

Chapter Six

All Seth could see was a man being strangled in close-up. A gurgling sound of water or blood bubbling through a constricted passage accompanied the image. Wavy black hair and dark, fathomless eyes flashed out of a tangle of rushes beside a riverbank. The face, twisted in agony, was distorted beyond recognition. Two hands encircling the neck were the sole evidence of an assassin.

Seth saw a boy dressed in knee pants and a brown jerkin standing helplessly by as the hands tightened, forcing the eyes to bulge out of their sockets. The mouth gaped open in an attempt to breathe and scream, but released only a choking rattle. A blistering terror coursed through Seth's veins, scalding him from the inside. Feverish and damp, he twisted in the bedsheet. The stabbing pain of strangulation broke through the heat and wracked his body. It felt sharp to be murdered, like being stuck with a battery of knives. As the pain reached a threshold beyond endurance, his flesh convulsed in a series of contractions.

The unknown victim reappeared, the face a mask of pain, only to surrender his will to live. He went slack and collapsed to the marshy ground in slow-motion, an untethered scarecrow returning to the earth. As he fell, Seth's agony dissolved into a peaceful nothingness. He snapped out of the dream as the man was about to die. Instantly awake, a cold sweat rose over his body. He opened his eyes and scanned the bedroom, but could not distinguish anything in the dark. He fumbled for the lamp on the nightstand and switched on the light. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary—the fan hummed loudly at the foot of the bed; the clock read a few minutes past four. He got up, walked into the bathroom, and urinated. He climbed back into bed, turned off the light, and pulled the moist sheet over himself.

As soon as he fell back to sleep, an acrid, burning odor jolted him awake. A tingling energy like prickly pins-and-needles spread across his body, nauseating him. The blanket of nettles came from a different vibrational level altogether; it was heartlessly cold. But it was the sulfurous stink of moldy, dead leaves which singed Seth's nostrils, teared his eyes, and contracted his windpipe that indicated he was in the presence of a ghost. Not just a ghost, but the ghost that had previously glided through Beth's living room. Only now the apparition was hovering over the length of his body. Lying prone on his back, he was trapped—paralyzed and mute. The spirit's pungent, burning vapor began to choke him. He gasped for breath, but refused to open his eyes, for an intuition welled up and warned, Seeing that thing will scare you to death. The ghost pressed downwards, wrapping him in its otherworldly chill. Invisible hands forced his legs apart and caressed his inner thighs. He nearly swooned as an immaterial finger slid inside him, stretching and burning his anal canal.

A sulfurous wind scorched his nostrils and stung tears from his eyes as he sank into an airless void. Stinking breath grazed his ear, and a disembodied voice inside his head hissed, "So, you've come back, my boy!" He jumped, and was pushed deeper into the mattress by the ungodly energy. His breathing was impaired by the monumental yet weightless strength exerted against him. His breath, when it came, was in tight little gulps. It's trying to suffocate me.

"Breath of life, my boy?" the voice inside Seth's head inquired. "You'll draw breath again only if you serve me—and save me."

Seth guessed that the ghost could read his thoughts. He screamed inside his mind, Go away! Go away! The spirit only laughed while continuing to flatten him into the mattress. He thought the sound of his voice might frighten the ghost away. But when he opened his mouth to scream, he emitted a low-pitched rasp: “Ahhhh! Ahhhh!” he squeaked, no louder than a mouse in a trap. Go away! Go away! GO AWAY! he hollered in his mind. He mouthed the words at the same time, eventually getting his voice to work, though the words croaked out haltingly. “GO AWAY! GO AWAY! GO AWAY!” he shouted. Beth and Roger must hear me. Why don’t they come to see what’s wrong?

Yet he wasn’t certain whether he’d actually screamed, or if he’d merely spoke inside his head. He couldn’t tell on what level of reality he was functioning as he tried to summon up something he wasn’t sure existed. Was he hoping to access a hidden resource in his soul that he’d never needed before? Or a previously untapped power that would well up? As he lay quaking in the dark, he accepted his own psychic strength and spit out a fierce “GO! A—WAY!” The command engendered a split-second impression of Keta, the Native American guide from his dream.

The spirit rose off Seth’s body and glided to the other side of the room. Its stench wafted away, allowing Seth to breathe. He opened his eyes, raised his head on the pillow, and saw a play of glowing amber lights against the far wall next to a chest of drawers. The fuzzy light shafts came together in random, abstract patterns, like light refracting through a prism. GO! A—WAY! GO! A—WAY! GO! A—WAY! he yelled in his mind, while the ghost flickered across the room.

“Gladly, boy, once you help me over,” the voice inside Seth’s mind replied. “If you fail, I will obliterate you, as my mistress desires.”

But I mean you no harm! Seth pleaded, now certain the spirit could read his thoughts.

“You’ve caused me nothing but harm!” the ghost said, twisting Seth’s body from within with a stabbing rancor. “How amusing that fate brings us together again. How fortunate for me.”

I mean you no harm, but go away. I mean you no harm, but go away, Seth chanted inside his head. The spirit’s breathing, like wind rustling river reeds, accompanied Seth’s words. I mean you no harm, but go away. I mean you no harm, but go away. I mean you no harm, but go away. The mantra soothed Seth, and silenced the ghost—the menacing breathing diminished. He glanced across the room and watched the eerie lights fade in and out. The spirit vanished momentarily before the lights pulsed back into view. The lights dimmed and reappeared until, all at once, there was nothing there.

Seth’s heart pounded as the first light of day peeked through the corners of the shades that covered the dormer windows. He lay motionless, transfixed by the intersection of the two worlds he’d witnessed. Thank God I didn’t smoke any hash! he thought. I don’t know how I would have dealt with that thing stoned. The lingering scent of sulfur kept him on the brink of nausea. He struggled to sit up and observe the rosy dawn illuminate the bedroom, accompanied by sporadic bird calls. He was weakened, as if he’d been enchanted by the spirit. He had to piss badly, but was too frightened and queasy to get out of bed. He sank back into the mattress and lay motionless for an hour. The old house creaked and moaned, but no sounds came from Beth and Roger’s bedroom at the opposite end of the hallway.

If the ghost induced the dream—and was the entire episode a dream?—what had broken it? Seth wondered. Could it have been my plea ‘I mean you no harm’ that sent the spirit away? Like calling on God in my hour of need? Is there a logical explanation for this? ‘I mean you no harm’ comes from a basic human goodness that protects us from evil. Because if there is a God, that thing wouldn’t exist in the first place.

Sunlight filtered through the shades and set the room in high relief. The eye-like windows stared at Seth, accusing him of madness. The whiteness of the bedsheet that shrouded his body blinded him. The clock on the nightstand ticked as loudly as a bomb, and the fan screeched. The light that penetrated the shades bent at crazy angles, mimicking the prismatic of the ghost’s ethereal body.

He buried his face in the pillow. Dry coughs tore his throat and shook his body as he lay in a bed he could not leave. He curled into a fetal ball, longing for the oblivion of sleep. Rolling onto his belly, he drifted from a jagged wakefulness into the initial stages of slumber. As he lost consciousness, he was shocked awake by the thought, It’s following me. Then he passed out.

Keta materialized in his dream. “Gentleness, mercy, and love expressed from the heart can vanquish any evil,” the shriveled creature intoned in a wispy voice. But Keta’s revelation slipped from Seth’s mind as he embraced the narcotic sleep of the dead.

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