“What do you mean, whoever it is?” Sam said impatiently. “It’s Adrian. We know that.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Just because you hear something identify itself doesn’t mean it’s telling the truth. You said just a little while ago that none of you have seen him.”

“Why dark intentions?” Gwen chimed in. “Are you saying he wants to hurt us? Why would he? We’re trying to help.”

Blake was getting angry. “You don’t actually believe this bullshit, do you?”

“You watch it, Blake,” Larry said, sounding unusually testy.

“I don’t know,” Elise said, ignoring them. “But Gwen, you especially need to be careful. He’s chosen you to help him carry out whatever he’s trying to do.”

Several in the group were about to respond, but the normally soft-spoken Sid hushed the crowd with a loud “Enough!”

“This is not the time to discuss this,” he said, nodding his head backwards. Everyone looked to see Andrea standing a few steps back and immediately understood.

“He’s right,” Sam said. “We’ve put her through enough for one night. We’ll meet at my place tomorrow and have a discussion about the future of this case.”

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It was well after midnight by the time Gwen finally got home. During the drive, it was decided that Melissa and Blake would simply stay the night and the three of them would go to Sam's the next day for the meeting. They quietly slipped into the house and Gwen decided to make everyone hot chocolate. She opted not to use the microwave because of its loud beeping and took the kettle off the stove before it was actually boiling to avoid the familiar screeching noise. It was still hot enough for the group to set it aside on the table for a few minutes to cool off.

Melissa fell very theatrically onto the living room couch. "Now that you're gotten your first taste of Granite Ghosthunter drama, you're definitely a full member. What did you think of the situation with Elise?"

"She's full of shit," Blake said venomously.

"I know what you think," Melissa responded with a chuckle. "I was asking her."

"Something happened to her," Gwen said. "It might not be what she thinks, but something happened. I don't think she's lying. She looked really scared."

Blake was unmoved. "Scared of nobody paying attention to her."

"I don't like it because I don't think there's much we can do with it," Melissa said. "Maybe psychic powers are legitimate, maybe they aren't. It's not like we're gonna see that question resolved anytime soon. I just don't think it should impact the investigation in one way or another. It can't be substantiated. That's why Sam doesn't like it."

"You know what we should do?" Blake asked after a quick pause. "The three of us should drive over there one night and just do some EVPs on our own."

"Without the rest of the group?" Gwen asked.

"Yeah," he continued. "We've been bringing bigger crowds into that garage every time. It's getting ridiculous. This isn't somebody who felt comfortable in a crowd, don't forget."

Melissa nodded. "You might be onto something there."

"This is our case. Well...really it's Gwen's case. You're the one who got the first EVP and you're the one he wants to talk to. All we need is you in there asking the questions and the two of us to work the machines."

"But is it right to go without the rest of them?" Gwen asked nervously.

"We may not have a choice depending on how this meeting goes tomorrow," Melissa said. "Larry takes Elise's word without any question and she obviously thinks we're getting in trouble by investigating that garage."

"But does he really or does he just want to undermine Sam?" Gwen felt a little guilty about saying that, since she had gotten a good vibe from Larry, but it did seem like he was operating from a totally different playbook than most of the group.

"I think both," Blake answered. "It's obvious he would like to be the leader of the group and if not that, at least higher on the totem pole. But it's just as obvious that he's not. If Sam were to step down as the group's leader, he would have Sid take over. And if Sid didn't want to do it, he would probably ask you, Melissa. And if you didn't want to do it...well maybe then Larry would get a shot."

Melissa grinned. "Don't be modest, Blake. You would be next in line at that point. You've been with us almost as long as Larry."

"Larry might snap if that happened. He can't stand me."

Gwen was conflicted. She liked Larry and Elise seemed nice enough, but she couldn't argue with the complaint that fantastical concepts like psychic power or demons made the whole investigation seem silly and got in the way of trying to figure out what was really going on. As

Blake alluded to, she was at the center of this particular case and would probably find herself dragged into the debate whether she wanted to participate or not.

Everyone finally got tired of talking and finished their hot chocolate. Melissa fell asleep almost immediately on the couch while Blake found some spare blankets and piled them on the floor. Gwen could have gone up to her room but liked the idea of an old-fashioned sleepover. She leaned the back of the recliner as far as it could go and began to doze off. In those moments when her eyes were shut but she was still awake, that fuzzy image of the pointing figure on the TV screen seemed to appear. Only this time it was pointing at her.

# Chapter 8

When Gwen woke that morning, she briefly thought she was back at college. That feeling of weakness, despite having just slept for a few hours, was familiar from many nights spent watching movies and going out for food in the dead of night. At least this time, she had thrown back a few cups of hot chocolate rather than vodka. Blake was awake and washing his face in the nearby bathroom. Melissa was still fast asleep on the couch. Gwen glanced at her watch and saw that they only had about an hour before the meeting at Sam's house and it was at least a 20 minute drive from Lakeside.

She tapped Melissa on the shoulder. She let out a barely audible murmur and turned over. After a gentle shake, she woke up and claimed to need help getting up. Melissa placed both her hands on Gwen's shoulders and managed to find her footing on the hardwood floor. Blake came out of the bathroom and Melissa quickly took his place. Gwen went to the upstairs bathroom and took a brief shower. Her parents were both already at work and Spencer was at school. It was strange to think they had all gone about their morning business with three people keeled over in the living room, but at least they hadn't made too much noise.

Blake wound up driving since he seemed to be the most awake out of the three. It was a quiet ride punctuated by occasional attempts at conversation. Someone would make a quick point that might get a "yeah" or an "mmm-hmm" but not much more. Everyone was too tired. On the hill that led up to Sam's place, Gwen caught a glimpse of the White Mountains and suddenly wanted to be looking out at the snowy landscape from one of the area's winding roads. She thought of taking a trip there soon, although in less than a week she would be back at college and much closer.

This meeting lacked a lot of the hospitality of the last one Gwen had been to. There were no burgers, no row of soda bottles and cups on the counter, no plates of appetizers on the table in front of the TV. Nobody seemed to have slept well the previous night and the group members sat quietly on the furniture or leaned against a wall while everyone waited for the entire roster to arrive. The last one to get there turned out to be Larry.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, looking a little intimidated that everyone was staring at him when he walked through the door.

"Don't worry about it," Sam said without much of his usual energy. "Okay everyone, this isn't one of our usual meetings. We're here solely to discuss the Giordano house investigation. I understand that Larry has some concerns based on what happened last night."

"Yes," Larry replied. "Elise couldn't make it. She needed to be back in Maine today but we had a long discussion after we left the house. I won't beat around the bush. I think we should end this investigation today. Whatever she sensed in that garage is dangerous."

Sam stood up out of his easy chair. "You know, I wouldn't mind this if it was one of our more typical cases. The ones where we hang around a house for a night or two and don't wind up with any evidence to show for it. But this one? The most amazing investigation we've ever done? I can't bear to sabotage this one. There's too much potential."

Gwen glanced around the room, as she was prone to do during these group discussions. Nobody looked very comfortable, but Sid especially seemed concerned.

“Let’s back up a little,” he said, in a quiet but authoritative way that only older people could manage. “Larry, what is it that you’re afraid of? What do you think might happen if we continue to investigate the Giordano house?”

“I don’t know for sure, Sid. But we need to think critically about everything that’s happened. Whatever we have been communicating with might say it is Adrian Giordano, but there’s no way to be sure. It knows we want evidence.”

“Now wait a minute,” Dale spoke up. Gwen was surprised he had been quiet this long. “When Andrea first heard the kid’s voice, she recognized it as her brother. You think it’s a demon we’ve been talking to? What about that stuff about justice? Why would it say that?”

“I don’t have all the answers,” Larry said defensively. “All I can do is go on what Elise told me. She said that whatever we have been talking to has an agenda. A dangerous agenda.”

“If it’s so dangerous, shouldn’t we warn Andrea?” Melissa asked, with no small amount of skepticism.

“Maybe,” Larry replied. “But then again, it doesn’t seem as interested in her. Maybe it only talked to her last night so we would believe it was Adrian.”

Blake sighed heavily and lightly grabbed his hair with both hands. “This is all a bunch of horseshit.”

“Easy now, Blake,” Sid gently said.

“Do you really think there’s a demon in that garage?” Blake asked, trying to keep calm. “Is that what you’re getting at?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s the problem,” Sam said firmly. “There’s nothing to substantiate anything that you’ve said. I like Elise as a person, but I don’t like her making decisions about our work based on something that only she knows is true or false. You know I don’t believe in demons. But frankly, if I was wrong and there was a demon in that garage, I would be even more eager for evidence because that would be the scientific discovery of the century.”

Several group members couldn’t help but laugh. Larry wasn’t among them. He seemed to realize that he had to abandon the “demon” concept if he wanted to be taken seriously.

“I realize that’s a big leap for most of you,” he conceded. “Suppose it’s not a demon. I still don’t think it’s wise to provoke a ghost who might be out to hurt us.”

“Do you think Adrian is a threat?” Sid asked.

“Possibly. He’s shown that he’s willing to hurt people. He’s already hurt his family.”

Blake stood up. “All right, that’s it! I have had it with your contempt for that poor kid. What about all the assholes in LHS who drove him to kill himself? Where’s your righteous scorn as far as they’re concerned?!”

“Blake, I don’t think it’s right to bully a kid like--”

“You don’t, huh? What about all the lonely gay kids who kill themselves because of the bigoted bullshit your church is always putting out there? You think that’s not bullying? It’s no wonder you would rather pick on Adrian.”

“Stop it, Blake.” Sam said suddenly. Larry was seething but didn’t say anything. “Let’s keep this about the case. When it comes to the evidence we’ve already gotten from that garage, is there any reason to suspect that Adrian would want to hurt us or anyone else?”

There was quiet for a few seconds and then Hannah spoke up. “Well, he pulled my hair.”

Blake rounded on her. “Oh, he did not! Just stop already, nobody believes that!”

“Yes, he did!”

That was too much for Larry. “Blake, you watch your mouth!”

Blake tugged on his lower lip and began staring downward at it. Larry rolled his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. Gwen felt increasingly nervous.

"I'll handle this," Melissa said softly. "Hannah, the only evidence we've ever gotten from Adrian has been in the garage. When you said your hair had been pulled, we were in the bedroom upstairs. There's no reason to believe that Adrian has been up there since his death. Are you sure you didn't just get it caught on something? It was dark up there."

Hannah knew Melissa had given her a way out, something Blake would not have done. Her eyes admitted defeat. "It could have been that, I guess."

"We need to get back on track," Sam said, clearly losing his patience. "You've been straight with me, Larry, so I'll be straight with you. I don't intend to stop this investigation, but I won't force any of you to go. If anyone here is afraid to go back to the Giordano house, don't worry about it. I won't hold it against you and you're still welcome in the group."

There was a long and unpleasant silence. Suddenly Dale chuckled and looked over at Blake. "Oh, I get it now! You were literally watching your mouth!"

"Yeah," Blake awkwardly replied. "It's...it's a joke."

"I wish you all would take this more seriously," Larry said. "You could be putting yourselves in real danger."

"What else can I even say?" Sam asked with palpable frustration. "I already said I'm not going to try and make anyone go! But I don't have the right to tell other people they can't go if they want to. We can only control our own actions, Larry. That's how life works. What more do you want?"

"You could stop being so condescending for starters," Larry grumbled in response. He paused for a moment after that and let out another resigned sigh. "But I guess you have a point just the same. I've done my best to get through to everyone and now it's up to you guys."

He turned to the door. "I'm gonna head home. I have a lot of thinking to do."

Hannah left with him as Sam sat back down in his chair. He said nothing for an uncomfortable amount of time. Eventually, everyone else got the hint and the rest of the group wandered out the door, casting concerned looks at Sam before closing the door and walking over to their cars. The ride home with Melissa and Blake was also quiet but not uncomfortable. There was an unspoken resolve the three of them shared. Regardless of what happened to the Granite Ghosthunters after today's events, they would continue the investigation.

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Gwen didn't sleep well that night, although she could not recall any actual nightmares. Her sleeping experience was incoherent even by dream standards. Her dreams often had a highly cinematic construction; perhaps the result of so many years of constantly watching movies. This one, however, was just a distilled feeling of anxiety as bizarre patterns and colors flew by. When she woke up, she felt like she hadn't slept at all but then realized she must have at least for a while. Without turning her head, she grasped around for her phone and found it at the edge of her nightstand.

During the night, several emails had come in but three stood out. The first was from Larry. It was written to all the group members and the content was more or less what everyone had been expecting.

*Granite Ghosthunters,*

*I've spent all afternoon and evening thinking about what I should do about my future in paranormal research and I've come to an answer. It might be hard for some of you but I feel like I'm left with little choice. I will be leaving the group, effective immediately, and I intend to start my own ghosthunting team in the near future. I talked to Sam on the phone earlier and I don't think I told him anything he didn't expect to hear. We've had some good times, but I just don't think it's healthy for me to stick around with the way things have been. Hannah will be joining me in this venture and if any of you are looking for something a little different, you're welcome to come along too. If not, I'm begging you to be careful when you're back in that house. I'm grateful for the times we spent together and for the new stuff I learned about paranormal research with the Granite Ghosthunters. I hope we meet again!*

*Best wishes,*

*Larry*

Gwen smiled wistfully after she was finished reading. She had liked Larry from the beginning and still respected him even when his fears threatened the investigation. It would be a little sad to continue on without him but there was undeniably some relief knowing that the next visit to the Giordano house would likely be less dramatic. The next email was from Dale and had been sent only to her.

*Hi Gwen,*

*I'm gonna assume you heard the news from Larry. I think most of the group will stick with Sam but I'm kinda torn. What are you gonna do? I really want to see how this Adrian thing plays out in the end and that's all gonna depend on what you decide. I have a feeling you want to keep at it, right? The problem is that even though Sam is more adventurous, he's kinda boring from the perspective of a TV producer, you know? Larry shows a lot more personality during the investigations and some of the religious stuff makes for great TV! I can't figure out which group I'm better off with. What do you think?*

*Dale*

She shook her head. Dale's obsession with a future on some stupid cable show like the one he had shown her at Sam's house was wearing thin. Adrian's story just seemed too personal, too intimate to be swallowed up and regurgitated by lame reality television. She would write back to Dale at some point, but not now. The most recent of the emails was from Sam. He had sent it only a few hours earlier.

*Group members (what's left of you),*

*I'm sure you've all read Larry's email by now. I'm very conflicted about the whole thing. Even though he got on my nerves at times, I respected his knowledge of this craft and his good humor in general. However, a moment like this may have been inevitable. Sometimes even the best intentions can't overcome irreconcilable differences. Sounds like a divorce, I know, but frankly it feels a little bit like that. I'm going to take a break from researching for a few days, but I would like to invite anyone interested to have lunch with Sid and me at Center Street Diner in Lakeside tomorrow. I figure you've come over to Glenboro enough times. I might as well meet you all there once in a while. We plan to get there around noon. I hope to see you all there.*

*Sam*

It felt too early to call Blake or Melissa even though she had a feeling they were both awake too. Once she was dressed and ready for the day, she would. Plans had to be made. Sam might be taking some time off from the investigation, but she couldn't afford to. Her winter break was coming to an end.

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“So what are we doing here, Adrian? We’ve done this quite a few times now but I feel like we’re getting stuck. You said you wanted justice, but what should we take from that? How can we help you find that?”

Gwen stared ahead into the now familiar dark shadows of the garage at the Giordano house while sitting in the same old folding chair. The routine sound of Melissa playing back the questions she had just asked went through one ear and out the other. Outside the window, the extremely familiar sight of snow falling to the ground caught her eye. The car the three of them had arrived in already had a white coat over its entire windshield.

“I’m not getting anything,” Melissa said a few moments later.

Gwen let out a heavy sigh.

“Try not to sound too exasperated,” Blake said. “Remember, he started talking to you in the first place because you made him feel at ease.”

She found that obnoxious, although she didn't say so. But come on, she had been spending her entire winter break trying to help this kid and now he won't talk if she sounds too testy? The “fragile flower” jokes were coming fast but that would surely bring about one of Blake's rants and she was getting tired of those too. She was never a huge fan of conflict and the tension at Sam's house had been hard on her. They had made her feel at the center of this case, the same case that had driven a wedge between them. She couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible. That and the feeling that she had to finish this before the new semester started were suddenly making her feel like she was under a lot of pressure.

“Don't feel like you're under a deadline,” Melissa said suddenly. “WMU is only about an hour from here. It won't be too hard to get you back here if we're still working on this.”

Gwen wondered if Melissa was the real psychic. She always seemed to know what was on her mind and knew what to say, even if Gwen had already thought about that possibility. She could try to commute for a while, but she had a feeling her film projects would quickly monopolize her time. She took a deep breath and put on her best “nurturing voice.”

“What can we do to help you, Adrian?”

When they listened to the recording, there was an answer.

“Watch.”

“Watch?” Blake repeated. “Is that what he said?”

Melissa nodded. “I wonder if he means ‘watch’ as a verb or like an actual watch that you wear on your wrist.”

“Probably the verb,” Blake replied.

“Watch what?” Gwen asked. “The YouTube videos? I did watch those. A couple of them, anyway.”

Blake shook his head. “I watched all of those and I don't recall anything that would answer the question we just asked him.”

“Shit,” Melissa said quietly. “What do we do with that?”

All three of them gasped when a knock rang out from behind them. They turned around and saw the same workbench he had touched in the past.

“That thing again?” Blake asked. “It must have some significance.”

Melissa walked over to the workbench and crouched, bringing herself at eye level with the finished wood platform that the tools rested on. “I don’t get it. What could we watch that would be on this? Nothing but wrenches and screwdrivers and all that.”

“He’s trying to direct us to something that’s in that general area,” Gwen said. “But I have no idea what. What’s over here, Adrian? What are we supposed to find?”

No answer could be heard when they reviewed the audio, which sent a fresh wave of frustration through Gwen. “Why do you think we hear him sometimes and then other times we don’t? I don’t think he ignores all these questions.”

“Who knows?” Melissa said back. “There’s still so much we don’t understand about how ghosts communicate. We’re doing a hell of a lot better than most people and we still can’t get everything we need out of him.”

“Maybe we ought to break for now and think it over,” Blake said. “I think we’re probably too tired to come up with anything useful now. Plus, we have to figure out just how we’re getting home.”

Gwen turned to look out the window and saw that a thick blanket of snow was now draped over Melissa’s car. “We can’t drive home in that.”

“You guys can stay the night. I don’t mind.” They turned around to see Andrea standing in the doorway. “Let’s do something...normal. Something that regular people do.”

The three of them walked towards the door when Gwen’s foot struck something hard. She stumbled forward but placed a hand on the nearby wall and was able to catch her balance.

Blake turned around. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She looked down and saw a small radio. “I guess I tripped on this old thing. I didn’t even know it was there.”

“It belongs to my father,” Andrea said. “He still loves it and won’t use anything else to listen to his music. I don’t remember it being there either but we can just put it aside for now.”

Gwen nodded and placed it on top of the workbench.

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The movie they were watching was extremely crude and predictable. Gwen could think of a dozen other comedies that had executed this premise better. As she reclined on a pink beanbag chair in front of the TV, she was grateful she didn’t have anything to write on or she would be tempted to take notes on all the movie’s various flaws.

When she began her first semester in the film production program at White Mountain University, Gwen was sure all of her friends were going to be fellow film students. While there were a few of them she really liked and planned on staying in touch with, it could be exhausting to be surrounded by people who were all very passionate and opinionated on the same subject. Any assumptions she had about whether any film was “objectively” good or bad were quickly shredded by rooms full of aspiring directors who paid no heed to consensus. She found herself grateful for friends outside her major that didn’t share her interest in movies to such an intense degree. It was nice to occasionally make a statement about a movie and not have it be immediately challenged. She was capable of defending her views; it was just exhausting to do so all the time.

It had also taught her that there was a time and a place to advocate for your opinions, especially when it came to entertainment. Many of her peers could never resist trying to dominate any conversation that referred to a movie and if they didn't enjoy what a group was watching, they would make sure nobody else would either.

As the two policeman characters on screen made yet another fart joke, she kept her disapproval to herself. This was not the time to play the critical film buff. This was a time for Andrea to smile and laugh while surrounded by friends who cared about her. She glanced over to the couch and was pleased to see Andrea grinning widely with Blake and Melissa on either side of her. Gwen didn't think she had ever seen Andrea smile like that.

The movie was nearly at its end when Winston the dog abruptly jumped off the recliner and ran towards the door to the garage, which the group had unintentionally left open.

Andrea gasped. "He's going to do it! Watch!"

Melissa grabbed the remote and paused the movie and then reached over the arm of the couch to grab her bag. Everyone turned towards the door while Melissa pulled out a camera and pointed it at Winston. The dog was sitting in front of the door now, wagging his tail and looking like he could barely contain his excitement. Gwen noticed that Andrea placed her hand across Blake's shoulders as she glanced over to make sure he was watching.

For a few seconds, the only sound in the room was the sound of Winston's tail repeatedly hitting the floor. Then he laid down on his side and rolled over.

"I can never get him to do that!" Andrea cried out joyfully, forgetting that she had already told the group this on their first visit. The excitement faded quickly from her face as the reality of the situation came back to her.

Winston rolled over a few more times before he went back to his chair. Even in a more relaxed state, the dog continued to glance over to that garage door. Outside, the blizzard raged in the dark and Gwen felt increasingly grateful that none of them were going to try and drive home in those conditions. The group watched the last ten minutes of the movie before figuring out where everyone would sleep. With three of the four bedrooms vacant, everyone was accommodated. However, Gwen had been left with Adrian's room and didn't feel comfortable sleeping in there, even though they knew the garage was where his ghost was active.

She returned to the living room and dragged the beanbag chair across the floor. She didn't want to be too close to the open garage door either. Eventually, she found her way to a carpeted room that housed a desk and several file cabinets. She reasoned that this was probably a den for Adrian's father, who was driving alone somewhere in Canada's Northwest Territories. She slumped into the beanbag chair but felt restless. The movie had almost put her to sleep but seeing Winston roll over for an unseen presence had jolted her out of her boredom-induced haze. She reached for her phone.

# Interlude III: These Two Guys

*Hello again, world.*

*I've got plenty of time to play around with YouTube today, that's for sure. As you can see, I'm posting this in the middle of the school day and yet I'm here in my room. Am I sick? Nope. Not in the way that gets you sent home from school, anyway. I got suspended, yo! Word up, gangstas! Cultural appropriation LOL [said as a one-syllable word].*

*So to explain why this happened, I have to give some backstory. I have to talk about these two guys who live near me. I don't want to say their names. It's ridiculous because nobody watches these, but I can't help but get worried that as soon as I say their names, they're going to become aware of it and I'll wind up getting even more shit. It's one of those bizarre things about LHS. Nobody gives a frog's fat ass what I think most of the time, but as soon as I say anything about someone else, it's like breaking news and gets to them within like 24 hours. It's downright uncanny and I'm not about to tempt fate now.*

*These two guys have known me for almost my whole life. We moved here when I was a little kid...I don't even remember our old house. One of these guys lives just down the street from me and the other one is his neighbor on the other side...if that made any sense. Anyway, the three of us hung out together for pretty much my entire childhood. We were best friends until about seventh grade. Then something happened which I still don't understand. At some point during that summer, I spontaneously became uncool with no explanation. They didn't want to be seen with me anymore.*

*Not being invited to hang out with them anymore would have been hard enough, but they also took it upon themselves to make fun of me in school. It was like they were running some kind of political campaign against me. People who used to have no problem with me suddenly didn't want to be around me either. Before long, it seemed like everyone was avoiding me and to this day, I still don't know why.*

*That's pretty much how it's been ever since. I mean, it's not quite as intense anymore. Now people are just in the habit of ignoring me and I don't get actively picked on as much. But every now and then, those two guys still get on my case. The incident that got me suspended happened in Physics yesterday. There I was, working on my Bernoulli's Principle plane model, minding my own god damn business, bothering nobody, when Ch—one of them comes up and snaps one of the wings off the plane.*

*I turn around and look at him and he goes, "Hey, you better fix that!"*

*I was already having one of those days where everything is going wrong and I was just not in the mood for that shit. So I told him to fuck off. The look on his face was pretty great. He was not expecting that.*

*Unfortunately, that happened right as the teacher was walking by and I was on my way to the principal's office. She gave me a lecture about decorum and respect for my peers and I couldn't help but roll my eyes and chuckle a little bit, which was probably a mistake. So here I am, suspended. But come on, the IRONY!*

*It's almost funny. If I saw it on TV or something, I'd probably laugh. These guys pick on me for literally years and never get in any trouble. But as soon as I stand up for myself, I'm in the hot seat. Why? Because I said a "naughty word." Gotta love a place that has its priorities in*

*order, right? But you know what? It's not about the swearing. I think I know what it's really about.*

*People hate victims, you know. They won't ever be that up front about it, but they do. They hate the concept and sometimes it feels like they hate the actual people. You're supposed to be insulted if someone says you're "playing the victim" or "acting like a victim." They always say "acting like" because God knows there's no way you might actually be a victim. People are always trying to take the blame away from the people or circumstances which do the hurting and put it on the person who got hurt. You got mugged? Well, everyone knows you're not supposed to walk in that neighborhood at night. Some girl gets raped at a party? Well, it's her fault for wearing a short skirt or whatever. It's always that same idea – it's your fault and we don't want to hear about it.*

*Nobody wants to admit that the world is just unfair and bad things happen to people for no good reason. Don't even get me started on those passive-aggressive "inspirational" slogans like "Smiling is the best antidepressant" or "Nobody can make you feel bad except you." I think some families of murder victims would disagree with that one, buddy. Get outta here with that shit. That's just another way of saying that it's your fault and we don't want to hear about it. I dare the smug jerks who post that stuff online to go into a hospital and say that to someone with terminal brain cancer and see how quickly you get punched in the face. They're just in the wrong frame of mind, that's the real problem. And even if you are a victim, you're not supposed to complain and you're definitely not supposed to be angry about it. That makes other people uncomfortable.*

*Well, fuck other people. I've had up to here with other people. I'm sick of always being asked to show a level of consideration and respect that has never been shown to me in the entire fucking time I've been at this school.*

*I used to buy into all of this. I thought I had to just keep quiet and put up with the daily rejection and abuse because that was the only way it would go away. At some point, I would be rewarded for keeping cool about it. Well, that didn't happen and I was a moron for thinking it would happen. Now I'm just...so angry. High school's almost over and things aren't going to be fixed. Everyone who made me feel like this is just going to leave without getting punished. The only person that's ever been punished for all the shit I've been put through has been me and that makes me so goddamn angry. I don't know what to do about it and I feel like I'm about to explode.*

*But don't worry, I'm not going to kill anyone. I know that's the first thing you thought. Uh oh, this kid's at the end of his rope, we better make sure nobody ELSE gets hurt even though nobody ever did a goddamn thing to keep ME from getting hurt. Fuck you.*

*Someday, you'll be sorry.*

*Well, on second thought, you probably won't.*

Gwen began to wonder why she kept forcing herself to watch these. Blake had already watched them all and said he hadn't heard anything that helped with the investigation. Yet there was still allure in the possibility of seeing Adrian alive, preserved in all of his bitter, resentful glory. This still didn't sound like someone about to commit suicide, but then again, there was still one more video on the account left to watch.

As she leaned back into the beanbag chair's leathery embrace and shut her eyes, a vivid image crept into her mind. She was younger and standing on a playground. Someone was next to her and they were holding hands, but it wasn't a happy moment. People surrounding them were

laughing and throwing insults. Details were hard to ascertain and Gwen couldn't tell if this was a memory or just the usual wacky thoughts that can creep into someone's head as they're about to fall asleep. The image faded as abruptly as it had arrived, but it wouldn't be gone for long.

# Chapter 9

With a cup of steaming coffee in hand, Andrea stared out the window at the newly fallen snow. According to the weather report Gwen had just read on her phone, the blizzard had dumped about 18 inches of snow during the night. Now the sun was out and it looked like it might be a pleasant day, aside from the cold.

Gwen joined Andrea by the window and gazed at the flat white landscape. The car they had arrived in was just barely visible.

“Guess we should break out the shovels, right?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Andrea replied. “My neighbor has been plowing the driveway since my parents left. He knows that it’s a lot for me to shovel on my own.”

After hearing that, Gwen caught sight of a green pick-up truck approaching with a silver plow attached to the front. Within seconds it pushed away a mound of snow that likely would have taken at least half an hour to shovel. The neighbor backed up and prepared for another advance.

“So who are the two guys that used to be friends with Adrian and then turned on him?” Gwen suddenly asked.

Andrea wasn’t surprised. “You watched that video, huh?”

She nodded. “He said they lived on this street.”

“He’s talking about Charlie and Eric,” Andrea said. “Adrian grew up with them but they eventually decided they didn’t like him.”

“Why?”

“Hell if I know. Why does anyone hate anyone in high school? Probably something petty and stupid.”

Gwen wondered if Andrea had felt that way about high school at the time or if she had taken on some of Adrian’s viewpoint following his death. Now wasn’t the time to bring that up. “Do you think that if Adrian was still alive, they might have reconciled after graduation?”

Andrea chuckled bitterly. “I don’t think so. Adrian did set Eric’s car on fire.”

Gwen did a classic movie double take. “What?!”

Finally Andrea turned away from the window. “You never heard about that? Officially, the police still don’t know who did it. But I knew it was him...and so did Eric. But Adrian was very deliberate when he planned something out. He didn’t leave even the tiniest bit of evidence.”

She had seen this in at least one movie and Adrian probably had as well. If those films were to be believed, destroying a car wasn’t particularly hard. You just soaked a rag in gasoline, stuffed it into a bottle, lit it on fire and tossed it. You may not get the typical Michael Bay explosion, but the low-tech bomb would do some damage. She couldn’t help but wonder if Adrian had made a mistake during the process, one that might have led to his arrest if he was still alive.

“That could change everything,” Gwen said. “What if he killed himself because he thought the police were going to track it back to him? What if that’s the justice he’s been talking about this whole time?”

Andrea shook her head. “No, that wasn’t it.”

“Why are you so sure?” Gwen asked, raising an eyebrow. “What do you know that you haven’t told us?”

“About my brother?” Andrea was getting testy now. “I know a great deal. I grew up with him, remember? I don’t think he killed himself out of guilt or fear of getting caught. In fact, I think he had made up his mind to kill himself beforehand and that was part of the reason why he did it.”

Gwen took a moment to think that over. It made sense. “But if blowing up that guy’s car wasn’t enough justice for Adrian...what is?”

Andrea had no answer for that one. Gwen left the window and joined the others, who were preparing their breakfast in the kitchen. Although the Giordano driveway was already cleared out, nobody felt comfortable driving on the roads until later in the morning when they would hopefully be cleared. A quick phone call with Sam confirmed that he still intended to try and meet at Center Street Diner for lunch. It was on the other side of town, which would not be a long drive under normal circumstances but could be rough in slippery conditions.

Gwen felt antsy after breakfast and decided to sneak away while the others cleaned up. After slipping on her coat, she gently opened the front door and was immediately up to her knees in the snow that was still on the front stoop. A few steps were all it took to reach the freshly plowed driveway, but the wet sensation inside her shoes would linger for quite a while. She wished she had brought her winter boots.

Finally she made it to the road itself, which had been cleared once already by the town’s big orange plows that were out and about quite often at this time of year. Adrian hadn’t said in the video exactly how many houses separated him and “the two guys,” but she reasoned it couldn’t have been too many. Andrea would have known but Gwen didn’t want to let on that she was on her way to talk to them. After passing three houses, she noticed two young men working together to shovel a driveway. A few minutes went by before they noticed her, giving her time to listen to their conversation and figure out who was who.

Eric was tall and imposing with broad shoulders. Some boys seemed to go through puberty earlier than their peers and Gwen remembered a handful of young men from her own high school days who towered over other boys who hadn’t yet “bulked out.” Charlie might have been one of those boys. He was shorter than Eric but a little larger, just overweight enough to avoid looking puny but not enough to get picked on. The two of them took a break from the shoveling and that was when they caught sight of her.

“Do you need something?” Charlie asked awkwardly.

“You guys are Charlie and Eric, right?”

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Gwen. I’m friends with Andrea Giordano.”

They both nodded briefly, unsure of how to reply.

“I wanted to talk to you about Adrian,” she continued. “I just heard about what happened to your car this morning.”

“Yeah, can you believe that?” Eric asked. “I don’t bring it up much now cause of...you know...but it was definitely him. He covered his tracks, but I knew.”

“Andrea says you used to be friends,” Gwen said. “What would make him do that?”

“I don’t know if I should answer that,” Eric replied. “They say you’re not supposed to speak ill of the dead.”

“What do you care, anyway?” Charlie added. “You don’t even know us.”

“I just feel bad for Andrea,” Gwen answered. It wasn’t a lie. It was more a sin of omission since she obviously wasn’t going to mention the investigation. “She’s still struggling a lot because of everything that’s happened and I just want to understand.”

They looked unsure of how to react. She had the feeling this might have been the first time someone had talked to them about Adrian since his death or confronted them about their treatment of him. Finally, Eric spoke up.

“He blamed us for all the problems he had in school. The car thing was a shock at first but when you thought about it more, it made sense. Everything had to be dramatic with him. A normal person might have just keyed the car or slashed the tire. He had to burn the whole thing to a crisp.”

“It’s still a shock when you consider that this person used to be your friend,” Gwen said. “What happened between you three?”

“Nothing special,” Charlie replied. “We just got older. People grow apart, you know? It just happens.”

“You two are still friends.”

“Jeez, you’re persistent,” Eric said with an awkward chuckle. “It just felt like we didn’t have anything in common with him anymore. We were getting into the sports teams and he wanted nothing to do with it. We were going into junior high and he still wanted to play pretend. It was embarrassing.”

“Then he started talking shit about us all the time,” Charlie added. “Going around calling us ‘traitors’ and ‘false friends’ and stuff like that. He’s such a drama queen...uh, *was* such a drama queen. So that became our nickname for him.”

“I don’t think he blew up a car over being called a drama queen,” Gwen replied, somewhat sharply. “That was just the beginning, wasn’t it?”

“I feel like I’m on a friggin’ witness stand,” Eric said with a look of disbelief. “Are you sure you’re not a reporter or something?”

That hadn’t occurred to her earlier, but the comment did make her realize that her knowledge of Adrian’s suffering was giving her line of questioning a tough edge. Still, it was best not to get off topic at this point. She needed answers.

“From what I remember of high school, these things tend to escalate.”

“I suppose it did,” Charlie said. “One of our friends made a joke that maybe Adrian was so upset because he was gay and in love with us. We had a good laugh about that and it obviously wasn’t true, but all of a sudden it was all over the school.”

Eric chimed in. “He was mad about it all but he never bothered to try and fix things. He never changed his behavior or tried to fit in. Then he’s all upset that nobody likes him.”

“He wanted to be liked for the person he actually was,” Gwen replied.

“That’s nice for a Disney movie,” Eric sneered. “But it’s not how high school works. You gotta do what the Romans do or whatever that phrase is.”

Charlie seemed slightly more conflicted. “If he had apologized for telling everyone that we were such bad friends, maybe we would have tried to get other people to lay off. But then again, so many people were enjoying the joke that it would have been hard. It was like we created a monster. Every time we thought it had run its course, someone would come up with a new variation on it.”

Gwen was getting more agitated. It might have been wise to end the conversation there. She didn’t. “Just to clarify, this went on for years. This was someone you grew up with and you knew he was suffering.”

“It wasn’t our fault!” Eric said defensively. “We can’t make someone kill himself. It was his decision. Can we just be done with this? We have snow to shovel.”

She had certainly heard enough, but now she was mad. “Yeah, we can be done. You guys sound like the worst friends since Brutus.”

Eric rolled his eyes. “Go jump off a bridge, Gwen Stacy.”

“Nice. I can see you take suicide very seriously.”

Charlie snickered and turned to Eric. “She doesn’t get it, man. Chicks don’t read comics.”

“Gwen Stacy didn’t jump off a bridge,” she shot back. “The Green Goblin threw her off. Get it right, douchebags.”

Finally left without a reply, they both turned their backs to her and continued their shoveling. They were actually mostly right. She knew very little about superhero comics, but sharing a name with a famous character meant you eventually learned a little bit. About halfway back to the Giordano house, she noticed Melissa standing at the sidewalk across the street. The car had also been moved to the end of the newly-plowed driveway.

Melissa caught sight of her. “Oh, there you are. Come on, we gotta go.”

“The meeting’s not until lunch.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how the other roads are going to be.”

Gwen shrugged and followed her towards the car. Melissa was driving so she was in charge. Sure enough, some of the back roads they needed to navigate to get back to the larger roads were still covered with dirt and slush.

“Where did you go, anyway?” Melissa asked.

“I went to meet Charlie and Eric,” Gwen answered, making sure her disapproval of them was clear as she said their names.

“Aren’t those the two guys who picked on Adrian?” Blake asked from the back seat.

“Yeah, although I grilled them both pretty hard and it seems like they were only the beginning. A lot of the other kids followed their lead and teased Adrian for, as far as I can tell, just being visibly upset about losing his best friends.”

Blake was quiet for a few moments and then spoke up again. “You ever throw a slab of meat between two dogs?”

Melissa chuckled. “Can’t say that I have. Why?”

“No matter how close they are, those two dogs will tear each other to bits trying to get that meat. I feel like high school is the same way, except instead of food they’re all looking for weakness. You show the slightest vulnerability and they hit you over the head with it.”

“How long have you been saving that one?” Melissa asked with a smile.

Blake blushed. “A few weeks now.”

“Don’t really know how to respond to that,” Gwen said. “But I’m pretty sure that Adrian’s ‘justice’ is about those two.”

“What does he expect us to do?” Melissa asked. “Nobody called out those guys while he was alive. I don’t see it happening now that he’s gone.”

Gwen had just been thinking the same thing. “That’s the big question.”

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“So you hadn’t heard about that car thing until today?” Melissa asked as the three of them stepped out into the small parking lot at the diner. Not many people were in a hurry to brave the weather for lunch, so much of the parking lot was also covered in snow.

“Nah,” Gwen said. “When I’m at school, I’m gone. I don’t follow stuff back here.”

“When it first happened a few months ago, you couldn’t go anywhere in Lakeside without hearing somebody talk about it,” Blake said. “It’s funny that I never made the connection until now, but nobody mentioned Adrian. It was all a big mystery.”

The three of them walked single file through a hastily-shoveled path from the parking lot to the front steps of the diner. When Gwen pushed the door open, she saw the remaining Granite Ghosthunters sitting at a table near the rear of the building. Only about five or six other people were sitting at the other tables. Gwen saw Sam wave to the group and was making her way to them when Anne Flaherty suddenly grabbed her arm.

“Gwen! You’ll never believe who was in here yesterday!”

“Elvis?” Blake asked with a deadpan expression.

Anne chuckled. “No, it was Valerie!”

Gwen didn’t expect that. “She’s in town?”

“Yeah, she looked exactly the same.”

“I don’t suppose she apologized to you?” Gwen asked, recalling their previous conversation.

“Yeah right,” Anne said with a knowing smile. “I didn’t wind up serving her table but I bet she wouldn’t even recognize me.”

“Who are we talking about?” Melissa asked.

“Someone from LHS,” Blake answered. “Real alpha bitch type.”

Anne glanced over at her boss and realized she had been distracted too long. “Take your seats, guys. Just wanted to tell you, Gwen.”

Gwen gave her a friendly touch on the arm and the group made their way to where Sam, Sid and Dale were sitting. Melissa apologized for the lateness but Sam shrugged and indicated that they hadn’t been there very long either. He and Sid had glasses of water with slices of lemon on the edge that didn’t look like they had been sipped yet. Meanwhile, Dale looked to have already drunk half of his chocolate milk.

“No sense beating around the bush,” Sam said. “If you’ve seen the emails, you know that Larry’s leaving the group and taking Hannah with him. Sid and I will keep doing this no matter what, but I wanted to see if the four of you plan on sticking with us.”

“You know we will,” Melissa said quickly. Blake nodded in agreement.

Sid turned to Dale. “What about you?”

“I’m in,” he answered after a pause. “I don’t know what Larry’s thinking to walk away from this case. Once we’re finished, it’s going to change all our lives. I’m talking major TV deals once people--”

Gwen interrupted him. “Dale, wait a minute. I’m sorry but I just don’t feel comfortable thinking about it that way. Andrea’s become a friend of mine and I don’t want to exploit her.”

“Me neither,” Melissa added. “Regardless of everything we’ve found during this case, I would dread seeing it filtered through television. It’s just so...raw. Andrea doesn’t want to be famous for something like this.”

“We wouldn’t use her real name,” Dale said, surprised at the pushback. “They almost never use real names for this stuff. Wouldn’t even have to mention the town.”

Sam didn’t seem to be happy about the turn the conversation had taken. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. When we’re done with this case, I will want to share our findings just like anyone else who has made a discovery. We don’t know what will happen then, but there are ethical issues to consider.”

“We’re meeting people at some of the toughest moments in their lives,” Sid said. “They put a lot of trust in us and throwing them at the mercy of pop culture is just cruel.”

Dale nodded with a defeated look on his face. Gwen wondered if they had gone too far.

Sam’s expression indicated a twinge of regret. “Sorry if we were harsh, Dale. Just wanted to be clear. It’s a good day for that, I guess.”

Dale said nothing as Sam continued on. “I can’t help but wonder if I shouldn’t have tried harder to reason with Larry. But then I thought if we didn’t give up the case, he would be asking for an exorcism.”

Blake chuckled. “The family’s not even Catholic.”

Gwen raised her eyebrows. “What?”

“It’s mostly a Catholic ritual. But in all those horror movies we watch, exorcism always works. But unless Catholicism is like the one true religion, in theory it would only work on ghosts who took it seriously. I’m trying to say it wouldn’t do anything to Adrian, in other words.”

“But Larry doesn’t think Adrian is even there,” Sid pointed out. “He thinks we’re talking to a demon. It’s not the first time we’ve had a situation like this with Larry.”

“He’s demanded that we bail out of cases at least three or four times,” Sam said. “It wasn’t worth fighting with him on the other cases, but not this one. This one is too extraordinary. In fact, it reminds me of the very first case Sid and I ever did.”

“Did you ever hear that story, Gwen?” Melissa asked. Gwen shook her head.

Several in the group had small smiles. It was clearly time to fill her in. This must have been some kind of ritual for new members.

“The first ghost that Sam and I ever communicated with was my wife,” Sid said, with an odd mixture of sadness and pride. “She died of a heart attack one day while I was at the grocery store. Totally out of the blue.”

“That’s terrifying,” Gwen replied. A few of the others nodded.

“She was a science teacher at LHS,” Sam continued. “You guys are too young to have been her students but she was one of the greats. My junior year was right around the time I started to get interested in ghosts. I was reading all this stuff on the internet and starting to realize that there was science involved in it and not just that usual campfire stuff. One day in the library, we’re supposed to be working on science projects and I’m on the computer looking at creepy photographs from some abandoned asylum. Who knows how long she was behind me before she finally called me out.”

The group chuckled. Most people had a similar story from their high school days.

“I thought she was going to be all mad and tell me it was all bullshit,” Sam went on. “But instead she suggested that I make my science project about paranormal research. I was blown away, but it was such an obvious idea.”

“She came home that night talking about ghosts,” Sid added. “Said that the answers were out there and all it would take is scientists to find them.”

“And one of those scientists might have been you,” Gwen said.

Sam nodded. “From that day on, she was my favorite teacher. I always went and talked to her about new stuff I had read about. That is...until she passed away.”

Both he and Sid were quiet for a moment until the older man cleared his throat and spoke again. “I saw Sam at the funeral but didn’t put two and two together until weeks after it happened. I would sit down and eat dinner alone in the house and I could have sworn she was right across the table from me. I don’t know how to explain it, but you just feel a presence.”

“And the glasses,” Dale interrupted. “Don’t forget that part!”

“I was getting to that,” Sid replied, shaking his head with a slight grin. “That’s his favorite part, you know. I had my wife’s wedding ring, engagement ring and glasses on some counter in the kitchen. Had no idea what I was going to do with them. But one morning, I wake up to find them on her nightstand. It was the exact same spot she always put them before she went to sleep.”

“Wow,” Gwen said quietly.

“A few more incidents like that and he gets a hold of Sam,” Melissa added.

Sam nodded. “I couldn’t believe it when he asked me. Anyone else and I would have been psyched to try out my little digital recorder and K-II meter. But this was so...personal. Mrs. Phillips meant a lot to me too.”

“I felt a little crazy asking him for help,” Sid said. “I didn’t know anything about paranormal investigation. I just had to do something because I was sure she was still in the house.”

“We spent the first night or two moving from one room to another trying to narrow things down,” Sam said. “Kind of like we had to do at the Giordano house on the first night. We eventually found out she was spending most of the time in the dining room.”

“What did she say?” Gwen asked eagerly.

Sid hesitated for a few moments. “We have the EVPs if you want to hear them sometime. I tend not to listen to them in public because...well, you know. But she just wanted to say goodbye since we didn’t have a chance before.”

Everyone was quiet, even though most of them had heard the story before. Gwen thought it over for a bit and wondered how many of them had heard the clips. It felt a bit like intruding on a private moment.

“I can’t tell you how much more closure I had after that experience,” Sid continued. “Sam and I couldn’t help but wonder how many other people had died and were trying to reach out to their loved ones, who have no clue what’s happening right around them. We still know so little about what happens after death. Maybe we wouldn’t have to fear it so much if we understood this better.”

“The Granite Ghosthunters was born then and there,” Sam said. “It took a while, but we put together a pretty fine group of people. A little less now, but we’re prepared to keep going.”

The feeling at the table was mutual. Well, for the most part. Gwen didn’t know it then, but that afternoon was the last time she would see Dale before returning to school.

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When Gwen finally arrived home that afternoon, she dug through the piles in her closet and found the high school yearbook from senior year. Even though everyone said at the time that she would treasure this forever, she hadn’t given it so much as a glance since the summer after her last year at LHS. Looking through the pages now, she was taken aback by how young everyone looked. She wondered if she and her classmates would have been in such a hurry to get them if they knew their most awkward phase of adolescence would be captured forever in the pages within.

It wasn’t long before she was looking for people she knew among the senior portraits. There was Valerie, impossibly glamorous with flowing blonde hair and a megawatt grin. She seemed to have missed the “awkward” phase entirely. There was Anne Flaherty, making a face

like a dog who just realized the car was on its way to the vet. Sometimes you could tell when someone was going to be picked on just by looking at them. Gwen recalled Blake's earlier comment and imagined poor Anne tossed into a pit of hungry lions.

Remembering that Blake was a year older, she found the yearbook from junior year and ruffled through it. There he was, somehow even more scrawny and disheveled than he was now. For all the jokes people made about the "freshman fifteen," it was good that he had put on some weight in college. This picture made it look like a stray gust of wind could have carried him off.

Returning to the book for her senior year, the signatures on the other side of the front cover caught her eye. There were smiley faces, hearts and heartfelt messages all over the place. There were also a few phallic drawings by guys who never missed an opportunity to proclaim their heterosexuality and yet were obsessed with male genitalia. Still, anyone who read these would assume high school really had been the best years of her life. So why didn't she feel that way when she looked back on it?

After catching sight of her own picture, a wave of embarrassment and regret swept over her. Gwendolyne Patricia Miles didn't look awkward; in fact it was the total opposite. Her hair was longer than it had ever been before or since, her glasses were missing and she was wearing a few pounds of makeup. Most people would have been relieved to look at their yearbook and see themselves looking so attractive. Yet Gwen felt like she was looking at a stranger or some version of herself engineered to look pretty for other people's enjoyment. It was her name under the picture, but it wasn't her. It felt like a newfound realization, but she was forced to acknowledge that she felt the same way back then.

# Chapter 10

Gwen and Melissa were moments away from the Kancamagus Highway and she was talking about her favorite subject.

“Not enough horror movies use winter scenery. Most of them are set in the same boring suburb in Southern California, preferably close to the studio lot.”

Melissa chuckled. “But you’re going to shoot one right here in the White Mountains.”

“Exactly. Practically everyone in class thinks they have to fly out West if they want any shot at making a movie. Either that or move to New York City and pay a fortune for an apartment the size of a broom closet. But look at all this production value! You could make a horror film here that would look like a Terrence Malick movie.”

“Who is that?”

“He’s a director who makes movies that are kinda boring but have really beautiful shots of nature in them.”

“Oh I see,” Melissa replied with a grin. “But how are you going to make a movie right out of college? Aren’t even the independent ones expensive?”

“Not as much as they used to be,” Gwen answered. “I already have a digital camera. I love those old-school rolls of film, but that is definitely out of my price range for a first feature. You just have to find people who are willing to help and keep the monster out of sight so you don’t need that many special effects. You gotta make the unseen scary, that’s what all the masters can do.”

“What happens after you’re done filming it? You go to film festivals and stuff?”

“Yeah, something like that. Do you want to be in it?”

“In the movie?” Melissa shook her head vigorously. “Oh my God, no. I tried acting once in junior high and I totally sucked at it. I’ll help you with the sound or something.”

“Blake won’t do it either,” Gwen said. “He wants to do production design. At this rate, I’m going to either play every role like Eddie Murphy or I’ll have to get actors who want to get paid.”

They both laughed. With the days until her return to campus growing fewer, Gwen had been making an effort to schedule some activities outside of the usual Granite Ghosthunters routine. She had decided to take his drive into the mountains with Melissa and later she would meet Blake for dinner at one of her favorite bars. It might have seemed ironic that Gwen wanted to take a day trip so close to her school in the waning days of her break, but once the film school schedule was in full swing, it wouldn’t be easy to find time to drive that famous winding highway that cut straight through the gorgeous scenery.

After a fairly steep portion of the drive, Melissa was ready for a break. She pulled over at a lookout point. In the summer or fall, there was a rock wall that was about a foot high that you could sit on and look out at the mountains. Now it was buried under at least three feet of snow. They opted to lean against the hood of the car and face the dramatic landscape. It was freezing cold and the visibility was limited, but there was still something fulfilling about being there.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Gwen suddenly asked.

“Uh, sure.”

“How did you cope with being picked on?”

Melissa’s face looked like that wasn’t the question she expected. “Why do you ask?”

“It just doesn’t seem like you carry it around the same way,” Gwen replied. “With Blake and Adrian, it’s like it traumatized them forever. But you seem to be able to keep it from holding you back.”

“It was definitely hard,” she began. “I spent a lot of nights in bed crying and wondering what I did to deserve it. But I had friends who stuck with me through the whole thing and didn’t turn on me like Adrian’s turned on him. They helped me figure out that it was those guys at school who had the problem, not me. They had some problem with me being Vietnamese that I couldn’t fix even if I wanted to. It wasn’t any kind of reflection on who I was as a person.”

Gwen nodded. “That’s good perspective.”

“It is, but I’m not sure it would work for Adrian or even Blake. From what I’ve seen, they weren’t getting picked on for surface details like I was. What was being rejected wasn’t their heritage or their appearance, it was the people that they actually were. Their interests, their personality, that sort of thing. That wasn’t my situation. Those idiots didn’t know anything about me and didn’t care. But with Blake and Adrian, people did get to know them...and then they rejected them. I think that might be harder.”

Gwen was silent. Melissa had just articulated a deep fear of hers.

“But then again, you’d think that there would be some advantages too,” she added. “After all, police won’t pull a stranger over for not liking their personality.”

“Yeah, I suppose that no matter what, it could always get worse.” Gwen said.

“You know,” Melissa continued. “The whole story just reminds me of a sermon I heard in church like a year ago. It was about this teacher who did a spontaneous activity where people wrote compliments on index cards that their classmates could keep.”

“Compliments in high school?”

Melissa chuckled. “I know, right? This was like the 60s, so one of the students wound up going to Vietnam and was killed in action. At the funeral, the teacher finds out that the guy was carrying that index card with the compliments even while in uniform. Not only that, everyone else from that class who had gone to the funeral still had them in their purses or wallets or whatever.”

“I would have kept it,” Gwen said.

“Me too,” Melissa replied. “It’s a pretty rare opportunity...but it’s kind of screwed up that it’s rare, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Gwen said. “So while we’re on the subject, I should say that you’re really smart and I like how you stand up for yourself and other people.”

Melissa might have blushed, but it was so cold that it would have been hard to tell. “Well, you’re probably the most natural paranormal investigator any of us have ever seen! We bring you along for one case and look what happens!”

They both laughed for a moment and then there was a pause. Not a typical pause, but the kind where Gwen felt like something might happen. Although there was nobody else there, she suddenly felt self-conscious and nearly panicked. She abruptly stood up.

“Uh, ready to move on?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, sorry. Just got really cold all of a sudden.”

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The day had gotten away from Gwen quickly when they finally arrived back at her house that afternoon. The two of them exchanged a quick hug without words and then Melissa was off

in her own car. Gwen hoped that Melissa hadn't been obsessing over that one awkward moment in the same way. Or maybe she hoped she was. It was hard to be sure.

She pulled the phone from her pocket, intending to check in with Blake before their dinner at the Frozen Hearth pub. It was a popular spot that tended to be busiest when newly-minted legal drinkers were back from college. Blake had shown some reluctance when she suggested it but he knew how much Gwen liked it and eventually acquiesced.

While in the mountains, she had missed a few texts from her mother and also a voicemail and missed call from a number she didn't recognize. Curious, she held the phone to her ear and listened.

"Hey, Gwen! This is Valerie! God, I haven't seen you in so long! I wanted to let you know that I'm in town for a few days and I'd really like to catch up. Call me back, okay?"

She stood still for a few moments outside the car and that strange memory came back again. Holding hands in the playground while people pointed and laughed. Now she knew Valerie was among them. At that point, it seemed unlikely they would become friends just a couple of years later. A lot had changed the summer after that incident, but she couldn't figure out why that particular moment kept coming back to her lately.

Gwen didn't know immediately whether or not she would call Valerie back, but decided to forget about it for the time being. She spent the next two hours at home while her parents complained about not seeing her often during the winter break. Gwen assured them that they would get sick of her after graduation since she intended to save money on rent and live at home while working on her Terrence Malick horror film.

After a brief walk to the corner where the Frozen Hearth sat, she pushed open the door and found Blake sitting at the bar halfway through a beer. He kept glancing towards the back of the room until he took notice of her.

"I just got off the phone with Andrea before you got here," he said as Gwen sat down.

"Are we set for tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, but we had better finish our investigation there soon. She says her mother and aunt are coming back to the house in a week or so. Who knows how they would feel about this whole thing."

With the impending end of her winter break, Gwen hoped to finish before then as well. At least Andrea would finally have some family back in the house. "What about her father?"

"He's in Yellowknife waiting out the winter," Blake said. "Supposedly he'll come home this spring."

"What the hell's wrong with that guy, anyway?" Gwen asked. "Who just drives to the end of the world when their family needs them?"

"He just wanted to disappear," Blake said gently. "I've felt like that sometimes, but it's harder when you have people depending on you. I feel bad for Andrea."

"Me too," Gwen said. "We've got to do this right, Blake. She needs help."

"While we're on the subject, I got some weird texts from Dale," Blake said.

"Why weird?"

"I don't think we're going to be seeing much of him anymore."

"We were too hard on him at the meeting," Gwen said. "I worried about that."

"You weren't," Blake said. "Somebody had to say something so he finally got the message. The problem is everyone has to throw in their two cents. We were all so eager to be on the right side that his feelings got tossed under the bus."

“But you didn’t say anything,” Gwen realized. “You’re too nice.” No wonder Dale was talking to him.

“I’m not that nice. I had nothing to add that hadn’t been said a couple times already.”

She was trying to compliment him, but he wouldn’t accept it. In fact, he never accepted compliments. She had noticed that before but never gave much thought to it until now. What was he afraid would happen if he did?

“I’m trying to say that you’re considerate,” Gwen insisted. “You know it’s true.”

He chuckled. “Just too sensitive for my own good. But once you start looking, it’s amazing how often people will put someone else down without really thinking about it. It’s like we’ve been programmed to do it. Like this one time, I was talking to some people at WMU when I first got there. It was that awkward time when you’re first there and you don’t really know who your friends are going to be.”

Gwen nodded. She remembered that. The bartender set their buffalo wings down in front of them. She took advantage of the incoming anecdote to start eating a few.

“We were talking about high school and some of them had trouble too,” Blake continued. “I told them that I still get nervous when I see someone whisper in someone else’s ear. I always think it’s about me, even if I don’t know them. So you know what they did after that?”

“What?” Gwen asked, letting a piece of chicken escape her mouth. She shouldn’t have skipped lunch.

“One of them whispers to the other one while staring right at me. It was supposed to be a joke and I was supposed to laugh. I didn’t. It was awkward. Needless to say, I didn’t really hang out with them after that meal.”

“I don’t think they meant any harm,” Gwen said.

“No, probably not,” Blake admitted. “But it was like I was a wild animal who had just shown my belly. They had to exploit that weakness. It freaks me out if I think about it too long.”

“I think part of you learns that when you’re in high school,” Gwen added. “At least I did. I felt like I had to hide almost everything about me to stay acceptable to Valerie and the group.”

“I’m surprised you wanted to eat here then,” he replied. “Have you noticed the crowd from our classes back there in the corner?”

“No,” Gwen said. “I didn’t even think to look.”

Blake glanced behind his shoulder and sighed. “Ah Jesus Christ, he saw me.”

“Who?” Gwen said as she turned around. She needn’t have bothered with the question since she recognized Craig Graham immediately. She remembered him as tall and buff during the LHS days, but it seemed like some of the muscle was being taken over by a beer belly. He still wore the same Patriots hat sideways, although perhaps now it was disguising a receding hairline. He was aging quickly, but still had a self-satisfied grin as if he had just scored a winning touchdown.

Craig helped himself to the stool next to Blake. “Is that really you, Ward? I haven’t seen you in years! How you doing, man?”

“Um, not bad I guess.”

“Good to hear!” Craig slapped him on the back hard. Blake grimaced for a moment but didn’t dare make any noise. Then Craig caught notice of Gwen.

“Oh hey, it’s Gwen Miles! This is awesome, LHS reunion!”

“Hello Craig,” Gwen said awkwardly. She and Blake locked eyes and something changed in his face. He turned around to face Craig.

“What are you doing this?”

“What, saying hello?”

“Acting like we were friends,” Blake said contemptuously. Craig was stunned, so he continued. “You’re being nicer right now than you ever were. You used to take my notebook right out of my hands and make fun of my drawings...when you weren’t drawing dicks on them, of course.”

Craig stuttered nervously for a few seconds. “Wait a minute, wait a minute. That was like ten years ago.”

“Not even six.”

“Oh, whatever. I can’t believe you’re still mad about that. We were all just kidding around, it was no big deal.”

“Of course it’s no big deal to you,” Blake responded. “You weren’t the one being shat on all the time.”

After a few awkward moments, Craig finally spoke again. “I’ll tell you what, Blake. If you got in our faces back then the way you just got in mine, I don’t think it would have happened as often.”

Gwen was proud of him, but then his face changed again. It made her nervous.

“So it’s my fault is what you’re saying,” Blake said, glancing down at the floor briefly.

“You could say that,” Craig agreed. “You gotta stand up for yourself.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Blake returned and then things got quiet. Craig clearly wasn’t sure if he was serious or not. Blake glanced down again. Gwen realized what he was about to do.

“Wait--”

It was too late. Blake suddenly kicked the leg of Craig’s stool, sending his chin forward into the bar. Flailing in shock, he soon wound up on the floor flat on his back as the stool clattered nearby.

His entire smug exterior had drained away. He yelled in that way that people rarely did in movies, where it seemed like someone had completely lost control of their voice. “What the hell is your problem?! Are you nuts?!”

“Hey, stop complaining!” Blake yelled back. “It’s just a part of growing up! You’re not entitled to sit in your chair peacefully! If you can’t handle get knocked on your ass, how are you going to handle the REAL WORLD?!”

He was screaming at the entire “real world” now, not just Craig, who was absolutely bewildered. She rushed over and grabbed his arm, hoping to drag him out the door before things got uglier.

“Let’s go home, Blake. You’re drunk.”

“No I’m not!” he said, yanking his arm away. “I only had one beer.”

“Yes you are,” Gwen said quickly. “Sorry, Craig.”

She was now pushing his back with both hands. He got the hint and walked outside, where it had started to snow yet again.

“What is your fuckin’ problem?!” She yelled. “What if he presses charges?”

“Oh sure, take his side.”

“That’s not funny!”

“It’s not a joke,” Blake said angrily. “But whatever. He’s not gonna press charges. He’s not even bleeding.”

Gwen wasn’t willing to let it go so easily. “What’s this Adrian case doing to you, Blake? These outbursts of yours keep getting worse and it’s obvious that’s the reason. I don’t know if you should keep coming along.”

Blake raised his eyebrow. “Oh, really? What makes you think you have the seniority to make a decision like that? You’ve only been in the group for like three weeks.”

“I’ll tell Sam,” she said quickly. “He’ll agree with me on this.”

“You do that and I’ll threaten to quit,” he replied. “He won’t want to lose any more members.”

She let out an exasperated sigh. This was not going well. She had to get through to him some other way. “You don’t have to live through this again. Once was enough, don’t you think?”

“You don’t understand. I’m living through it all the time. There’s always this little voice in my head telling me that I suck, regardless of what I accomplish. I’m always worried that all my friends are going to realize it and then I’ll be alone and miserable just like I was back then. I just...want someone to pay for that.”

Gwen was taken aback by the vulnerability he had just shown. “I wish you could see yourself the way I do. Or the way Andrea does.”

“What’s she got to do with this?” he asked quietly.

“Something seems to be going on between you two,” she answered. “You haven’t noticed?”

“She’s in mourning,” Blake said, somewhat surprised by the question. “She’s lonely and she needs kindness, so I’ve been trying to be kind to her.”

“But do you like her?”

“You mean do I like *like* her?” He let out a short laugh. “We really are back in high school. Yes, I do. But I’m not getting my hopes up. Once some time has passed and she’s in a better place, she’ll probably be looking for someone better than me.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Well, whatever.” He turned around and began to walk away. Snowflakes blew around in the space between them. Gwen stared ahead for a few moments, unsure whether she should go after him or not. Just when she was going to go her own way, he turned around.

“You ought to take some of your own advice, Gwen. High school’s over. You don’t have to pretend to be someone that you aren’t.”

She was suddenly uneasy. “What does that mean?”

“I think you know,” Blake said. He turned around again.

Gwen only had a faint idea of what he meant, but the thought was too unsettling to entertain for too long. She went back inside to pay for their meal while avoiding the gaze of the LHS alumni still aghast at the spectacle they had just witnessed. When she finally reached her house and stepped out of the bitter cold into the warmth of the living room, she realized there was one more person she wanted to check in with today.

## Interlude IV: Only the Beginning

*Oh man, I've really stepped in it this time. I can't go into much detail but I've let my anger get the better of me and now I'm in trouble. I'm not sure what's happened to me in the last year or so...it's like I'm just one more incident away from turning into a rage monster like in some supervillain origin story.*

*My Dad likes to tell me "it gets better" once you're done with high school. He means well, but I think it takes willful ignorance to buy into that. I mean, you definitely can't pay attention to the news if you want to hold onto that. How can anyone look at the world out there and assume you're better off joining it?*

*It's hard to take in because of the lies we're told as kids. I don't mean the silly lies like Santa Claus bringing presents or not being able to swim after you eat because you'll get a cramp and die. There are bigger lies you hear that you buy into and it really hurts to find out they're not true. Stuff like...if you treat people with respect, they'll do the same for you.*

*Getting picked on doesn't stop once you graduate high school, it's just different. Instead of getting called "loser" or "douchebag," it's "entitled" or "Millennial." Here nobody cares about your problems because daily abuse is apparently a normal part of growing up. Out there nobody cares because of...well, that's hard to say actually. They just regurgitate these insults about participation trophies or whatever. But like...I may have gotten one or two of those, but it wasn't my idea. You arrogant fucks were the ones giving them out!*

*But it's the same stuff I was talking about before. You're never allowed to have a problem that isn't your own fault. You'll never get an acknowledgment that things are just unfair. It's a shame because the world is unfair to a lot of people, some more than others. I mean jeez, if I was black I'd have to worry about all of my problems AND randomly getting shot by the cops every time I went out on the street. So I'm actually in the least shitty bracket of this suffering tournament...which is not exactly encouraging.*

*It's not just the police that are screwed up. If you put any institution, public or private, in the spotlight long enough you find out just how corrupt and broken it is. Put it all together and you get this big shitty picture. I'm starting to wish I was one of those people who never read anything about current events. They call them "low-information voters." We pick on those people but they got the right idea. Like, what's the upside to knowing how bad everything is? Is it really worth being "informed" if the information makes you so miserable?*

*I saw some article the other day that was all like "there is so much more anxiety and depression lately, why is that?" I'm like "No shit, look around you man!" I guess you can't say that society creates anxiety and depression but it sure as hell enables it, the same way my phone charger didn't create my phone but still keeps it charged to 100 percent.*

*So this is why I'm not really looking forward to graduation like everyone else. Maybe they've all bought into the "it gets better" thing. But I just can't. I don't think this is the point where people stop treating me badly. I think it's only the beginning.*

*I just...I don't know what to do. I don't know what's worse, what I've been through or what's coming once I'm done with LHS. Other people don't seem to have this problem. They have that "confidence" that girls supposedly like so much. But if confidence is so important, why has everyone been dead set on making sure I don't have any? Oh wait, I'm sorry. It's my fault I*

*don't have any...cause I'm supposed to just have it no matter what people say or how often I get told I'm not worth a shit. How can I go out into a world so harsh like this? I'm not sure I can.*

*I...I think I have to stop, you guys. I might cry and then this could go viral for the wrong reasons. I can see it now - "Wimp Crying on Camera," one million views, a hundred thousand likes. It gets better. Yeah...sure it does.*

Once again, Gwen wasn't expecting what she heard when she started the video. Since this was the last of the four posted on Adrian's channel, she expected something with more finality. After all, he had killed himself days after this one was uploaded. He seemed frustrated and despondent but Gwen had to confess to herself she was waiting for something more obvious. An apology to loved ones? A final farewell to his viewers? But then again, this wasn't someone who paid much deference to the expectations of others. Maybe those typical signs of suicide weren't as common as everyone thought and that was why so many loved ones in these situations never saw it coming.

There was one more thing that was bothering her. He hadn't confessed to the destruction of Eric's car. Sure, there were a couple of oblique comments that were likely referring to that incident, but he was speaking like he didn't want to implicate himself. If he knew his own death was imminent, why bother? What happened that pushed him over the edge if he wasn't there already? The next time the group gathered at Andrea's house, she hoped to find the answers.

# Chapter 11

After sleeping late, Gwen noticed she had another message from Valerie. Her persistence was surprising; it used to be that everyone else was desperate for her attention. This time, she had told Gwen the café where she would be hanging out that morning. Gwen knew the place. It was one of those hipster hangouts where people would talk about quinoa or how expressing gratitude solved all of life's problems. It certainly wasn't her crowd but the smoothies were good.

During breakfast, she began to consider taking a short drive there to see Valerie. Some good memories were coming back, like when their group would summon her over to the lunch table by singing "why don't you come on over, Valerie?" Sometimes it annoyed Valerie, but Gwen would much rather have her name associated with a popular song than a superhero's dead girlfriend.

In the summer between the end of middle school and the start of high school, Gwen had completely changed her appearance. She bought new clothes, grew her hair longer and even started wearing contacts despite never finding it very comfortable. When she and Valerie wound up seated next to each other in Algebra, it wasn't long before they began to connect. Gwen found herself invited to Valerie's cafeteria table with the others in her circle. It had been surprisingly easy to forget about that incident less than a year earlier and just enjoy the new arrangement.

There were plenty of moments where Valerie had acted like a genuine good friend, even if Gwen was constantly afraid of her disapproval. She had never reacted well to attention from boys and Valerie had been her coach, eager to find her a dashing boyfriend like the ones she always seemed to have. There were trips to the mall, school dances, softball games and countless meals together. Blake always seemed to ignore the possibility of good memories from high school to further his talking points about its inherent evil, but it wasn't so simple for Gwen. While she was constantly holding back parts of herself, there were still a lot of good times.

As she nervously drove through puddles of slush and dirt to the café, Gwen's thoughts returned to that one memory. It was so vivid and yet she felt some distance from it and she wasn't totally sure whether it really happened or was just a dream. It reminded her of a conversation she had with Debra, her roommate from her freshman year at WMU. She was a psychology major particularly interested in dreams and memory. According to her, if you weren't sure if a memory was a dream or not, it probably really happened.

The café was a small building which felt even smaller as she navigated the crowd of people looking at the elaborate chalkboard menu. It was Valerie who saw her first and greeted her with an enthusiastic hug.

"I'm so glad you came!" she said, leading Gwen over to a small table adjacent to the window. She looked different than Gwen expected. That long flowing blonde hair and bright green eyes were still there but she was dressed in a gray Yale sweatshirt and blue jeans. Valerie from high school wouldn't have been caught dead in something so casual looking.

"Sorry it was hard to reach me," Gwen said. "I've had a busy break."

"You look kinda different," Valerie said abruptly. "Maybe the hair? Or the glasses, it's gotta be the glasses. Got sick of contacts, eh?"

"I guess so. You look different too."

Valerie laughed. "I'll bet. I dress to be comfortable now, can you imagine?"

A waitress approached them and asked if they wanted anything. Valerie got a cappuccino and Gwen opted to try one of the smoothies. Some of them had a few bizarre ingredients, but one with banana and strawberry seemed safe. It proved to be easy to talk to her old friend and she heard quite a bit about Valerie's current efforts to get into law school. Gwen shared some of her future plans too and was pleasantly surprised that she could finally discuss her passion for movies and not worry about running afoul of some undefined rule. Maybe that rule was never there in the first place. After all, everyone watched movies. Yet the medium wasn't the problem, it was her passion. Gwen had long been afraid that showing too much passion would get her ridiculed. You were supposed to be aloof and detached from everything during high school. It wasn't cool to care about things.

After about a half-hour of conversation, Valerie shared that she would be heading back to Yale the next day. Gwen realized this was her one chance to ask Valerie what she had been thinking about for days, although it was nerve-wracking.

"Can I ask you something kind of random?"

"Okay," Valerie said with a hint of nervousness.

"I keep thinking about one day in eighth grade," Gwen began. "Everyone was outside and I was holding hands with someone. A girl, actually. I felt happy but then people noticed and they started laughing. I hate to say it, but you were laughing too. Do you remember this at all?"

Valerie was floored by the question and sat silently for a while. For one agonizing moment, Gwen feared she might point and laugh at her all over again, but that was silly. It was already obvious this wasn't the same person from middle school.

"I'm sorry, Gwen," she finally said. "I don't remember that. I don't remember it but I have no doubt it's true. That's just what I would have done back then."

"It's okay," Gwen replied. "I think I only remember you being there because we eventually became friends. I can't really remember who the others were. I hadn't thought about it in years but it's been on my mind lately for whatever reason."

Valerie's eyes were cast downward. Gwen could never remember her looking so upset. "You know, I was in the diner the other day and I saw Anne Flaherty waiting tables. Thank God she wasn't my waitress or I don't know what I would have done. I was awful to her. But you...you're my friend. I hate to think that I hurt you. I've missed you terribly at school."

"Has everything been okay there?" Gwen asked.

"In the end, yes. But my first year was awful. I almost transferred. Nobody there cared about how fashionable I was or how unfashionable somebody else might be. I felt like everyone was so much more grown up and I was a stupid small town girl who didn't deserve to be there."

"That's hard," Gwen said. It was also hard for her to imagine. She had felt welcome at college since the beginning.

"It was, but I needed it," Valerie said. "Otherwise I'd never really grow up. Maybe I needed to hear this too. I just hope you can forgive me."

Gwen was starting to feel some regret. She hadn't expected this kind of genuine remorse, just like she hadn't expected Anne to forgive her. They hadn't seen each other in years but Gwen hadn't even considered that they might have changed too.

"I forgave you a long time ago," Gwen said. "I was thinking about good times we had on the way over here. I was just so reserved in those days and I've been trying to figure out why."

Valerie was quiet again but then a slight smile crossed her face. "Hold hands with anyone you want, okay?"

Not long after that, they parted ways and discussed the possibility of meeting again that summer. This time, Gwen knew she would make the effort. In the meantime, she wondered if she would tell Blake about what had happened. Would he be willing to believe that a former “mean girl” could change so much in just a few years? Then again, perhaps it wasn’t smart to bring up high school at all given the way he had been acting. She hoped he had calmed down since the previous evening. They were set to investigate the Giordano house again and the last thing the group needed was more drama.

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The cold struck Gwen like a slap to the face when she stepped outside that evening. Doing her best to bury her chin in her scarf, she awkwardly dashed over to Melissa’s waiting car. The last few days hadn’t exactly been warm, but this was a new low in an already tough winter. Whatever snow had melted during the milder daytime hours would surely be ice before long.

Melissa took note of Gwen’s red cheeks and pained expression. “It’s freezing, isn’t it? Don’t worry. I’ve got the heater turned way up.”

Gwen gave a heavy sigh of relief as she got into the car. She pulled off the hat and scarf and the two made their way to Blake’s apartment to get him. He walked calmly to the car and gave no indication that the frigid conditions bothered him. Gwen had noticed over the years that men never wanted to admit to being cold. At least Blake wasn’t one of those guys who tempted fate every year by wearing shorts through the winter months.

Blake seemed like his normal self as he greeted his friends and sat in the back seat. Gwen and Melissa had exchanged a few texts where they discussed the incident at the Frozen Hearth, but nobody dared reference the incident during the drive. For her part, Melissa had to pay attention to the road. There were already little pockets of ice that forced her to be extra cautious. Finally, they pulled up the driveway to the Giordano house.

“Hurry up and get in here!” Andrea called from the front door. “It’s way too cold!”

The three eagerly followed her into the house. Gwen noticed that Andrea greeted Blake with a “half-hug,” which is what she called it when people only used one arm. In this case, it was likely because she had a mug in the other hand. As she briefly rested her head on Blake’s chest, he caught notice of Gwen’s attention. She grinned. He could try all he wanted, but he couldn’t deny it.

“The garage is going to be like an icebox tonight,” Andrea said. “I have a space heater I was thinking of bringing in there.”

“Appreciate the thought,” Melissa said. “But unless it’s completely silent, I wouldn’t. We don’t want any humming noises to cover up any EVPs we might get.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that. Well, let’s at least have some hot chocolate first.”

Her suggestion was well-received and a few minutes after everyone sat down, Sam and Sid pulled into the driveway. As Andrea got up to open the door for them, Gwen realized that this was all that was left of the group now.

“You might have noticed we’re a few members short,” Sam said sheepishly.

“Blake told me what happened,” Andrea replied. “I’m really sorry that this case has caused so much trouble. You all seemed to work so well together.”

“Some other case would have brought this on if not this one,” Sid said. “Most of the time we don’t find much so there isn’t much reason to argue. But when something like this comes along, we can’t be arguing amongst ourselves about how to approach it. It’s just too important.”

“I want you to know we’re still fully committed to helping you communicate with your brother,” Sam added. “We’ll try for as long as it takes.”

“That’s nice, but I hope we figure this out soon,” Andrea responded. “My aunt is bringing my mother back here in a few days. She would flip out if she knew I was doing this.”

Sam put a hand on his chin. “I see. Well, keep us posted in any case.”

“You all better get your jackets back on,” Sid said. “We’re likely to catch our death of cold in there otherwise.”

As the group slipped their jackets and gloves back on, Sam addressed the group. “I went over all the EVPs and other evidence we’ve gotten since we started this. There’s a consistent pattern of Adrian trying to draw our attention to that same tool bench. I’m not sure why. He doesn’t strike me as the handyman type. But since we may not be able to keep investigating here for long, we’re going to have to try and get him to be more specific on why exactly that spot is so significant.”

“Maybe he wants to make sure we know that Charlie and Eric are tools,” Melissa joked. Chuckles and lighthearted groans followed. The group spent the next few minutes setting up the usual equipment, a process that had gradually become quicker as they had gotten used to the space. Sam and Sid left the garage to watch the proceedings on the computer. Andrea had also opted to stay out of the cold for a while and returned to the living room couch. The remaining three sat in folding chairs in the middle of the room, watching their breath hover in the cold air. Melissa signaled to Gwen that she was about to start recording.

“Hi Adrian,” Gwen said to the dark room. “I want to let you know that we’re running out of time. Your mother is coming home soon and Andrea doesn’t think she’s going to want this investigation to continue. We still want to help you but we’re not sure how. I know there’s something about that tool bench that’s important. Somehow, you’ve got to let us know why because we’re at a loss. Can you do that? Can you explain what we’re meant to see there?”

After waiting for a few moments, the three left the garage to listen to the recording on Sam’s computer. Andrea had new cups of hot chocolate ready for them as Sam retrieved the audio and turned up the volume. Sure enough, they found the ghostly voice they had come to recognize.

“Watch.”

“Watch what?” Sid asked.

“He’s said this before,” Blake answered. “I can’t figure out what he’s talking about.”

“The YouTube videos?” Andrea suggested.

“Maybe,” Gwen said. “But I have watched them all now and I don’t think there’s anything really earth-shaking there. I have a better understanding of his struggles but I don’t know what any of it has to do with a tool bench in his garage.”

The group quietly thought it over while Gwen reflected on all that happened since she first met the Granite Ghosthunters. The first time she had heard Adrian’s voice was one of the most powerful moments in her life but now listening to him speak had become surprisingly familiar. The wonder of communicating with someone who had died had been replaced by exasperation and impatience about not being able to figure out what he wanted.

Sam suddenly sat up straight in his seat. His eyes widened as he stared at the camera’s footage of the garage. “Wait a minute, wait a minute! Guys, look at this!”

The stereo that had been sitting on top of the bench was rocking back and forth. After wobbling in place three times, it finally tilted backwards and fell between the bench and the wall.

The group heard the thud from the garage immediately after watching it disappear from view on the screen.

“I don’t suppose the wind could have done that?” Sid asked. The group exchanged skeptical looks. “You’ve got to at least ask the question.”

Gwen and Blake were the first to rush back into the garage. The cold swept over them again as Blake knelt by the tool bench and picked up the stereo. He was checking to see if there was a disc in the CD compartment when he noticed something else on the floor behind the bench.

“What is it?” Gwen asked. Blake didn’t answer as he reached into the shadowy space and grabbed a small object. The narrow area between the bench and the wall covered his jacket sleeve with dust as he pulled the item into view. It was a phone.

Gwen let out a small gasp and placed her hand over her mouth. The rest of the group came in to see what they had found.

“It was never about the tool bench,” Gwen said. “It was about what was behind the tool bench. That.”

“See if it will turn on,” Sam said. “He might have left a message.”

Blake tried but only saw an icon indicating the battery was dead. “It needs to charge. It’s been sitting back here for weeks.”

Melissa began digging into her purse. “I think I have a little charger on me. It should hopefully work with that phone.”

She handed it to Blake, who noticed an outlet near where the stereo had fallen. Once it was connected to power, the phone lit up quickly. Gwen briefly wondered if a password would be necessary to access the phone, but Blake was able to navigate to the main menu without it.

Gwen noticed that Andrea looked extremely nervous. It could have been just the cold, but the way she was fidgeting with her fists clenched looked like she was dreading what Blake might find on the phone.

“Not sure where to start,” he said quietly.

“He’s telling us to watch,” Sam replied. “So I would say start with the videos. There may be something there that never made its way to YouTube.”

Blake nodded and tapped the screen a few times until he found the list of videos. The most recent one caught his eye immediately. “This one looks like it was shot right here in the garage.”

Andrea suddenly reached out a hand and nearly yanked the phone from Blake. “Don’t!”

Everyone turned and stared at her. She winced and pulled her arm back.

“What’s going on?” Melissa finally asked.

“I...I hid the phone behind there,” Andrea stammered, careful not to lock eyes with any of the others.

“Why?” Blake asked.

“And why didn’t you tell us about it?” Melissa added.

“It was sitting on the bench when I found him,” Andrea said as tears began to stream down her face. “I saw the first few seconds of that video before I stopped it. When I saw that it was filmed in the garage, I was afraid. I was afraid that it was going to be a video of him dying. I couldn’t stand the thought of anyone seeing that, so I dropped it behind the bench and I hoped it would be lost forever.”

At this point, she totally lost composure and began to sob. Blake got up and held her while the others were silent. Gwen couldn’t blame her for what she had chosen to do, assuming

the content of the video was as she feared. However, Gwen didn't believe that was the case and it was soon clear that she wasn't alone.

"But why would he want us to watch that?" Sid wondered aloud.

"I'll watch it myself in the other room," Blake said.

Andrea looked up at him. "Why?"

"Somebody has to," he replied. "It's the only way to be sure. And if that is what's on there, then at least nobody else will have to see it."

"Are you sure?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah," Blake said. He walked back over to the wall and picked up the phone and Melissa's charger. He left the garage and nobody spoke for several minutes. The only sound was Andrea blowing her nose as she tried to regain her composure. Gwen found herself worried about Blake. If Andrea was right about what was in that video, it was an additional trauma he didn't need given how fragile he seemed lately. Still, he was right. Somebody had to take the risk and nobody else was especially eager.

After what seemed like hours, but was really only about five minutes, Blake came back into the garage.

"It's not what you think," he said quickly. Andrea let out a sigh of relief.

"What is it then?" Sam asked.

"Well, I think you guys should just watch it for yourselves." He led the group out of the garage and over to the living room couch where they could gather and not be quite as cold. Blake sat in the center while everyone huddled around the small phone, either sitting on the couch or on the floor. When he was satisfied that everyone had a good view, he played the video.

*Adrian's face is close to the camera in a way that is familiar to anyone who has seen enough selfies on social media. He even imitates the "duck lips" expression that is inexplicably common in self-portraits of teenage girls before chuckling and placing the phone on the tool bench.*

*"I'm gonna try a change of scenery this time," he says to the camera. "I've been hanging out in here a lot lately. Not sure why. I pulled the door up in order to get some light in here. Autumn's in full swing now so it's not as warm as it has been but it's still nice out."*

*He takes a few steps away from the camera. He is standing in the middle of the garage, around the spot where the fallen chair still sits. There is a pile of rope a few inches away from his shoes.*

*"So I've been doing a lot of thinking and—huh?"*

*He looks towards the driveway. "Oh, someone's coming."*

*Someone else speaks. "Who the hell are you talking to, reject?"*

*Charlie and Eric come into frame. Adrian isn't acting surprised to see them. "What do you guys want?"*

*Eric's fists are clenched. Charlie is more relaxed, standing a little farther away.*

*"I know it was you, creep," Eric says.*

*"What are you talking about?" Adrian asks.*

*"Don't play stupid!" Eric yells. "You threw that flaming bottle into my car and now it looks like it's been in a war zone. What the hell is your problem?!"*

*"I did it, you say?" Adrian responds. "I don't suppose you have proof of that."*

*They are quiet so Adrian continues. "You know...witnesses? Maybe fingerprints on the glass? I don't know, crime scene stuff."*

*"You did in the middle of the night and you had gloves on," Charlie says. "The cops probably aren't going to bring you in but we know it was you."*

*Adrian can't resist a smile. "Whoever did it must be very smart. Frustrating, huh?"*

*Rage shoots through Eric's body and he exhales loudly.*

*"You know what I would be frustrated by if it was me?" Adrian asks. "The idea that somebody would do something so mean and never get punished. That I would suffer and the outside world wouldn't really care. Sure, the police look it over but there's not enough evidence so everyone just gets back to their lives. Meanwhile, you're left without a car. I bet that would hurt. Well, if you want a silver lining, at least you're doing better than me. I never had anyone investigate the things that happened to me."*

*"Holy shit," Charlie responds. "That's what this is about. You're still mad about seventh grade. That was five years ago dude, where are you going to just get over it?"*

*"I don't know," Adrian says back. "When are people going to stop treating me like a goddamn leper? Why can't they get over it?"*

*"You miserable little shit," Eric growls. "We used to think you were just embarrassing to be around but now I know it's worse than that. You're nuts. That's the only way to say it."*

*Eric looks down and notices the rope. He crouches to grab it and looks at it for a moment before turning back to Adrian.*

*"Why don't you take this and hang yourself?"*

*Adrian looks at the rope and then gently pushes it away.*

*"Why don't you make me?" he says, looking Eric right in the eye. A couple seconds later, he conspicuously glances at the camera. Eric follows his gaze.*

*"What?" he says. "Are you recording this? Charlie, turn that thing off."*

*Charlie walks over to the phone and picks it up. Seconds later, the video ends.*

"Wait, that's it?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah, that's it," Blake answered. "So what do you guys think happened afterwards?"

"If those two guys were smart, they would have taken that video to the cops," Sam said. "He came just shy of confessing to setting that kid's car on fire. They must have been too angry to think straight."

Sid spoke up but was still too deep in thought to make eye contact. "So that video is what he wanted us to see this entire time. But why? Just how angry were those two boys?"

"You don't think..." Gwen found herself unable to finish the sentence as the horrific implications swept over her.

She may not have said it aloud, but Andrea picked up on it immediately. "All this time we've been saying it was suicide, but what if..."

"Let's slow down," Sam said, making an appropriate gesture with his hands. "We should be careful with this."

"You would think the police would have found signs of a struggle," Blake commented. "But then again, they might not have been looking."

"Either way, they should see this," Melissa said. "That could be what Adrian wants us to do. Nothing gets accomplished just by having us sit around and watch it."

"Are you okay with that, Andrea?" Sid asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I could do it tomorrow."

"I'll do it," Gwen said suddenly. "I'm going to do my best to get to the bottom of this. Let's all plan to meet here again tomorrow night."

# Chapter 12

Gwen had been slow to get out of her bed for most mornings during her winter break. This morning was different. She was on a mission.

The first place on her list was a supermarket in Glenboro, where she had learned that Larry worked as a manager. She felt that familiar dread as she turned on her car and waited a few minutes for it to warm up. There was likely some ice on the roads after last night's bitter cold and she considered calling Melissa and asking her to take care of the driving again. The problem with that, however, was that then the two of them would end up talking. While that was always pleasant, she wanted some time alone with her thoughts. The twenty minute drive to Glenboro (likely closer to thirty given Gwen's cautious approach) would provide that.

The others had been a little surprised by her intention to take sole responsibility for fulfilling what she now interpreted as Adrian's wishes, but it made total sense to her. Time was running out and most of the others had jobs and other responsibilities to balance with the investigation. She had a few days left with nothing expected of her and with college about to end in the spring, who knew how long it would be before she had another chance like that. There was also something personal about this whole thing. Gwen had been the one who first communicated with Adrian. She still wasn't sure exactly why it had unfolded that way, but it did cultivate a sense of loyalty that was driving her to try and help him make peace with his death.

It seemed to her that despite the unnerving way the video of Adrian, Charlie and Eric had ended, most of the group did not suspect a murder had taken place. In her brief meeting with Charlie and Eric, Gwen had found them to be self-centered and highly insensitive, but still fairly normal teenage boys who were unlikely to kill their old friend and neighbor. Despite her gut feelings, she was trying to force herself to stay open-minded. After all, if that nasty visit had pushed Adrian into a frame of mind where suicide seemed like the only option, it could be argued that the two of them did have a fairly direct role in his death. And yet Adrian hadn't seemed despondent in the video. He was defiant, even smug, a side of him she hadn't seen in any of the other footage.

Surprisingly, the one who knew Adrian best was the one who seemed most open to a different explanation for his death. Andrea seemed eager for a story that took the blame away from her brother and put it on a couple of bullies down the street. Blake would surely find some vindication in that outcome as well but he had spent enough time as an investigator to know that they needed more information. As she had left the house the previous night, Gwen realized there was one more source of potential insight the group had been ignoring. To get in touch with Elise, she would need Larry's help.

As she drove into the supermarket, she found herself dwarfed by the enormous snow banks scattered around the parking lot. The largest of them must have been over ten feet tall. That was the thing about snow. Shoveling and plowing didn't get rid of it. It just moved it somewhere else. The only thing that could get it out of everyone's way was warm weather, which was definitely not coming anytime soon. When she was a kid, she liked trying to climb these man-made mountains for as long as her parents would put up with it. Now she just wanted to get inside the store before her limbs turned to ice and fell off.

The chilly parking lot had been quiet, but the inside of the store was buzzing with activity. It was always crowded at this time of year, with people scrambling to make sure they had enough of the essentials in case another blizzard hit and cut them off from the road. Taking a glance at

the long checkout lanes made her glad she was not here to do actual shopping. Larry was likely busy today but hopefully she could catch a glimpse of him if she wandered the aisles long enough.

She was headed for the frozen meat section and there he was, talking to a younger co-worker and pointing down a few aisles. She patiently waited for the conversation to finish and the other guy to walk away. Larry turned to go about his business and noticed her.

“Gwen?” he said. “You, uh...need help finding anything?”

“No,” she said with a smile. “I came to talk to you quickly.”

“What’s going on?”

“I was hoping to get in touch with Elise. Do you have her number?”

“Yeah,” he said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a phone and scrolled through his contacts until her name came out. Gwen typed the numbers into her own phone as he read them off.

“Have you gotten to the bottom of that case yet?” Larry asked.

“Maybe,” Gwen replied. “I wanted to go over that night again with her. Get a better sense of the impressions she was feeling.”

He nodded. “I think that’s smart.”

“Everything going okay with you?” she asked.

“Oh sure,” he said. “You know, if you feel like you’re ready for a different approach to all this, our group would love to have you. You’re a very gifted investigator.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But for now, I’m about to go back to school and that’s gonna be my focus. I’m not sure what the future is for me as far as this ghost stuff goes.”

Larry chuckled a bit. “Okay. Well, good luck to you.”

She wished him the same and headed for the front of the store. Once she got the car started, she reached for the temperature dial and cranked up the heat. Like usual, it would spit out cold air for a few minutes until the car was ready to cooperate. Her next stop was the police station but she figured it made sense to leave a message for Elise first.

Surprisingly, Elise picked up the phone right away. “Hello?”

“Hi, Elise. This is Gwen. From the investigation in Lakeside?”

“Oh of course,” Elise said brightly. “How you doin’, girl?”

“Oh, I’m good. How are you?”

“Just fine. Are you still working that same case?”

“Yeah,” Gwen answered. “I wanted to talk to you about that night.”

She meant to say more, but Elise began talking quickly and emphatically. It seemed she really wanted this off her chest.

“Gwen, I’m so sorry about what happened to the group! I never meant to cause that much trouble. I feel terrible about the whole thing!”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Gwen said. “I’m new to the group, but the others are all saying it was something that was bound to happen at some point. But I’m curious about what you felt that night. It seemed to really scare you.”

“Yeah,” Elise said, sounding a little embarrassed. “I might have reacted too strongly. It’s just that for a while I wasn’t getting anything from the house. Then you guys found that image in the ITC video and it all came at once. I don’t usually get feelings that are so strong. Most of the time it’s very subtle.”

“You said you felt ‘bad intentions.’ Could that mean revenge?”

She took a moment to think. “Yeah, I suppose it could. What I felt was like...this angry desire, an angry desire to do harm. It was so intense I thought it was a...”

“A demon,” Gwen finished for her. “Well, I’m pretty sure it isn’t. I think it’s just a very angry young man. I’ve found something else, too.”

“What?”

“If it wasn’t suicide...if he was murdered...and he wanted revenge on the guys who did it, then what you felt would make sense, right?”

“My God!” Elise exclaimed. “Is that what happened?!”

“I’m not sure,” Gwen said. “But it might be.”

“I didn’t think of that possibility at the time, but it could be the truth. It would explain the intensity of his anger. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to bring the evidence to the police and let them draw their own conclusions. It’s all I can do, really.”

“I hope it brings him some peace,” Elise said after a pause. “He feels very connected to you, Gwen. I felt that as well.”

“Thanks, Elise. I’ve got to get going now.”

They said their goodbyes and she began to drive out of the parking lot. By now, the car’s heater was working nicely. Gwen pulled away from the mountainous snow bank and left the grocery store’s parking lot. The drive to the police station would take her back through the center of Lakeside and towards a park that was typically very busy in the summer. Now it was deserted, with only the top of the slide and the monkey bars peeking out from under two months worth of snow. The police station was a short distance from the park’s entrance.

Gwen made her way through the front doors of the station and realized she had never actually been inside this building. To her immediate left was an office full of shelves and filing cabinets with a middle-aged woman working at a desk. A tabletop sign sitting in front of her read “Records Division.” That wasn’t what she was looking for.

She turned and saw what appeared to be the main desk. A table sat behind glass with a phone attached to the nearby wall. On the other side was a door, which opened as Gwen made her way to that side of the lobby. A familiar face walked out.

“Oh it’s you,” said Officer Jason Hobart. “Sorry, but we’re out of tickets for the Policeman’s Ball. Very popular this year.”

Gwen smiled nervously. “Uh, I’m not here for that. I could use some help.”

“Do you want me to let you know when we host a workshop on distracted driving?”

She did her best to avoid sighing. “No, I’d like to speak with whoever worked on the Adrian Giordano suicide. Was it you?”

Hobart looked vaguely flattered. “Me? No, that was Detective Munoz. If you want, I can tell him you’re here. What are you planning on talking to him about?”

“I have a video,” she said. “It’s from Adrian’s phone. I think he should see it.”

“Okay.” Hobart went back through the door. Gwen paced around the lobby for a few moments before he re-appeared and motioned for her to follow. She made her way through a corridor of desks, many with ringing phones resting on them, and Hobart pointed to the desk they were there to find. Munoz was a young looking man with something of a baby face, but the gray streaks in his black hair gave away that he was older. Hobart walked off as Gwen sat down in a small chair in front of the desk. Munoz finished up his current phone call and hung up.

“Alex Munoz,” he said, extending his hand. “Can I help you with something?”

“Gwen Miles,” she replied as they greeted one another. “I’m here about the Adrian Girodano case.”

“Not a whole lot to say about that one,” he said. “Sad thing, but it’s pretty straight forward. He got tired of being picked on and put an end to it.”

“Well, it might not be that simple,” Gwen said. “Here, you should watch this.”

He took the phone from her with a curious expression. “This is Adrian’s phone?”

Gwen nodded. “It was behind a tool desk in the garage.”

“Well I’ll be,” Munoz said. “We looked all over for this thing. Why in the hell was it back there, I wonder.”

Gwen knew, but didn’t want to get Andrea in any trouble. She just shrugged.

“How did you happen to find this?”

She wasn’t pleased at the idea of lying to the police, but the true explanation was problematic to say the least. “Well, the family finally got up the nerve to go in there and clean the garage out and we stumbled on it while moving stuff around.”

He looked at her briefly but seemed satisfied with the answer. “So there’s a video on here I should see, huh? It’s not the YouTube stuff? Cause that’s online and I’ve already seen that.”

“Not that,” Gwen said. “It’s that last one.”

He nodded and began to play it. His eyebrows arched as he saw Adrian alive. Ever since Gwen had watched the first YouTube video, she had found it disconcerting to see him preserved this way. Munoz must have had similar feelings. He was now at the moment where Adrian had nearly confessed to burning Eric’s car.

“I thought that was him,” Munoz said. “But since he was dead, it didn’t seem to matter.”

As the conversation on the video grew more heated, he sat up in his seat and leaned his head forward. His mouth hung open slightly. When the footage ended, he set the phone down on his desk and exhaled. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Gwen said sympathetically.

“Well, I appreciate you showing this to me.”

“Was it them?” Gwen asked, suddenly on the verge of tears. She had held back her feelings on this in the interest of getting things done, but they were bubbling up now. “Did those two creeps kill him?”

“Let’s not go there,” Munoz said. “Hanging someone by force is not an easy thing to do. I think the scene would have looked a lot different if that’s what had happened. Still...I should probably talk to these two. I knew they had some beef, but this is pretty heavy stuff. Do you mind if I hold on to the phone?”

“Not at all,” Gwen answered.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll have to copy over this video. If you’re all set, I want to get to work. Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, standing up. “I’m glad you agreed to see me.”

He had one more thing to say. “If you’re friends with Andrea...look after her, okay? She was the only one to see him hanging up there. Aside from me, anyway...and I guess the coroner.”

Gwen fought back tears. “I’ll do my best.”

As she walked back towards the lobby, her thoughts were occupied not just by what he had said to her before she left, but his face upon watching the entire video. For all of her horror film expertise, Gwen had never seen a dead body in real life and certainly not one hanging dead in a garage. She wondered if the police eventually grew numb to it, but that look on Munoz’s

face suggested otherwise. Who knows what gruesome memories had been dredged up by the video? After all, someone must have had to get the body down from the ceiling.

It had been tougher than she expected, but she had done what Adrian seemed to be asking of her. In a number of movies she could recall, “justice” for ghosts had meant coming back to murder those responsible for their death. While she had to admit that didn’t sound like the worst idea in the world, she hoped this more traditional sort of justice would be acceptable. Perhaps she would know tonight.

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The preparations were like any other night of Granite Ghosthunting work, but tonight was different. It was hard to articulate, but everyone knew this evening was extra important. One way or another, the investigation would end tonight. Andrea’s mother would soon return, accompanied by her aunt, and they would try to resume regular life in the Giordano household. Gwen would leave the group behind and return to WMU, eager to finish up her final semester and start chasing her dreams of making an independent film in the White Mountains.

After returning home from the police station, she had a vague feeling that she had neglected her family during this winter break. She spent much of the afternoon in the living room with her parents, browsing the internet while her father watched football and her mother looked at Facebook on her phone. There were periodic conversations but just sharing the room together was nice. Spencer was absent, but nobody was especially surprised. He preferred to spend weekends in the company of peers on the internet who wouldn’t call him names and just wanted to gallivant around online fantasy worlds. Gwen had grown worried about him recently, but he was so determined not to talk about his feelings that she wasn’t sure what to do.

Before heading over to the Giordano house, Gwen went back to Bubba’s with Melissa and Blake. She felt like they needed a “do-over” after what had happened during their previous dinner and this outing was definitely an improvement. Blake even ordered another sarsaparilla and was able to laugh about his previous mistake. Both of them were impressed with how productive Gwen’s morning had been. Then again, perhaps the hard work had simply been figuring out what Adrian was trying to tell them. Taking that video to the authorities was a breeze by comparison.

Dinner went a little longer than expected, so the three of them were the last to arrive at the house. The moon was already high in the sky and it was as cold as ever, but at least the projected snow had held off. New England local news channels did big business from apocalyptic snow predictions, with each flurry getting its own name and fancy logo. The forecast this winter had been more accurate than usual, but it was only a matter of time before one of these civilization-ending snowstorms didn’t actually happen.

“There you guys are!” Andrea said as she opened the door for them. As they walked in, Sam and Sid were already seated at the table enjoying the now customary cookies and hot chocolate. Gwen had hoped that perhaps Dale might return but no such luck. Even though the case had fractured their group and their numbers would be down to four when Gwen returned to school, Sam was still smiling. She had a feeling it was for more than hot chocolate.

“Everything’s all ready,” Gwen said as the three latecomers took their seats. “I took the video to the police department and the detective who came here says he’ll look into it.”

“You talked to Detective Munoz?” Andrea asked.

“Yeah.”

“He’s a very nice man,” she said. “I was out of my mind when he was looking around here and he was just so sensitive. But I’m sorry, go back to your conversation.”

“Good work, Gwen.” Sam said. “We’ve been talking and I think we’re going to send you alone in there tonight if that’s okay.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Why?”

“I think that’s our best chance of seeing some activity, to be honest.”

“Are you sure?” Gwen asked.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Sam continued. “You’re blaming yourself for what happened to the group and wondering if I’m upset with you.”

“Uh...maybe a little?”

“We’ve been over this, remember? I wish we could have all stayed together but I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything.”

Sid spoke up. “I just want you to know that I totally agree. You’ve made some of this old man’s dreams come true.”

Gwen blushed. “Aww, you guys!” She gave each of them a hug and then sat back in her chair.

Sam gulped the last of his cup of hot chocolate and set it on the table. “So, are you ready to finish this?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure I want to go alone. Can just one of you come with me? I’m sure Adrian will understand.”

Sid looked over to Blake and Melissa. “What do you think?”

“I’ll wait out here,” Blake answered. “Why don’t you go with her, Melissa?”

Melissa nodded and stood up. The rest of the group took that as a cue and set up the equipment inside the garage. They had become so familiar with the area that the process was quicker than it had ever been. When everything was set, Gwen and Melissa walked into the garage. She sat in the folding chair which hadn’t been moved since the first time she managed to get Adrian to speak up. Melissa found another one and placed it next to hers.

“Adrian?” Gwen said, turning on her recorder. “It’s me, Gwen. Melissa’s here too. Are you listening?”

Examining the recording, they heard a faint “yes.”

“This could be my last night here,” she continued. “I want you to know that I’ve tried to do what you wanted. I took the video on your phone to the police, the one where Charlie and Eric came in here? The detective said he would probably talk to them again.”

The two of them listened to the recording again. This time there was no response.

“I hope that’s the justice you were thinking of,” Gwen said. “We’re not sure what really happened in here on the day that your life ended, Adrian. Is there any way you could tell us?”

Still nothing on the recorder. The two of them sat in their chairs and exchanged uncertain glances. How long was it reasonable to wait? Was this how it was going to end?

Finally, Melissa spoke. “Jeez, you’d think he’d at least say--”

That was when they saw it. Adrian stood before them. He was not glowing like they might have imagined. His body was about halfway drained of color and details were hard to focus on, but Gwen knew from watching those videos that it was him. His mouth was moving but the apparition was still too fuzzy to try and read his lips. In the five seconds Adrian was visible to them, Gwen blinked her eyes four times in an attempt to better make out the figure. Then he was gone, as abruptly and quietly as he came.

She and Melissa sat in stunned silence. Gwen was vaguely aware of the noise coming from the room behind them. The others were eager to enter but Sam had persuaded them to wait until they were sure whatever just happened was over.

“You saw that, right?” Gwen asked as her heart pounded inside her chest.

Melissa nodded, although Gwen hadn’t turned her head to look. “Fu...full body...full body apparition.”

“Holy shit,” Gwen said, shuddering on the second syllable. That got both of them chuckling for a moment before Melissa grasped at the camera dangling from her neck and had a sudden realization.

“Oh no!” she cried out. Gwen turned. “Gwen, I didn’t take any pictures!”

“I didn’t either,” Gwen replied sheepishly. “Oops.”

“Nobody will believe us!”

In that moment, Gwen felt it was essential that her friend not feel any guilt or regret about what they had just experienced. Before she knew what she was doing, she reached out and took Melissa’s hand.

“We’ll know,” she said. “We’ll know what happened. That’s what counts.”

Melissa may have been blushing, but it was hard to tell in the dark. They sat and held hands for several seconds before the others finally came into the garage. Gwen tried to let go of Melissa’s hand, instinctively expecting ridicule. Melissa wouldn’t allow it. They were still holding hands as the group entered, but nobody seemed to have any reaction to it one way or the other.

“Something major just happened in here, didn’t it?” Sam asked.

Gwen nodded weakly. He sounded like a faint voice coming from far away although he was in the same room. So much had happened in the span of a few moments that she could barely digest it all. As they left the garage, she cast another look at the spot where Adrian had appeared, hoping he might show himself again. She immediately chastised herself for being so foolish. The fact that it happened once felt downright miraculous, it was silly to imagine it could happen again.

Sam gathered everyone around his laptop to review the footage they had been taking of the garage. Gwen sat on the carpet staring into space as the others shuffled around her. This sense of being completely overwhelmed was like when Adrian first spoke to her, only even more intense. Many years later, thinking of this moment would still be enough to interrupt whatever she was doing for some heavy reflection. She came back down to Earth when she realized Melissa had taken her hand again.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she smiled.

“You did too,” Gwen replied. “How are you so calm?”

“Only for now,” Melissa answered. “I’m sure I’ll freak out later.”

Gwen looked in her eyes and realized nothing was ever going to be the same again.

“There we go,” Sam said. “This is about thirty seconds before you guys had that big reaction. Let’s take a good look.”

Ever since the first round of EVPs, the group had been filming the garage with three cameras during their sessions. The combined perspectives meant that every part of the garage was visible on at least one of the video feeds. The viewpoint Sam chose to observe was from the camera placed above the door frame. Gwen saw herself and Melissa from the back, seated in their folding chairs and holding the digital recorders to their ears.

A moment later, a gray blotch seemed to flicker in front of them. It was vaguely human-shaped but devoid of details.

“What the hell is that?” Blake asked.

“It was him,” Melissa answered. She turned to Sam. “It was a full-body apparition.”

“Let’s check the other two feeds,” Sam said, always careful to keep his excitement in check until he felt it was warranted. He hit a few keys on his computer and a new perspective came into view. Now they were looking at Gwen and Melissa from the side. The gray specter appeared again, although it looked smaller from this angle. The third camera had been positioned in front of them and Gwen wasn’t too pleased with this one. She hadn’t realized up until now how awkward she looked while they were waiting for Adrian to respond. When he appeared this time, the gray matter seemed to cover most of the screen, although Gwen could still see the stupefied expressions on their faces.

“It shows up on all three cameras,” Sid noted.

“There really was something in there,” Sam replied. “It’s just hard to make out.”

“It was hard to make out in person too,” Melissa added. “I could see him, but only for little moments at a time.”

“But you did see him?” Andrea asked. “How did he look?”

“It was hard to get a detailed sense of him,” Gwen answered. “I would like to think he showed himself as a way to thank us for doing what he wanted, but we can’t really know that for sure. It could have been just a bizarre accident that we saw him at that moment.”

Andrea didn’t seem pleased with that answer. “But do you think he can move on now? Will he still be here?”

Sid shrugged. “Who can say? If you find that he is still here, you know how to get in touch with us. If we can avoid upsetting your family, we would be happy to come back.”

“Absolutely,” Sam added. “In the meantime, I’m going to go through this footage frame by frame to see if we can get a glimpse of Adrian. I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

Not long after that, the group said their goodbyes. Gwen noticed a mournful expression on Andrea’s face and suspected that she would miss having everyone visit so often. It had surely broken up whatever lonely routine she had fallen into since her brother’s death. Her family would return to the house soon enough, but they would have their own grief to deal with. Given the intensity of their experiences together, Gwen suspected she (as well as Blake and Melissa) would remain friends with Andrea. If all went well, her days of dealing with the hurt alone would be over.

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Gwen slept soundly that evening and late in the morning, waking up long after her parents had gone to work and Spencer left for school. Still half asleep, she grabbed her phone and began checking a few of her favorite websites for new content. After a few minutes, she glanced over to her nightstand and saw the digital recorder was also sitting there.

She sat up quickly and couldn’t believe she hadn’t considered this until now. She and Melissa may have forgotten to take any pictures when Adrian had appeared to them but the recorder had been on the entire time. Nobody had remembered to check it, not even Sam, who was normally so thorough but became fixated on the video footage as soon as he heard what happened.

Rustling through the drawer on her nightstand, she found a pair of headphones and connected them to the recorder. She heard herself asking if Adrian was in the room, followed by

the “yes” that they had already heard when they checked the audio in the garage. Gwen spoke again and then came the long awkward silence where they both were waiting to see if Adrian would say anything. It was somehow even more awkward to listen to it later, with the ambient noise quietly droning away. Finally, Melissa spoke up.

“Jeez, you’d think he’d at least say--”

She expected their reactions to be louder, but aside from some quick gasps, the two of them had actually been fairly quiet when Adrian first appeared. Even though the image of him wasn’t clear, Gwen could recall his mouth appearing to move. Now hopefully she would hear whatever it was he said.

What she heard turned her blood to ice. It wasn’t words. It was laughter.

# Chapter 13

Adrian's laugh only lasted for a few seconds but Gwen gained a terrifying amount of insight from the sound. It was not a friendly laugh. It wasn't exactly a villainous cackle either but seemed to lean more in that direction. At that moment, it all made sense. The car burning, the video in the garage, Adrian's death and the subsequent haunting of the garage all fit together with a terrible clarity that made her feel like she might have a panic attack.

Gwen dropped the recorder on her bed and reached again for her phone. She had to talk to someone. She hastily typed a text message to Melissa that would have been an incomprehensible mess if not for her phone's auto-correct feature. She stared at the phone waiting for a response. Melissa wrote back after about three minutes. She was in a meeting at work.

Gwen felt vaguely embarrassed for forgetting that most people worked on weekdays. Despite that, she decided to try Blake. He worked as a clerk at a nearby bookstore and it was unlikely they would have many customers at this time of day. His reply turned out to be even quicker. He had taken the day off after their long night at the Giordano house. She told him she was coming over immediately. Gwen considered just throwing a coat over her pajamas and leaving the house but a glance outside the window at the gray skies convinced her otherwise.

Once she was dressed, she grabbed the recorder and rushed outside. She was ready for the cold but not for the wind. A thin layer of the snow covering her front lawn took flight and spiraled right towards her face. She turned her head away and awkwardly walked towards the car. As she pulled out of the driveway, tendrils of snow continued to blow across the road. It was only January, she thought. Two more months of this at least.

Blake rented a small apartment above a garage from a family who lived next to a small pond. The garage wasn't attached to the house and even had its own section of driveway. Gwen had come and gone several times without ever meeting the family in the house. During the brief drive, she found herself wishing she had been able to talk to Melissa. Not because of what she had just heard on the recorder, but because she wanted to get a sense of what was going to happen between them after the previous night.

Gwen pulled in front of the garage and made her way up the single flight of stairs. The door to his apartment was slightly open and she could see him through the crack. Although he was apparently on the phone, he noticed her presence and motioned for her to enter. As she gently pushed the door aside, he was concluding the conversation.

"All right, thanks. Bye."

"Anybody I know?" Gwen asked.

"Uh, maybe? That was Kate Stephenson over at the newspaper."

She was unsettled. "Were you telling her about our investigation?"

Blake shook his head. "No, not that. I was just letting her know that the police have new evidence in the Adrian Giordano case that could suggest it wasn't suicide."

"Oh no," Gwen said. "If I had just gotten here a few minutes earlier...you have to listen to this EVP right now."

"Was this from the big moment last night?" Blake asked.

Gwen nodded and held the recorder close to his ear. He grinned slightly upon hearing her and Melissa's exuberant shouts of surprise when Adrian had first appeared to them. Then the laughter rang out and his face became much harder to follow. Blake looked frightened, then

confused and perhaps a little sad. He sat stunned for a few moments before finally looking up at Gwen. "Holy hell."

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's hard to say," he answered, "but...he almost sounds gratified or something. Like he can't believe you actually did what he wanted. But maybe we're still not sure what that is."

"I think I am," Gwen said firmly. "It was a suicide. But he had a lot more in mind than ending his life. It didn't work the first time, so he...he tried again."

Blake looked impressed. "So that's it. You've put it all together. Andrea and I couldn't agree on whether it was a suicide or not. She really wanted it to be murder, but that just didn't make sense to me. I wondered if we would ever know for sure...but then we decided that either way, we wanted to get his justice for him."

"We can't!" Gwen protested. "We've got to call the police before they bring in Charlie and Eric."

"What are we gonna tell the police?" Blake said, raising his eyebrow. "That they were framed by a ghost? It's all in motion now, we can't stop it."

"But we can't just let them go to jail for something they didn't do!"

He shook his head. "Wait a minute. I'm not a lawyer, but I don't think that tape is enough to send them to jail. They probably won't even get charged."

"No," Gwen replied faintly. She suddenly understood Adrian's plan a little better. "No, that wouldn't be justice, would it? Not really. Justice would be humiliation."

"Yeah!" Blake said, getting excited in a way that made Gwen even more uncomfortable. "Once this gets out in the paper, those two will always have that cloud hanging over them. I sent her the video while we were talking, so hopefully all the details will make it into the article."

"What?" Gwen asked, perplexed. "That's impossible. I gave the phone to the police."

"That's true," he said with a grin. "But do you remember the night when we first found it? When I watched that video alone?"

"You sent it to yourself," Gwen replied, feeling a twinge of panic. "Why? What the hell's going on here?"

"I was really mad when I finished watching it," Blake explained. "At the time, I don't think I really knew why I was doing it. There was something powerful about having that footage. After we left last night, Andrea and I were texting for a while and we agreed that just going to the police wasn't enough. We wanted the community to know about this."

"Were you two ever going to tell anyone else about this scheme?" Gwen asked.

"I was going to talk to you about it tomorrow, but here you are."

"You were going to wait until it was too late to stop you," she said sternly. "You knew I wouldn't like the idea."

"But this is justice," Blake insisted. "Can you imagine them going into the diner and looking at old ladies whispering to each other like 'you know, they killed that Giordano boy but the police let them get away with it?' They'll never live it down. It's so awesome."

"It's not awesome, it's sick."

"Why? Those idiots deserve it. Sure, they didn't physically kill him but they literally handed him the rope to hang himself with and it's all on camera. If I can talk Andrea into putting that on YouTube, it might spread all over the place. We'll get that internet shame machine going and they'll be dogpiled."

Gwen felt ill. It was as if she was losing someone she cared about, watching him disappear and get replaced by something that was mean and cruel. Maybe a moment like this was why Larry believed what he did.

She finally spoke and her voice quivered. "This sounds a lot like bullying, Blake."

"So we should spare their feelings?" he asked with subtle contempt. "We should try and be better than them? Some kind of moral victory shit? What good is that?"

Gwen didn't immediately have an answer as he turned away from her. "You know, when I was a senior, I started to think maybe things could change. Maybe we had all grown up enough that I could finish high school on a better note. So I decided to go to the homecoming dance. It was the first time I'd worked up the courage to try something like that."

He turned back to face her. "I should have known better. Nobody laughed or anything, but everyone just ignored me. Nobody cared that I was there, nobody took a chance on talking to me. It was so...ingrained that I was a moron for thinking anything would be different."

"Blake, I'm sorry but--"

He waved his hand in the air. "That's not the end. I wandered outside and I found a few guys who had graduated the year before. They were just leaning against the wall of the school and drinking. They were the first people who had spoken me the entire night. They offered me a can and we hung around, making jokes and talking about how stupid high school was. It was great."

Gwen had a puzzled expression. None of Blake's anecdotes ever ended this well.

Sure enough, he continued. "Then the teacher comes out. The other guys weren't students anymore, so he just told them to get lost. As for me, well, I was in trouble. I got suspended for two days. The cops treated me like I had just gone on a killing spree and my parents...they were sure that one can of beer was going to turn me into some vagrant living in a cardboard box."

"I'm surprised you never told me that story," Gwen said.

"Look, I know it was against the law. I know something had to happen. But do you get how it makes people feel when I get in that much trouble over some beer while those two assholes can destroy somebody else's life and they don't get so much as a lecture?"

She crossed her arms. "And this helps...how?"

His eyes were beginning to well up. "This might be the only chance I ever have to balance things a little bit. To score a victory for people like me who never get to win. If I don't, nobody else will."

Gwen sighed "Well, I hope it helps you feel better. I really do, but I worry that it won't. Because I don't think it's ever going to be enough."

"What are you talking about?"

"We embarrassed Hobart when he pulled us over," she said. "You knocked that other idiot out of his seat at the Hearth. Most people will never have a chance to do something like that. And now this. How much revenge do you need?"

He tried to reply but was left stammering.

"You know, it's one thing to be angry about high school when you're in your 20s," Gwen continued. "It's to be expected, really. But what about when you're 30? Or 40? It's going to start getting embarrassing. You're gonna be getting wheeled around the nursing home complaining how nobody was ever fair to you."

She was getting too upset to continue and walked towards the door. "That's not how I want to live. And I don't want to watch you live that way."

“Wait,” Blake said, but she couldn’t. She shut his door and hurried down the stairs to the front door. Her car was waiting for her, but she wasn’t quite ready to drive. Instead, she made her way over to a bench looking out over the nearby frozen pond. A particularly cold breeze made her tense up and before she knew it, she was weeping into her gloves. She wiped her eyes frequently, afraid that her tears might freeze, but this did little to keep them at bay. She couldn’t remember life ever feeling so cruel, at least not since that memory from eighth grade that had been tormenting her over the past few weeks. A few minutes passed, it could have been hours for all she knew, and suddenly she noticed Blake sitting down on the bench next to her.

“I kept waiting to hear your car start,” he said quietly. “I wanted to see if you were okay.”

“Nope,” she said, trying to smile.

He sighed and rubbed his hands together. He may have regretted not putting on enough warm clothing but he would never admit it. “You know, I had another thought when you played me that EVP. But I guess I...pushed it aside.”

She turned to face him. “I thought about what it would be like if I had died but was still within reach. If I could talk to people. Would I really want to use that chance for...for something like this?”

Gwen nodded gently. “I hope you wouldn’t.”

“Andrea won’t say it, but I think she’s hurt that he doesn’t have anything meaningful to say to her. Doesn’t have to be an apology or anything, but he could at least say he loves her...or just goodbye. But instead, he wanted this.”

“Why did you push that aside?” she asked.

“I thought it was weak.”

“Not at all,” she replied.

“It hurts, Gwen,” he said after a brief pause. Gwen realized he was struggling not to cry too. “It still hurts like it was yesterday. I keep thinking I can get even...but like you said, I don’t know if it’s possible. But I can’t bear the thought of you cutting me off because of it.”

She hadn’t expected this. She might have been angry but she still would have talked to him the next day.

“Please try and be patient with me,” he continued. “I wish I wasn’t like this. I wish I could just go about my business like everyone else. I’m sorry.”

Looking at his anguished expression, it was obvious he wanted a hug. Yet even now, in the presence of his closest friend, he was too scared of rejection to try. Maybe someday he would learn that she trusted him, but for now she pulled him close. His shoulders shook as he finally broke down. Only he knew how long these tears had been held back. She cried a bit too, but it was quieter.

“I love you,” he finally said.

She was shocked, not at the feelings but that he shared them out loud. “I love you too.”

Gwen had said that to him once before, in a situation not unlike this one. One night in her second year of college, she had gone out to a pub near campus with a guy named Griffin. They had an enjoyable time over dinner, swapping moments from their favorite horror films. It had gone so much better than most other times she went out with boys, but it all went sour when she decided to head straight home by herself once they were finally out of the restaurant. His expectations had been quite different, to put it delicately.

Her roommate was asleep when she finally got back, but she knew Blake would probably be up, enjoying the late night quiet as he doodled something on his computer with an electronic tablet. Sure enough, he picked up the phone and offered to come talk to her upon hearing her

sobbing. She hadn't spared any of the details of how she felt, how it seemed like Griffin had gone through their whole pleasant evening with only one goal in mind. Was there something wrong with her for not sharing that goal? Why had she been so reluctant anyhow?

Blake had just shaken his head and then hastily grabbed a pen and a nearby pile of post-it notes. Within a minute, he had sketched a crude mythological griffin wearing a polo shirt and shouting "I'm a selfish douche!" Despite having spent the last fifteen minutes sobbing, she laughed out loud upon seeing it. At that moment, she told him she loved him. He smiled nervously and said that he loved her back.

After he left that night and she reclined comfortably in her bed, she began to feel nervous about that moment. Would he take it as an indication that she wanted a relationship with him? How would he react if she had to reject that potential romance? Thankfully, that scenario never materialized. He seemed to know exactly the spirit in which it was meant. Thinking about it years later, she took note of the contrast between them. Griffin thought that girls had an obligation to provide whatever he was in the mood for. Blake wasn't even sure he deserved a hug after years of loyal friendship.

He pulled back and had that same nervous smile from the moment she was just reminiscing about. Gwen could tell this was the time to reach him.

"Hey," she said quietly. "Next time we hang out, we'll just watch a movie or something, okay? Something dumb we can laugh at. Let's be done with all of this. We did what we said we would do."

"You don't think I should put that video up on YouTube?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. That just keeps you stuck in this crap for longer. Let's just leave it. Let's try and leave all of that stuff behind for good."

He hesitated for a moment. "I'll try. I hope I can."

She smiled and stood up. They exchanged one more brief hug and then he was heading back up the stairs to his place. Gwen sat in the front seat of her car, exhaled heavily and then started her short journey back.

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Later in the afternoon, Melissa called Gwen and sounded concerned. Looking back over her text messages, Gwen realized she did come off as panicked. After the day she had, morning felt like a long time ago.

Once she was finished at work, Melissa drove over and the two of them sat in Gwen's room on the floor, leaning back against the side of the bed. It didn't take long for the whole saga to come out and Melissa heard the whole story about the EVP, Gwen's own realization, and Blake and Andrea's activities. She didn't seem overly surprised by any of it and the two agreed that in hindsight, the idea of Charlie and Eric actually murdering Adrian in his own garage and getting away with it seemed unlikely.

"So you've told me a lot about Blake and Adrian," Melissa said. "But what about you? Are you doing okay?"

"Who knows? I've barely had time to think about that. We still haven't even talked about..." Her voice trailed off.

Gwen looked at Melissa's hand and thought about reaching for it. Despite everything that had happened, she chickened out. She briefly had a better understanding of Blake's insecurity but the thought did not linger long as Melissa took her hand and used the other to nudge Gwen's head onto her shoulder.

“Is it okay?” Gwen asked.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“It’s just that I never--” She trailed off again.

“I had a feeling,” Melissa said.

“When did you know?” Gwen asked.

“I had suspicions from time to time,” she answered. “But I don’t think I really knew until I was a sophomore. Towards the end of the school year, I dated a girl who was a senior. Then she went off to college and we fell out of touch.”

“You didn’t want to do the long distance thing?”

“Not then,” Melissa replied. “Maybe I could do it now, but it shouldn’t be a big deal. After all, WMU’s only an hour away.”

“Yeah,” Gwen said quietly. “But I haven’t even told anyone.”

“So what?”

Gwen looked up. “Huh?”

“So what?” Melissa asked again. “We’re not celebrities. We don’t need to have a whole press conference about it. We just live our lives and people will figure it out on their own.”

Gwen was going to say something else, but the door to her room suddenly opened. Her father stood there with his hand on the doorknob.

“Girls, dinner’s--” He abruptly stopped speaking. “Oh...um, sorry. Come down when you’re ready.” He wasted no time in closing the door.

Melissa looked down at Gwen. “See?”

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The following afternoon, Gwen dragged her large duffel bag full of clothes down the stairs. She could have picked it up instead but felt like she should save her strength for the walk to the driveway, where she would need to keep it out of the snow. There had been some rain and sleet during the night. Nothing major, but enough so that she would have to pick the chunks of ice off her windshield wipers again. They would probably need to be replaced soon, just like after every winter.

One might think Gwen would be used to the tedious process of getting snow and ice off her car by now, but avoiding it was the major reason she was heading back to WMU several hours later than she had originally planned. Her parents had said goodbye before heading off to work and she was relieved neither of them had pressed her on what was going on between her and Melissa. While not out of character for them, she was still grateful for their tact.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, Gwen noticed the school bus pulling up in front of the house. Spencer was home and even though they had already said goodbye, it wouldn’t hurt to wait a moment for him to get inside. He opened the door and she was shocked by the expression on his face. His eyes were red and puffy and the skin around them was red, probably from rubbing. Had he really been crying this hard on this bus?

Gwen regretted her stunned reaction after Spencer rushed off into his room and slammed the door. She couldn’t remember the last time her little brother seemed so vulnerable. She thought about knocking on his door, but he would almost surely tell her to go away. He seemed determined to handle it alone. Gwen looked at his door, her car in the driveway, and back at the door. After a few moments, she let go of her duffel bag.

# Epilogue

The first day of spring was typically forecast in late March, but everyone in New Hampshire knew that was too optimistic. You couldn't count on winter being over in March, regardless of whatever a certain amateur meteorologist groundhog in Pennsylvania said. As the winter dragged on, however, it was tempting to buy into the optimism. Sometimes in April, you could see flowers just starting to poke up through the soil and find yourself excited that spring was on the way. That was risky because it was not uncommon for a sudden freak snowstorm to appear and smother it all. Winter never went down without a fight.

As Blake walked out his apartment door and down the stairs to his car, he felt safe in assuming winter was over. It was early May now and the fog and gray clouds of the last few months were long gone. From here on, it was a short spring and summer followed by another beautiful New England autumn. It was important to enjoy these times while they lasted because winter's return was inevitable.

Gwen would be home from college for good in just a couple of weeks. Aside from her spring break, Blake hadn't seen much of her since January. He wondered if he could have made more of an effort, but he had spent the rest of the winter nervous about how he had behaved. That moment when it seemed she would abandon him over his single-minded goal of vengeance for Adrian haunted him for weeks. His weeping breakdown on the bench shortly after wasn't sitting well either. Despite all of Gwen's reassurances, he still cringed at the thought of it. Blake could talk a big game about all the bullshit that young men were taught about not showing their emotions, but those lessons still left their mark.

This discomfort was likely to fade, especially now that Gwen and Melissa had been spending so much time together. In college, Blake had watched Gwen's romantic mishaps with quiet frustration. He couldn't think of anyone who was more deserving of love. He had also realized pretty early on that he wouldn't be the person to give her that, although he did love her. He had spent many nights in bed wondering if that love was romantic or just a result of their close friendship. He had never really had a friend like her so he never felt sure what to expect. Eventually, he decided to stop trying to put his feelings in a box and just accepted that love for the unique, intense attachment that it was.

Blake still felt like a complete amateur when it came to romance and having Andrea in his life was making that clearer than ever. He had gotten so used to having even the most subtle flirtations rebuffed that meeting someone who had developed genuine feelings for him was disorienting. In this case, he hadn't even flirted with her. All he had done was pay attention to her feelings throughout the investigation. Months later, he was still nervously waiting for the day when Andrea would feel strong enough to move on without him, but that changed when they were actually together. Then he could actually believe that he was wanted, despite that other voice constantly telling him he was mistaken.

Her parents were both finally home and seemed grateful to him for being there for Andrea. Blake suspected there was a lot of guilt behind the gratitude and he felt it was deserved. They had abandoned their daughter at the most awful time of her life and it occasionally made him angry. When he was feeling more charitable, he would ask himself what he would do in their shoes and it was hard to come up with a satisfying answer. They could be forgiven for

briefly losing their minds at a time like that, couldn't they? Blake didn't know for sure and didn't particularly want to find out.

Neither he or Andrea had said anything about what happened that winter to her parents. They had discussed it briefly but concluded that there wasn't any outcome they were comfortable with. Either her parents would refuse to believe it and scold Andrea or they would be desperate to communicate with Adrian at a time when Blake wasn't sure if his presence was still in the house. Even without a ghost, the family must have felt his presence. He wondered if the Giordanos would have that garage taken down. Nobody seemed comfortable using it. Perhaps they would simply sell the house instead. In a movie, that would lead to a new family being accosted by Adrian's angry ghost, but Blake believed (or at least hoped) that he was finally soothed.

The newspaper article about the police revisiting Adrian's death was printed about a week after Gwen drove back to WMU. It was a tiny piece on page 7 that was only paragraphs long. The police hadn't been especially talkative with Kate Stephenson, probably out of concern for the family members. Little did they know that one of the family members came up with the idea in the first place. Underwhelming as it may have been, it got the job done. Charlie and Eric's names had been publicly mentioned in connection with Adrian's death, even if details were scarce. Blake hoped they had at least gotten grilled by the police at some point. He had never tried to find that out for sure and was doing his best to keep his promise to Gwen.

On days like this, that was easier. It was one of those rare times when the temperature outside was not too hot or cold, just comfortable. Blake took note of the leaves coming back on the trees as he got closer to Andrea's house. As he pulled in the driveway, he allowed himself about 30 seconds to finish the song that was playing in the car. During a concluding series of drum rolls, he waved imaginary drumsticks above the steering wheel.

About two hours later, Blake was reclined on the living room couch. Andrea was asleep with her head on his chest. She had mentioned that she still wasn't sleeping well, but that suddenly seemed like a huge understatement. They planned to watch some TV but she was out within minutes once they were comfortable. Blake reached down with his free hand to pet Winston the dog, who was usually right next to the couch when he visited. He searched for the dog and instead touched the carpet. Suddenly the quiet in the room was gone.

Winston was barking at the door to the garage.

**The End**