



You Are Destined To Be Together Forever (Odd Thomas 0.5)

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Category: Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Fantasy, Suspense, Mystery, Horror

Description: Amid the dizzying rides, tantalizing games of chance, and fanciful attractions of a state fair, two teenage sweethearts on the cusp of life and love's pleasures find their way to a shadowy carnival tent brimming with curiosities. There, from the bizarre and enthralling Gypsy Mummy, a mechanized merchant of dreams and prognosticator of tomorrows, the young couple learns what fate promises for them. But fate, for Odd Thomas and Stormy Llewellyn, is something altogether different: full of dark corners, sharp edges, and things no seer or soothsayer could ever anticipate.

And for Odd Thomas, a gallant fry cook from a sleepy California desert town, the future beckons—to listen to unquiet spirits, pursue unsettling mysteries, and learn shocking truths . . . for a purpose far greater than himself.

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One

My four-hundred-pound friend and mentor, P. Oswald Boone, the famous mystery writer, says that although he has in his refrigerator cheeses older than I am, sixteen is not too young to write worthwhile prose, as long as I write about what I know, which in my case means a girl named Stormy Llewellyn, the ghost of Elvis Presley, brutal murder, and revenge from beyond the grave.

In late May, the annual spring fair had come to Pico Mundo, California, where I had lived all my life, on the edge of the Mojave Desert. On Friday, I borrowed Terri Stambaugh's car so that I could take Stormy to the carnival that had set up its many attractions on the fairground midway. Terri was my boss, the owner of the Pico Mundo Grille, where I worked as a fry cook twenty-four hours each week during the school year, forty hours each week during the summer.

I couldn't borrow a car from my father, because he had walked out on us years earlier. I couldn't borrow a car from my mother, because such a request would stress her. When stressed, Mother made veiled references to suicide, and sometimes she retrieved the pistol from the nightstand drawer in her bedroom, caressing its contours with more affection than she'd ever shown me. When I was a child, which was a shorter period of time for me than it was for most people, my mother sometimes implied that she might take me with her if she decided to consummate her romance with Death. My mother is beautiful, and to anyone who never lived with her, she seems to be a genteel and pleasant lady, if slightly aloof. I moved out when I turned sixteen, into a tiny apartment above a garage, which I pay for by mowing the lawn and doing general maintenance chores for my landlady.

At 4:30, Stormy met me behind the Grille, where Terri's Mustang was parked. "Hey, odd one. You look better than a stack of your best pancakes."

"I take that as a compliment."

"As it was intended."

We kissed. It wasn't a wild, passionate kiss, but tender and sweet. In the matter of passion, she wanted to go slow, and I wanted whatever she wanted.

She had been orphaned at seven, when her parents died in a plane crash. After that, for a time, she had been an abused child, a victim of her adoptive parents. In spite of all that she had suffered, the world had not broken her.

With jet-black hair, a Mediterranean complexion, and mysterious dark eyes, she was straight out of a dream about an Egyptian queen regarded as a demigoddess by her subjects, which is how I would have regarded her if she wouldn't have punched me for daring to put her on a pedestal. Stormy Llewellyn didn't want a pedestal. She wanted only someone who would look her straight in the eyes and always tell her the truth.

As I opened the passenger door of the Mustang for Stormy, I said, "Mr. Presley is in the backseat."

"Elvis?"

"I thought you should know. Though he can't speak, he can hear whatever we say."

Stormy got into the car and looked behind her seat, but of course she couldn't see the King of Rock 'n' Roll because he had been dead for years, in fact, for decades, and it was only his spirit that was going with us to the carnival.

Most people leave the world when their bodies die. Some spirits linger, reluctant to cross over to the Other Side. They come to me because they know that I can see them and that I will help them if I can. Sometimes they want their murders avenged. Mr. Presley wasn't murdered—except by numerous movie critics when he was alive. But he, like some others, seemed to be afraid of what might await him in the Great Beyond.

He had been hanging out with me for some months, though he made no effort to explain himself. The dead don't talk. I don't know why. But they have ways of conveying their concerns and desires. Mr. Presley seemed content just to keep me company.

As I got behind the wheel of the Mustang, Stormy said, "What's he wearing this time?"

"That ridiculous Arab getup from Harum Scarum. Sorry, sir, but it is ridiculous."

All other lingering spirits that I had known were limited in their wardrobe to the clothes they had been wearing when they died. Mr. Presley, however, was capable of manifesting in anything he had worn during his storied career. He tended to avoid the flashy Vegas costumes that made him look like a less-well-coiffed Liberace.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that he had in an instant changed from the Harum Scarum garb to the flamenco-dancer costume that he had worn in Fun in Acapulco: tight black tuxedo pants, a two-thirds-length black jacket, and a ruffled white shirt with an elaborate black foulard at the throat.

"Better," I said.

He made a gun of his thumb and forefinger, pointed it at me, and winked.

You might wonder why Stormy Llewellyn would believe I can see spirits. She's a practical girl with a commonsense plan for her future. She works part-time behind the counter at Burke & Bailey's in the mall, scooping ice cream and mixing milkshakes. She intends to be an ice-cream entrepreneur with her own shop by the time she's twenty-four and to build a chain of six stores by the time she's thirty. She is already saving half her wages toward the financing of that plan. Stormy is not the kind of sixteen-year-old girl who believes everything—or anything—I say just because I'm her guy.

I'm her guy. I can't tell you how deeply it pleases me to write those three words. My father's a mess, my mother's psychotic, I'm a fry cook without his own car, a geek who lives in one room and a bath above a garage, and I see dead people and worse. She's the coolest girl in school, and every guy who sees her stands awestruck, with his tongue hanging out. Nevertheless, I'm her guy, me and no one else, maybe because I'm able to keep my tongue in my mouth when I look at her and because I can make her laugh.

Anyway, she believes in my paranormal abilities because she's had some experiences in my presence that confirmed them. For example, she was with me when an angry poltergeist destroyed my brand-new stereo system for no good reason. And Wyatt Porter, chief of police, has vouched for me, because I have shared my prophetic dreams with him and have given him other paranormally obtained information that has helped him close cases. Only the chief and his wife, Stormy, Ozzie Boone, and Terri Stambaugh know about my sixth sense, and they all protect me from discovery by others.

Now, as I drove the Mustang along the alleyway behind the Pico Mundo Grille, Stormy said, "Maybe Elvis doesn't want to leave this world because so many people loved him here. The day of his funeral, over fifty thousand gathered at the gates to Graceland."

“Guess you?

“We’ve been talking to Terri,” I said. My boss at the Grille was an obsessive Elvis fan, though she was fifteen when he died, and he was even then long past his prime.

“The lines waiting to view him in his casket totaled two miles,” Stormy said.

Mr. Presley had come forward from the backseat, leaning over the console to see Stormy’s face.

She said, “They needed one hundred vans and four hours to move all the flowers from the funeral at Graceland to the cemetery for the graveside service.”

As I braked at the end of the alley, I glanced at Mr. Presley, and he looked at me, and in his spirit eyes were spirit tears. He had always treated his fans with respect until the last few years, when his drug use and health problems prevented him from giving them the high-quality performances for which they had paid.

We rode in silence for a block or so, and then Stormy said, “Eighty cops and forty sheriff’s deputies weren’t enough to control the grieving crowd. The governor had to call up thirty National Guardsmen to assist them.”

Mr. Presley slipped once more into a corner of the backseat, gazing out a side window, clearly distraught.

At a red traffic light, I stopped and glanced at Stormy, aware that she was up to something with all those funeral details.

She met my eyes but spoke loud enough to be sure that my other passenger heard her. “Maybe he doesn’t want to leave this world because so many people loved him here,” she said again, but then she added, “or...or maybe he’s embarrassed by how his life

spun out of control, and he's afraid to cross over and face those fans who adored him but saw how he spiraled down in the end. It can be tough to be idolized by millions and even tougher if you can't live up to the image they have of you."

I wasn't surprised by her bluntness. She was, after all, Stormy Llewellyn. Llewellyn is a variant of Leo, which comes from the Greek leon, meaning "lion" and implying abundant strength of character and will and physique, all of which applied to her. And you know what stormy means. Although not surprised, I did feel some sympathy for Mr. Presley, and I said, "That was a little hard."

"Tough love," she said.

And of course what she'd told him was at least as much love as it was tough. He had died in 1977. Rare is the spirit who lingers here so long after death. He needed to understand and accept the reason that he had not yet moved on; and whatever words were required to bring him to his senses, even if tough, would be a kindness.

Instead of responding to what Stormy said, Mr. Presley did a little mime routine, first boring vigorously in his nose with one finger, then pretending to reel from his nostril a few yards of snot.

"How's he taking it?" Stormy asked.

"Immaturely."

Mr. Presley rolled the imaginary snot into a wad the size of a baseball and threw it at me.

A horn honked behind us. The light had changed. Nevertheless, I delayed long enough to pretend to catch the hideous but nonexistent ball of mucus and throw it over my shoulder, back at him, before I accelerated across the intersection.

“What was that about?” Stormy asked.

“Snotball.”

“Again?”

“He always was a big child at heart.”

You might think that the presence of the lingering dead would make of my life a solemn if not even sorrowful affair, grim and dark and shot through with fear. It is at times grim and dark and shot through with fear—when it’s not silly, amusing, and shot through with foolishness.

We had traveled a few miles and were in that area where Maricopa Lane passed from suburban neighborhoods into a semirural landscape, when a man with a meat cleaver embedded in his neck came out of nowhere and dashed in front of the car. Even if I had been driving the Batmobile, with its ability to stop on a dime and give six cents in change, I couldn’t have avoided hitting the guy. Anyway, braking didn’t matter, which I knew because of Stormy’s failure to cry out in alarm. I drove through the spirit as he pointed at me. With the nimble grace of the lingering dead, he passed through the front of the car, boarding the vehicle at fifty miles per hour, folded to a sitting position, and settled into the backseat, beside Mr. Presley, the laws of physics no longer applicable to him.

As I slowed and pulled to the shoulder of the road, Stormy said, “What’s up?”

“A dead guy just came aboard.”

“What dead guy?”

“I don’t know. Never saw him before. Covered in blood, meat cleaver in his neck,

looks a little excited.”

“Maybe he’s an Elvis fan.”

I parked along the side of the road and turned in my seat to confront our new passenger. He appeared to be about forty. Shaved head. Blue eyes. No beard. No tattoos. He wore khakis and a red-and-white checkered shirt that looked as though it had been made from the tablecloth in an Italian restaurant, but the stains all over it weren’t spaghetti sauce.

“Tell me,” Stormy said, because she couldn’t see the new guy any more than she could see Mr. Presley.

“Well,” I said, “his partially severed head wobbles like a bobblehead doll with a horizontal-motion feature. His eyes are so wide they look as lidless as fish eyes, and he’s screaming at me as if he hasn’t realized yet that the dead can’t be heard, even by me.”

“Vivid,” Stormy said.

Although he had been capable of flamboyance on the stage, Mr. Presley looked appalled by the grotesque spectacle of the recently deceased passenger. He tapped the newcomer on the shoulder (a spirit can feel another spirit), and with the forefinger of his right hand, he made a wind-it-down gesture.

“I think he must have been murdered just minutes ago,” I said. “That’s why he’s so excited.”

Stormy sighed. “I thought we were going to the fair.”

“We are.”

“We are, huh? So you mean for once the dead guy doesn’t want vengeance?”

“He’d probably call it justice.”

“And I suppose he wants us to get it for him.”

“Not us. Me. Then we’ll go to the fair.”

The spirit recently freed from his body had taken Mr. Presley’s advice and had manifested as he appeared in life. No blood. No meat cleaver embedded in his neck. He nodded vigorously, to assure me that he wanted justice.

An instant later, he was outside of the car, running ahead of it, his feet never quite touching the ground.

I drove in pursuit of the spirit, turned left into a narrow country lane, and said to Stormy, “He’s leading us to his murderer.”

“I was looking forward to a snow cone with orange syrup.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for a snow cone,” I assured her.

“And a cheeseburger and jalapeño french fries and a ride on the Tilt-a-Whirl.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for all of that and even time for you to throw up afterward, but we’ve got to deliver a little justice first.”

“It’s like being married to some Perry Mason lawyer with superpowers.”

“I don’t have superpowers.”

“What would you call them?”

“Quirks.”

Two

The two-lane blacktop was so narrow that if we met oncoming traffic, I would have to drive partly on the graveled shoulder of the road. Following the sprinting spirit in khakis and checkered shirt, we passed a few humble houses that featured cacti as lawn shrubs and pebbles instead of grass, in recognition of the desert that, in these outskirts of Pico Mundo, couldn't be denied as easily as it could in the center of town.

“Call Chief Porter,” I said, “and give me the phone when you have him on the line.”

Stormy flipped open her cell phone and entered the number as I gave it to her.

The road sloped down for more than a mile, through an uninhabited area of mesquite and purple sage in full spring bloom, toward a hollow in which a grove of cottonwoods flourished because an aquifer lay within reach of their roots. At the trees, the paved road came to a dead end.

“There?”

“No cell service out here,” Stormy reported as she pocketed her phone. “No cell service, probably no cable TV, no public sewer hookup, most likely well water, no city water lines, but I bet they have plenty of chain saws.”

An oiled-dirt driveway curved among the trees. Through the screen of branches, I could see a two-story house. Gliding toward that residence, the spirit of the murdered man disappeared into the cottonwood shadows.

As I parked across the narrow dirt lane to prevent anyone from escaping the house in a vehicle, I said, “Better stay here while I have a look around.”

“I’m not a delicate flower,” Stormy declared. “As soon as I’m old enough to buy a pistol, I’m going to get a license to carry a concealed weapon.”

Because of the troubles in her childhood, she knew that true Evil walked the world.

“But you’re not old enough yet,” I said.

“Which is why I have this.”

From her purse, she produced a six-inch-long stainless-steel tube about two inches in diameter, with a crosshatched grip. At the top was a stainless-steel knob as shiny as a mirror. She pressed a button, and in an instant the tube telescoped to eighteen inches and locked at that length. Smiling at me, she lightly rapped the palm of her left hand with the knob of the baton.

“Ordered it through an ad in a martial-arts magazine,” she said. “It’ll fracture a knee or even a skull.”

Unconvinced, I said, “You should still stay here with the car.”

“Oh, my adorable fry cook, I am either coming with you or I’m going in there alone.”

“What does that mean? You’re going to test that thing on my head?”

“I wouldn’t want to test it on your head,” she assured me. “But we’re either in this together or we’re not, and I’ve been operating on the assumption that we are in it together.”

“In what together?”

“Life.”

She has these dark eyes as deep as galaxies. It’s easy to get lost in them.

I said, “Well...see...it’s just that...since caveman days it’s been the man’s job—”

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“You’re not a caveman.”

“No. But traditionally—”

“I bet some of those cavewomen were totally tough mamas.” She opened the passenger door and got out of the car. “Is Elvis coming with us?”

Mr. Presley was no longer in the backseat. I don’t know where he goes when he’s not with me. Being a spirit, he can’t sing or play the guitar, and he can’t eat his favorite deep-fried peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich even if he could get somebody to make one for him.

“He split,” I said, “he’s off ghosting somewhere,” and I got out of the car.

As she joined me at the entrance to the driveway, Stormy said, “Why Elvis and not Buddy Holly?”

“I don’t know.”

“Buddy Holly was twenty-three when he died. So young. You’d think he’d be more reluctant than Elvis to cross over.”

I said, “Buddy Holly went down in a plane crash one winter night. On the other hand, Elvis was sitting on a toilet when he died, maybe of an overdose, and he collapsed into a puddle of his own vomit.”

“So you’re saying maybe he lingers here out of mortification?”

“Not just that. But it’s conceivably a factor.”

As we followed the driveway into the cottonwood grove, she said, “I doubt that anyone on the Other Side cares how we died, only how we lived. Tell him that. I mean, if he comes around again.”

“He’ll come around. Even if he didn’t want me to help him cross over, he’d come around to stare moon-eyed at you.”

She was surprised. “He stares moon-eyed at me?”

“He’s in love with you, I think.”

“That’s kind of weird.”

“Regardless of his other faults, he was always a gentleman in life. He wouldn’t materialize in your bathroom and watch you naked in the shower or anything. Anyway, I guess I’m glad he’s dead, so I don’t have to compete with him.”

“If he wasn’t dead, he’d be like sixty-five. You being a quarter his age, he wouldn’t be much competition.”

“I wish you’d said any instead of much.”

She smiled and pinched my cheek. “Yes, my sweet griddle boy, I’m sure you do.”

We followed the oiled-dirt driveway only twenty feet or so into the woods before leaving it for the cover of the trees. I wanted to circle the house, staying in the woods, to reconnoiter it from every angle, before deciding on an approach.

This being the Mojave in spring, the day was warm, the air oven-dry and very still.

Dead leaves crunched underfoot, and occasionally a bird took wing through the branches overhead, startled into flight.

I felt someone watching me, but that didn't mean anything. Because of my paranormal abilities, because I had to make my way through the world of the living and the dead, I sometimes felt that I must be under observation by a hostile presence when in fact I wasn't.

In a whisper, Stormy said, "I feel as if we're being watched."

To spare her the fear of being tracked by malevolent and unseen enemies, I said, "Watch out for rattlesnakes."

Three

The house didn't look like the place where Norman Bates dressed in his mother's clothes and sharpened the cutlery with which he would stab women to death in the family motel. Neither was it constructed of gingerbread and gumdrops to lure unsuspecting children into the home of the woodland witch, there to be roasted in an oven.

The simple two-story residence was freshly painted white with pale-yellow trim. A swing on the front porch; basket ferns hanging from brass chains. A pair of bentwood rocking chairs on the back porch. Furnishing the green lawn were a birdbath, four ceramic garden gnomes seated at a table that was a giant ceramic mushroom, a half-dozen cast-concrete pastel-blue rabbits four or five times life-size, and a powder-blue wheelbarrow used as a planter that overflowed with vine geraniums offering a wealth of scarlet flowers.

If this had been Thanksgiving Day, I would have expected a Norman Rockwell grandmother to be standing at the open front door, costumed in a long apron over a

gingham dress, a smear of flour on one cheek, waving to the arriving grandkids.

Deep in cottonwood shadows, Stormy said, “Creepy.”

“Megacreepy,” I agreed.

“Blue rabbits? What’re they supposed to be—the product of nuclear waste?”

“Bunny Godzillas,” I said.

“Are the gnomes playing poker?”

“I think they’re having tea.”

Wary of snakes, we continued through the trees until we could see up the back porch steps to the open kitchen door.

Stormy said, “Something’s lying in the doorway.”

I squinted and said, “Maybe a dead guy.”

“What dead guy?”

“Probably the meat-cleaver-in-the-neck dead guy.”

She tried using her cell phone again, but as before there was no service in this area. “I’m having second thoughts. Blue rabbits and now a corpse. Let’s drive someplace the phone works and call Chief Porter from there.”

As a chill crawled up my spine and stiffened the hairs on the nape of my neck, I said, “Too late.”

“This isn’t a stupid horror movie, odd one. It’s never too late to do the intelligent thing.”

“Someone in there needs our help right now. There’s no time to waste.”

“How do you know?”

“Intuition.”

“Yeah? Well, my intuition says we should leave this very minute or get a meat cleaver in the neck.”

“When I say intuition,” I reminded her, “I mean sixth sense. My intuition isn’t like yours. No offense intended.”

“I fall for a fry cook,” she said, “and find myself with a clairvoyant.”

“Clairvoyant isn’t the right word.”

“Is there a right word for you?”

“Maybe not,” I admitted.

Draperies or curtains covered most of the windows, and the house stood in silence, as if abandoned.

“She’ll die if we don’t go in there right now,” I said.

“Who?”

“I don’t know who or how or why, but I know we don’t have much time to save her.”

Whether or not fortune favored the bold, we crossed the lawn without darting from one point of cover to another. The four gnomes around the ceramic toadstool were neither playing poker nor having tea. Each of them held a beer stein, and judging by the expressions on their faces, the sole reason for their gathering was to drink themselves into a stupor.

Lying across the threshold between the porch and the kitchen was in fact the fortyish guy with the shaved head and the wide blue eyes, the same man whose anguished spirit had led us to this place. The cleaver had cut through his carotid artery, and he had bled onto the porch floor so recently that the pooled blood had not yet developed a skin.

To avoid tracking blood into the house, Stormy and I had to step on the dead man's back and then between his splayed legs. I'm not an admirer of bearskin rugs, but at least all the squishy-gooey parts of the bruin have been long removed before it is cast down to be trod upon. From the cadaver's torn throat issued rude wet noises that, it seemed to me, we deserved.

In the kitchen, Stormy brandished her stainless-steel baton, looking for a skull to fracture, and I snatched up a rolling pin that lay on a disk of pie dough, on the pastry-friendly marble slab inlaid in the butcher's-block island. We were ready for anything now, unless the anything had a gun.

"Pigurines," Stormy whispered.

Someone collected cute ceramic and glass and carved-wood pigs, which were lined up atop the refrigerator, peeking between bottles on the spice shelves, displayed on the windowsills, clustered on the center of the work island and on the dinette table. There were pigs in frock coats and bib overalls and Santa Claus costumes, in tuxedos and party dresses. Here a pig stood in mid-pirouette, and there a pig played a banjo.

Where the walls weren't hung with cabinets and appliances, they featured framed needlepoint samplers with

h decorative borders and clichés meant to comfort: Home Is Where the Heart Is, Sunshine Always Follows the Rain....

Abruptly the framed samplers rattled against the walls, and the pigs clinked against one another, as if a mild earthquake shook Pico Mundo.

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Unnerved, I turned, and Stormy turned, and behind us stood the spirit, which manifested with his neck intact.

“You see something?” she asked.

“Dead guy.”

“What’s he doing?”

His blue eyes were gas-flame bright, his face tortured by conflicting emotions. As if demanding justice, he pointed at me. Baring his clenched teeth, he thrust the same finger toward the ceiling, and like Clark Kent in an emergency that allowed no time for changing into cape and tights, he shot out of the kitchen and through the plaster overhead, causing no damage in his sudden exit.

“What just happened?” Stormy whispered.

“Well, basically, pointing the way, he flew through the ceiling. The killer must be upstairs.”

“Let’s get him.”

“I can handle this myself.”

“Boyfriend, you’re not going up there alone.”

I raised the rolling pin. “This is all I need.”

Raising the steel baton, she said, “And this is all I need.”

“Sometimes you make me nuts.”

She smiled. “You wouldn’t love me if I didn’t.”

We went upstairs.

Four

The stairs creaked. They always creaked when creaking could lead to your death, and they never creaked when creaking didn’t matter. The universe is anthropic, meaning that its design makes possible and sustains intelligent life, especially human beings. Nevertheless, I perceive some power, some presence, some adversary behind the scenes that by countless devices subtle or blunt seeks to destroy us. On the second floor, the master bedroom, a second bedroom, a bathroom, and a hall closet were deserted, but all the door hinges squeaked or rasped, or did both.

Two women were in the third bedroom, at the back of the house. They looked up, frightened, when I pushed open the door.

The youngest of the two was an attractive blonde in her late twenties. She was sitting on the edge of a bed, fully clothed but chained to a steel ring that had been welded to the bed frame.

The other woman fumbled with a collection of keys, trying to free the blonde from the manacle that connected her to the chain. She was gaunt, disheveled, her thin arms mottled with bruises, her right eye swollen shut. When she turned to me, terror and timidity were written large across her paper-pale face, but the tight corners of her mouth suggested determination, and in her green eyes I thought I read a wild scrawl of triumph.

In spite of the rolling pin that I carried and Stormy's martial-arts baton, the older woman's initial fright gave way to a kind of frantic but inconstant gladness. One moment, she seemed relieved and rejoicing, as if she had just disarmed a bomb, but an instant later, her face clouded and a frown briefly replaced her grin, as though she heard the bomb clock ticking again.

She scowled. "Who're you? What're you doin' in my house?"

"There's a dead man—" I began.

"Yeah, Kurt. He moved in on me, moved in smooth as butter. I didn't see the snake he was till too late. Bastard Kurt, stone dead now, sick bastard, stone dead." She grinned as though I had told her that she'd won the lottery. "I chopped on him real good, damn if I didn't. Me, useless old Roberta, I finally done it." She appeared to be amazed that she had been capable of killing Kurt. "I chopped him like he weren't but a rack of ribs. Wish I'd chopped him a couple hundred times, chopped him up and down, 'fore I killed him. Wish I'd had the nerve years ago."

Apparently Stormy decided no threat existed here, or maybe she thought I looked ridiculous as I brandished the rolling pin, because she handed me the stainless-steel baton. The emotionally fragile Roberta, struggling with the manacle lock, had begun to cry. Stormy went to her, put a hand on her shoulder as though to console her, and relieved her of the keys.

Voice trembling more with anger than with fear, the blonde said, "I was on my way to work. It wasn't even dawn yet. He came up behind me. It happened so fast."

As Stormy examined the keys, Roberta explained herself through a veil of tears: "He brung this one other girl last year, just like he brung Kristen this mornin'. He beat me near to death 'cause I said just please let Hannah go. Hannah was her name. He kept her in this here same room. Treated her like she weren't nothin' but a thing. He broke

that girl, just like he broke me, broke her bad.”

Stormy was having trouble finding the key to the manacle.

Trembling, alert for some sudden attack, Kristen said, “Where are the cops? Why didn’t you call the cops?”

“No cell-phone service out here,” I said.

“Use the house line.”

“There ain’t none,” Roberta declared, wiping away tears, still an unstable brew of emotions, phasing now from sorrow to anger in an instant. “The mean sonofabitch never let me have no phone. When he’d go out, he locked me down in the cellar, like you wouldn’t even lock up some dog.”

Stormy said, “Kurt had more keys than a prison warden, but none of them work.” She looked at me. “Why would he lead us here?”

“Vengeance, I guess. Even the wicked feel justified in wanting vengeance.”

I thought of the kitchen, the collection of “pigurines” and the needlework samplers that suggested a time before Kurt, when Roberta had evidently led a simple but happy life in this house. I recalled the moment when the framed samplers rattled against the walls and the pigs clinked against one another, as if in a mild earthquake—just as Kurt’s angry spirit had manifested.

Evidently my expression revealed my alarm, because Stormy said, “What’s wrong?”

Before I could reply, the spirit of Kurt rose into the room, as though for the past few minutes he’d been wandering and lost between the kitchen ceiling and the bedroom

floor. Once more, he manifested with his mortal wounds, soaked in blood, a demonic figure around which the air was smoky, murky, as if he pulled with him some of the darkness from the realm of the dead where he belonged. Glaring at Roberta and then at me, he pointed repeatedly to the meat cleaver in his neck, as if I might have failed to notice it. Thrusting an accusatory finger at the woman who killed him, he looked equally furious and exasperated, having apparently reached the conclusion that I had the IQ of an amoeba.

“You’ve already gotten the justice you deserved,” I told him. “You don’t belong here anymore. Just move on.”

Roberta said, “Who’re you talkin’ to?”

Enraged by my failure to beat the woman to death with either the martial-arts baton or the rolling pin, Kurt pulled the cleaver from his neck and threw it at me. Because it wasn’t a real blade, only the idea of one, it passed harmlessly through me.

“You can’t do any more damage in this world,” I told him.

“Who’s he talkin’ to?” Roberta asked Stormy.

“Nobody,” Stormy said. “He’s just quirky. Are there other keys?”

“Quirky?” Kristen was alarmed by the possibility of an encounter with another homicidal lunatic. “What do you mean, quirky?”

“Peculiar,” Stormy replied. “But in a good way. He’s quirky but adorable.” To Roberta, she said again, “Are there any other keys?”

His head now seated firmly on his neck, face contorted by fury, Kurt raised his hands, and from his palms issued concentric pulses of energy visible to me but to no one

else.

I said, “Uh-oh.”

Spirits lingering in this world have only one way to harm the rest of us. If their lives were marbled with many evil acts, if they are spiritually malignant to a sufficient degree, they are able to convert their demonic rage into destructive energy and vent it upon the inanimate.

Kurt was going poltergeist.

“There’s no point in this,” I counseled him. “All you’re doing is delaying the inevitable and ensuring yourself greater suffering when you finally cross over.”

“He’s weird,” Kristen said, referring to me.

“Quirky,” Stormy insisted.

Not susceptible to my charms, Kristen said, “Roberta! Are there other keys anywhere?”

Roberta felt her pockets, looked surprised, “Maybe these,” she said, producing a ring of ten or twelve keys.

The pulses of energy that Kurt emitted grew brighter, concentric ripples issuing from him faster, faster.

The bedroom door crashed shut before anyone could move toward it. Roberta dropped the new set of keys, hurried across the room, and wrenched the knob back and forth.

I scooped up the keys and tossed them to Stormy.

When the door wouldn't relent, Roberta returned to us, shivering and shaking her right hand as if the doorknob had been freezing.

"There!" Stormy declared, having found the right key to unlock the manacle.

Freed, Kristen sprang at once off the bed, as though it were saturated with some pestilence infinitely more horrific than the black plague. Although Roberta had saved her life, she shied from the woman, too, as if not convinced that everything was as it seemed to be. Stormy and I excited her suspicion, as well. She ran to the door, but she had no more success with it than had Roberta.

Nightstand drawers opened of their own accord, slammed shut, slid open, shut, and now the dresser drawers, whispering on their slides, banging shut, banging, banging. A mahogany highboy spat out its drawers entirely, spilling their contents as they clattered to the floor.

Roberta's stew of emotions—sorrow, anger, frantic gladness—had boiled down to a thick reduction of fear. She stood awestruck, turning this way and that, arguing against the clear evidence of her senses—"This ain't happenin', no way, no, no"—and raising her already bruised arms to ward off whatever missiles might come her way.

The six-foot length of chain fixed to the ringbolt on the bed frame rattled up from the mattress, weaving in the air as if it were a charmed serpent, the manacle like a cobra's head poised to bite.

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A ginger-jar nightstand lamp levitated, its cord taut. The plug pulled from the wall socket. The lamp flew past my head, shattering against a wall, showering Kristen with ceramic shards.

In spite of all their violent thrashing and vindictive wrath, poltergeists cannot control the malevolent energy that issues from them, cannot target anyone or aim with precision. They are able to harm us only by indirection, by ricochet, by the luckiest of lucky blows. If, however, a flung fireplace poker spears through your eye, through your brain, and out the back of your head, the fact that it found you by sheerest chance will not be much consolation.

Roberta began to scream and Kristen joined her, which seemed to inspire the late, unlamented Kurt to new heights of supernatural ire. The mattress flipped off the bed, and the coils of steel in the box springs sang as though something with a thousand claws plucked and strummed them. Emptied of all its drawers, the highboy lurched away from the wall, rocked to its left, rocked to its right, as if it were the Frankenstein's monster of furniture, lumbering this way and that in search of a victim, before it suddenly rocketed to the ceiling with such force that it broke apart and brought down with it a hail of shattered plaster.

Over the cacophony, Stormy called to me: "Do something!"

"Do what?" I shouted.

"How would I know? I work in an ice-cream shop."

"Do something!" Kristen demanded.

“I’m just a fry cook,” I lied. “I don’t know what’s happening here.”

The twanging steel coils in the box springs began to break free from their ties, unwinding as they tore loose, ripping through the covering fabric like baby snakes emerging from a nest, greeted by the manacle-and-chain serpent that still undulated like a cobra in the thrall of flute music.

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The ceiling joists creaked and shuddered. Cracks appeared in the plaster overhead, from which a powdery debris rained down upon us. Within the walls of the room, the studs groaned as though they might buckle under some tremendous weight, and underfoot the floor began to thrum, so that I thought the room might implode upon us.

Kurt’s angry spirit, a poltergeist of singular power unique in my experience, whirled like a tornado, careening around the debris-littered bedroom, vanishing into—and reappearing out of—the walls. He passed through the door, and when an instant later he rushed back into the bedroom, he split the door in two. The portion on hinges swung open, and the other half crashed to the floor.

None of us needed prompting. We rushed across the fallen half of the door, into the upstairs hallway, and sprinted toward the stairs. Retreating from a poltergeist is not cowardly any more than running with the bulls in Pamplona is courageous; the former is an act of reasoned prudence, and the latter is foolishness bordering on lunacy. I am pleased to report that, in my haste to escape Kurt’s wrathful spirit, I only considered muscling ahead of the three women, but in fact followed them through the door, down the stairs, and out of the house. Chivalry lives.

We departed by the front door and reached the yard in time to hear what sounded like second-floor windows exploding at the back of the house and a shower of glass

raining upon the porch roof there. The thump-bang-rattle of Kurt's postmortem temper tantrum continued in our absence, though I hoped that in spite of his singular power, he would be unable to follow us. Having initiated its frenzied destruction, the average poltergeist thrashes mindlessly until exhausted, whereupon it wanders off into whatever purgatorial zone serves as its retreat between our world and the next, perhaps for a while as confused as any living person with advanced dementia.

Roberta's trembling right hand spidered across her face as if she expected to discover bleeding lacerations, and when she found nothing, she wrapped her pale bruised arms around herself, shivering as if the Mojave were as cold as the Alaskan tundra. "It's him," she said. "Ain't no way it's anythin' else."

"Him who?" Kristen asked. "What're you talking about?"

"I chopped him with the cleaver, so he come back for revenge."

"Came back from the dead?" Kristen said. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"I believe in what I seen," Roberta insisted.

"There's a word for a destructive spirit," I said. "Something like...polyanthus."

"That's a flower," Stormy said.

"Or maybe it's poltroon."

"That's a craven coward," she said.

"Polonaise?"

"A Polish dance."

“Well, I’m just a fry cook.”

The fracas on the second floor seemed to be winding down.

“Poltergeist,” said Roberta.

“No,” I said, “I don’t think that’s it.”

“That’s it, all right,” Stormy said.

“Poltergeist,” Roberta insisted.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Kristen looked at me as if I were a candidate for the Idiots’ Hall of Fame, which was a look that I had seen before on the faces of a number of pretty girls. “What the hell’s wrong with you? Of course it’s poltergeist.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts,” I said.

“I don’t. We’re not talking about what happened up there. We’re just talking about a word.”

“Well,” I said, “if it wasn’t a pollinosis up there, then what was it?”

“Hay fever,” Stormy said, defining the word pollinosis.

“Poltergeist,” Roberta repeated. “But we ain’t never gonna say what it was, if we know what’s good for us.”

“Polonium,” I suggested.

Stormy said, “A radioactive element.”

The battered woman continued: “What we best say is Kurt done trashed the room while alive. Knocked me around some, too, give me all these bruises, black eye. Then he tried takin’ Kristen out to the shed, to the old cold cellar deep down under, where he done killed poor Hannah and hung her body, where he’d soon of killed and hung me, too. We say how I caught up with him, me all crazy with fear, and my mind snapped, and I chopped him to save Kristen.”

Beginning to shake violently again, Roberta broke into tears.

Kristen put an arm around her and said, “You saved me.”

In the house, all had gone quiet.

Before either of the women could start to wonder why Stormy and I had shown up in the first place, my girl said, “It’s over now. You two wait here. We’ll drive out to the highway, where there’s cell-phone service, and we’ll call the police.”

In my experience, the spirits of truly evil people didn’t linger long in this world, if at all. When they were reluctant to cross to the Other Side, they were soon taken across against their will, as if by a bill collector for some lender to whom they owed a big debt.

Because I couldn’t share that knowledge with these women without blowing my fry-cook cover, I worried that we were leaving them in a state of high anxiety. “Will you be all right here? The sun’s pretty hot. You could move onto the shade of the porch. It’ll be safe on the porch.”

“I’ll keep myself right here,” Roberta said, “and to hell with the porch.”

“It’s over now,” I assured them. “It really is. Or you could move into the shade of the cottonwoods. I mean, if you don’t think the porch is safe. But it is safe. The porch, I mean.”

Kristen regarded me with a mix of pity and exasperation. To Stormy, she said, “Do you usually drive or does he?”

“I will,” Stormy said. “Let’s go, Oddie.”

Stormy and I started toward the cottonwoods, but then I had to hurry back to Roberta to return her rolling pin. I didn’t look at Kristen again.

Six

While Stormy drove us to the fairground, I called Chief Wyatt Porter, who was something of a surrogate father to me, and told him what had happened, when, and where. As usual, he would do his best to keep me out of the official story.

In the fairground parking lot, Stormy wanted to

sit in silence, with the windows up and the air conditioner running. We watched the late-afternoon light darkle from peach to apricot to cherry, and after a few minutes she closed her eyes, whereupon I looked not at the colorful western sky but at her.

Eventually she said, “When high school’s over and real life starts, can you go on being a fry cook?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“With everything...everything else in your life?”

“Because of everything else, being a fry cook keeps me sane.”

“Sooner or later, it’s all going to overwhelm you—what you see, what you can do, what you are.”

“I’m getting a better handle on it all the time,” I assured her. “If my messed-up parents couldn’t drive me crazy, I’m not going to go nuts just because I can see the lingering dead.”

“And have prophetic dreams.”

“Not a big deal.”

“And have psychic magnetism,” she said, referring to another gift of mine that played no role in that day’s adventure.

After a silence, I said, “Maybe what you’re really wondering is if eventually it’s all going to overwhelm you.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not an easy date.”

She said nothing.

The next silence was excruciating, and I became the one who at last broke it. “What I want most of all isn’t you. What I want most of all is for you to have a happy life.”

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Her thick eyelashes suddenly glistened with tears that she held back. “I really want that ice-cream shop of my own.”

“I bet you’ll have a chain of them.”

“This far in life, I’ve been nobody.”

“You’ve been somebody to me. You’re everything.”

“I want to be somebody, odd one. I want to have a business that I can be proud of, a place where people like to go. When people hear my name, I want them to think of ice cream. I want my name to make them happy, the way ice cream makes them happy.”

If I assured her that she would achieve her dream, I would be failing to provide her with the one thing that she demanded of me: the truth, whether it was easy or hard to hear. I could not see the future. If I happy-talked her through this moment, if I insisted that my paranormal gifts would only enhance our lives together and would all but guarantee her success, if I minimized the difficulty of my own struggles with my sixth sense, I would be lying to her.

At last I said, “What do you want to do?”

Without opening her eyes, she reached out to me, and we held hands as the desert darkened and the carnival on the midway painted the night with more color than the aurora borealis.

After a minute, she opened her eyes, smiled at me, and answered my question with seven words that were a welcome reprieve. “I want to go to the carnival.”

We ate snow cones with orange syrup, cheeseburgers, and jalapeño french fries. We rode not just the Tilt-a-Whirl but also the Whip, the Big Drop, and the Caterpillar. Neither of us threw up.

From time to time, I saw Mr. Presley wandering the midway. He was watching people eat the hot dogs, burgers, fried ice cream, fried Almond Joys, and french-fried butter that he could no longer consume.

In time, Stormy and I came to a large tent where fancy lettering above the entrance promised ALL THINGS FORETOLD. Within, a sawdust floor spread wall to wall. In five rows stood thirty-three fortune-telling machines. Some were quaint contraptions dating from previous and more magical eras of carnival life, but others were fully of the moment, digital.

In a shadowy corner of the tent stood a machine the size of an old-fashioned telephone booth. The lower three feet were enclosed. The upper four feet featured glass on three sides. In that display sat—so a placard declared—the mummified corpse of a Gypsy dwarf who, in the eighteenth century, had been renowned throughout Europe for her predictions.

Gypsy Mummy wore much cheap jewelry and a colorful headscarf. Her eyes and lips were sewn shut, and her mottled skin pulled tight across her face. For a fortune-teller who supposedly had been counsel to three kings, her price for a prognostication was remarkably reasonable: a mere quarter.

As we arrived at the machine, a couple in their early twenties sought revelation ahead of us. The woman put her mouth to the round grille in the glass and asked, “Gypsy Mummy, tell us, will Johnny and I have a long and happy marriage?”

The man, Johnny, pushed the ANSWER button. A card slid into a brass tray. He read its message aloud: “A COLD WIND BLOWS, AND EACH NIGHT SEEMS TO LAST A THOUSAND YEARS.”

Stormy squeezed my hand, and we smiled at each other. Johnny and his date were not satisfied. They sought again the approval of the long-dead sage.

Gypsy Mummy’s unrelenting negativity did not at first deter them from feeding additional quarters to the machine. They’d spent two bucks before, in frustration, they threw all eight cards to the sawdust floor and, bickering about the meaning of the predictions, left the tent. In answer to their question about a long and happy marriage, some of the other warnings they had received were THE FOOL LEAPS FROM THE CLIFF, BUT THE WINTER LAKE BELOW IS FROZEN; and more ominous still, THE ORCHARD OF BLIGHTED TREES PRODUCES POISONOUS FRUIT; and not least troubling of all, A STONE CAN PROVIDE NO NOURISHMENT, NOR WILL SAND SLAKE YOUR THIRST.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” Stormy suggested when we were alone before the centuries-old corpse, which was more likely to have been a figure constructed of plaster and wire and latex.

Nevertheless, I gave Gypsy Mummy a quarter, and she presented to us the message that Johnny and his fiancée had hoped to receive: YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.

“She just winked at me,” Stormy said.

“Who did?”

“Gypsy Mummy.”

“How could a sewn-shut eye wink?”

“I don’t know, Oddie. But she did, she winked.”

I am superstitious, for good reason. But you don’t have to be superstitious to think that it’s a bad idea to doubt the reliability of a fortune-teller’s prediction when it is word for word the very assurance that you desperately wanted to hear. We had no doubts as, there in the arcade called ALL THINGS FORETOLD, we kissed each other to seal the promise.

I have written this brief memoir not merely at the encouragement of my friend and mentor, Ozzie Boone, but at his insistence. Because my paranormal talent must remain my secret, nothing that I write can be published in my lifetime. In fact, I doubt that I will ever write another piece like this, for my life with Stormy Llewellyn will be too full to allow time for memoirs. I will have my work as a short-order cook, the griddle and the deep fryer, and she will have her ice-cream career, and we will both have the needy spirits of the lingering dead to deal with in the years ahead. I believe there will be children, too, each of them as beautiful as she is, perhaps one or two as strange as their father. She and I will grow old together in Pico Mundo, too busy for the wider world beyond, grow old here with our many friends, in the warmth of family that she hardly knew before being orphaned, that I never knew with my troubled parents. We will grow old together, for so it is promised by Gypsy Mummy, and if God is good—which He is—I will be with Stormy on the distant day, decades hence, when she leaves this world. I will hold her hand at the end, and I will pass soon after, for we are one heart, and neither of us would be of use without the other.

You’ve witnessed the beginning. Join us for the end.