

The Acquiescence

By Andrew Gilbertson

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"You *can't* be serious! As if this weren't all absurd enough, you...! You idiot, ghosts and computers don't mix!"

I stared in disbelief as Charlie started to fiddle with some kind of small plastic gizmo in the middle of the darkened parlor room. The dank room smelled musty, and the surrounding house creaked ominously; I couldn't honestly say that I trusted the integrity of the floorboards, either- any misstep seemed to be more than a little likely to send one of us crashing into the downstairs room below.

Leyla lay, quietly moaning, on the couch. Jennifer was pleading in soft but urgent tones with Alex, who was walking in little circles, pumping his fists in the air and muttering to himself. Despite all that had happened, he was still excited to be part of this séance. Even if it had turned deadly.

The house was big. Not quite a mansion; but one of those TV houses. Like that one from *Full House*. Too big for a real 9-to-5-er to ever really own, even if the show tried to make you think they could. 3 floors; the top being a glorified attic. Dozens of rooms. Hundreds of ghosts, legend said- but not the grim, grinning Disney kind. This haunted mansion had been trying, of late, to kill us, it seemed. I didn't know which to be more concerned about- a parcel of poltergeists who apparently had it in for us while we were in *their* house... or the fact that, even with Leyla lying semiconscious, nursing a bruise on her forehead the size of a cantaloupe from where the grandfather clock had *almost* lethally struck, despite the two in our party that had disappeared *completely*, Alex and Charlie didn't seem to be any less enthusiastic the whole affair. If anything, the adrenaline and excitement seemed to feed their glee- Charlie was seeing his next big buck, and Alex his next big thrill.

Me, I was terrified. This was real. Too real. Homicidal specters were not the fun and games that I'd been promised; Poirot and Marple and all of those Victorian BBC shenanigans always presented séances as fashionable, harmless, exciting entertainment; I was intrigued. Why the heck not, right? Jennifer, on the other hand, had said from the start that dabbling in the occult was not for personal amusement, not to be taken lightly... and I was starting to believe her.

She shouldn't even be here.

She was a neighbor's kid; this wasn't her crowd, and it definitely wasn't her scene. She was a sweet kid, sheltered- the kind of 'good little Christian girl' that every parent wants their kids to go and hang out with, because she's 'safe'; even if they'd never actively encourage the friendship lest their offspring get an earful of pie-in-the-sky nonsense. Well, luckily, Jennifer wasn't preachy, or holier-than-thou; in fact, she was very sweet, helpful, kind- everyone in the neighborhood loved her. She was practically a 'girl scout' in the same way they always called Superman a 'boy scout'- loyal, helpful, blah blah blah... which is why she absolutely didn't belong here. She was *too* sheltered. No way she'd be able to handle this. Heck, there was no way someone that naive should even exist in the same *world* with Charlie Windsor.

Charlie was a real piece of work. You know that wheedling, dealing, sell-his-own-mother-to-make-a-buck sleazy businessman type from the movies- the one the monster always saves 'till last, right before the hero or heroine, and then dispatches most horribly of all? Charlie practically lived it. Okay, maybe he wasn't *that* bad... but he sure wasn't winning any popularity contests. And considering that he was the one who had gotten us into this mess- "Trust me, this will be *way* more exciting if we can stir the spirits up a bit"- *well done, Charlie boy, you sure did* that- maybe our perceptions weren't especially charitable at the moment. He didn't have the dirty cream-colored-button-up-under-a-brown-vest ensemble or the three-day stubble of a Hollywood slimeball- in fact, he was rather immaculately dressed- but he still projected the stereotype of the anything-for-a-buck sleazebag. And his first sucker was Alex.

Alex Reed was... well, a typical teen, really. Good kid, too. Good footballer, despite not exactly being built like an athlete. (Hey, mass is mass and a tackle's a tackle. And the kid could *run*.) Just a bit of a thrill junkie- but hey, no one's perfect. He was still the 'rake-a-neighbor's-yard' type; he didn't exactly put Jennifer to shame, mind you, but he wasn't some brain-dead jock, either. If Charlie embodied a stereotype, Alex defied it. Which is why I think it was more curiosity than thrill-seeking that first got him into the Ouija board scene. But, after he was hooked on that, it was practically fate that the thrill-seeking would take over and lead him to our malodorous benefactor. Windsor's plans to rent the supposedly 'haunted' and long-abandoned mansion outside of town were not well-advertised; Windsor's brief stint on that ghost-chaser show from the Discovery channel may have given him Hollywood ambitions, but not Hollywood cash. Still, Alex's boundless enthusiasm- the same enthusiasm that made him such a pleasure to teach in second period- was more than enough to track down the 'ghost tour' being planned in the area. And that same enthusiasm had also turned him into Windsor's veritable cheerleader. And the

enthusiasm from which this free advertising sprang was certainly effective. It had drawn me in; I've always been curious about the paranormal from a scientific perspective; what exactly are we dealing with?

We were dealing with it, all right.

So, Alex's dumb-and-feeling-dumber all the time teacher (me, in case you hadn't guessed), his coach, Brian Armstrong (we'd met at the usual faculty meetings; nice guy, reminded me of Ted Levine, that guy from 'Monk,' but I didn't know him well outside of the school), a friend of his (Alex's, not Brian's- she was a good 20 years the coach's junior), Amber Lang, whose daddy could afford the price of the tour Windsor was offering (and how did *Alex* manage that? He wasn't exactly made of money... but then again, neither was I)- but who didn't seem the type for this kind of thing, so I suspected there had been some heavy selling on Alex's part; maybe she just wanted to impress him. Get his attention, make her boyfriend mad. Something like that. Maybe Amber was paying his way, too, in exchange for... well, I didn't want to guess at that. And then, Leyla.

I think she was Alex's godmother or something. Friend-of-the-family. She was... I dunno, at the risk of sounding racist, dark (but not quite African American, like Jennifer and Alex... Leyla looked more South Pacific island-y to me, but I've never been good at figuring that kind of thing out) with a slight trill of an accent that I definitely couldn't place. She had a warm laugh and a ready smile; and even though I hadn't met her before the tour, I instantly liked her. Everyone else did, too. She had that spark-of-life thing going, like the sunshine followed her around; she was fun to be with. Maybe that's why they... whoever *they* were... had tried to extinguish her. She didn't belong in a dead, cold place like this. They wanted her like *they* were.

Which, I guess, was 'dead and cold,' actually.

Not that she was the most incongruous member of this little party. No, that was Jennifer, without a doubt. She hadn't paid for the tour; Windsor just didn't have the muscle or the guts to throw her out, and she'd followed- been following the party ever since the tour began... actually, she'd been following me since a few hours before I'd left for the tour, which graduated following the tour- trying to talk us out of it. When the tour started, she'd been locked in with us. ("For the effect," Windsor explained- "No escape from the haunted house!" And he'd done a cheesy evil laugh for effect.) But, to her credit, even though she was clearly terrified of being here, she'd only taken a minute to swallow her fear and get back to her 'mission.' To which she was very, *very* dedicated. Poor girl had probably talked herself hoarse by now. She hadn't let up for at least the past four hours, maybe longer; I'd lost all track of time in here. All she did was switch from person to person when it was clear that she was getting nowhere, but she just kept talking, expounding, explaining- though it was never quite annoying chatter (except to Windsor) it was a constant stream of arguments, pleas, entreaties... all to the effect that this was a *bad idea*. She'd tried to talk me out of going. Followed me. Tried to talk the others out of going. Tried to talk the others into leaving... that had gone well. I think she'd almost had most of us convinced when Brian Armstrong disappeared; now leaving seemed as dangerous as staying. And her credibility was further damaged by all of those 'Christian buzzwords' that her speech was peppered with- you know, 'salvation,' 'deceiver,' 'the power of the blood' 'demon this' and 'demon that,' the usual. She claimed there were no such things as ghosts, only demons (Heck, after Buffy the Vampire Slayer, most people probably didn't see much of a difference between the two). I think that what she didn't realize was that I was already convinced that this was a bad place, Leyla was unconscious, and Alex, in his occult excitement, would have been just as pumped to meet a demon as he would a ghost. And I think Windsor would have, too... the publicity for his 'séances' would be phenomenal.

And now, he was setting up a laptop.

Amber had slipped away from the group to visit the facilities. (Windsor had assured them that even though the power was out, the water was still running and restrooms were functioning.) Though the grand old decor of the house was tarnished with age, dust, and disuse, Amber was pleasantly surprised to discover that the bathroom was in fairly good shape; nothing too dirty or too disgusting to use. A pocket lighter thankfully spared her the awkward choice between a room in complete darkness or leaving the

door open to catch the old-fashioned lanterns that Windsor had sparingly strung around the creaky old house.

This was not Amber's idea of fun, but she had to admit, she was warming up to it. The idea of a real, live séance was creepy and kinda cool, like being in a horror movie. She was kind of glad that Alex had talked her into it; it was much spookier than those 'professional' haunted-warehouse walkthroughs she went to on Halloween. This was real.

As she went to wash her hands, Amber tripped and nearly fell over an old, dusty trashcan before she realized that her eyes were still locked on the patch of wall next to the rusty old bath tub.

Like most people, she suspected, she found that if you stared at a wood grain pattern long enough, you'd start to see pictures in it. Highly stylized, warped pictures, but recognizable shapes nonetheless, which, once you turned your eyes away and then looked back, you could never find again. This one was so clear, so real, she could hardly take her eyes off of it.

It was a cackling demon- dark, chitonous hide, ringed by a row of jagged horns; pointed, hulking shoulders tapering to bony, skeletal hands; its face was a caricature, a twisted, distorted thing warped by the patterns of the tree rings- yet it was all as clear as if it had been a carving etched there instead of a random pattern in the wood. She could almost read its expression- a disconcertingly intense hunger- and swore that she could almost see a little sub-pattern of flames, caught mid-dance within its eye sockets.

The brain could be a funny thing sometimes.

Not wanting to fall flat on her face- the others would surely hear the thud, and that would be embarrassing to explain- she focused her will, and, with some difficulty, tore her gaze away from the mesmerizing image. Using her lighter, she found the sink and vanity, also old and dusty from disuse. She turned the squeaky, half-rusted faucet, which rewarded her with a distant squawk and nearer a sputter, but no water. She could hear it rising from far away through distant pipes, like the rising gurgle from a hose just turned on at its source. This would take a minute... and it probably wouldn't get warm, either.

As she waited, she turned back to the specter of death in the wooden paneling. No surprise, it had vanished. Whatever trick of the light had allowed her eyes to spot it had disappeared, and with it, so had her fanciful perceptions of the faux-wood walls.

She turned back to the sink and screamed.

There, in the mirror, she saw the eye sockets flickering with flames, saw the sharp, bony teeth, open in a hungry leer and dripping with blood, saw the face, warped and twisted as the wood grain was, but not a caricature; it was truly that distorted and twisted, a mockery of a face, frozen in a baleful glare filled with malice- and she saw it all over her shoulder.

She spun around to face the horrible apparition, the flesh-and-blood specter, the drawing come to horrible, grotesque life, all the time knowing she would be too late- the scythe would slash down before she could turn and face it; there was no way she could ward off a monster from within the deepest, darkest depths of her own terror. She could hear the footsteps of the group running toward her, only seconds away, but they'd arrive a moment too late; there was no way they could reach her in time. They would only find the horror that she'd wheeled to face standing over her still-warm corpse-

There was nothing there.

Her heart hammered as her eyes darted wildly about, her breathing coming in short terrified gasps. The wall was as blank as it had been when she entered the bathroom; unassuming and unshadowed- there was nothing hiding, nothing lurking, nothing there.

And yet she'd seen it, real and solid as she was, standing behind her. She knew she had- it wasn't just a trick of light, it was another person- another something- standing just behind her. She knew she had. She hadn't just been spooked by the house... had she? She turned back to the offending mirror.

It was there. Facing her.

It laughed, but no sound came forth.

She screamed again; its face filled her vision. It wasn't in front of her; it wasn't behind her- it was her reflection. It stared her straight in the face as her legs locked and her mouth refused to move; she wasn't breathing, wasn't thinking-

She didn't even scream at the loud thud against the door; nor jump- her body wouldn't function enough for that. Only her insides clenched, jumping as if they'd been in a car wreck without her, a cold tingling racing through every part of her body at once. They were here- the rest of the group- it wasn't too late!

The door thumped again, and her mind raced to make sense of it.

Oh, no.

The creature, the mockery of life, extended it's free hand, a bony fingertip pointing at her.

She was modest.

But it was just a reflection, wasn't it? It only existed in the mirror?

She valued her privacy.

It's hand had opened, reaching forward, it's robed arm extending as the fiery eyes locked with hers.

She'd *locked* the door.

The door thudded again as someone tried to break the lock.

A bony finger touched her shoulder.

And with a clatter, the only sound in a dark and empty bathroom, the cigarette lighter fell into the porcelain sink, extinguishing almost immediately as a trickle of water finally emerged from the rusty spigot.

"What are you doing?"

I was indignant. This whole thing was crazy. It didn't make sense. I was scared. I was confused. And Charlie was plugging in his wi-fi card.

"Just a part of the show, mister Murphy." He was maddeningly calm. "Nothing to worry about."

I should have had a witty retort for that; instead I was dumbstruck and speechless. Nothing to worry about? Nothing to *worry about*?! I'd been *worrying* since Amber disappeared! I'd been *worrying* since the house started trying to kill us. This was beyond *worrying*! This was *terror*!

When we heard Amber scream, I assumed she'd just found a dead rat in the bowl- but the dark, slasher-film atmosphere had us all on edge, and we bolted. When she kept screaming, coach Armstrong even did the movie-cop thing and broke down the door with his shoulder. All we found was a smoldering lighter in the running sink, and a set of footprints in the dust leading in towards the fixture, back over to the sink... and nowhere else.

When Windsor made a 'maybe she fell in' joke, maybe we should have known he was not just a callous lowlife, but certifiably *insane*. Which anyone making a joke in that situation, *or* telling us to 'not worry' in this situation, would absolutely have to be.

Our grand tour guide was acting like this was all a part of his plan; if it was, then that would make him... what, a serial killer? He was playing this a little too cool- maybe he had done one of those psychology things on TV. Disassociation, or something. Like his brain had gone into denial about how bad things were, so it was convincing him that this was just another day at the office.

He was certainly acting no differently than he had as he led us up the stairs to the third floor- really a glorified attic- telling us that it was "the ghosts' realm," and warning us not to stray too far into it. He was just as unflappable as he had been when I found him at the top of those stairs half an hour later (when the rest of the group was in this same makeshift 'break room' parlor for refreshments), chanting something indecipherable (pretty sure I caught the words "I summon up" in there somewhere, which is *never* a good sign) and making, when caught, his 'stir up the ghosts' claim.

He was as professional and cool (not to mention smarmy) as he was when he told the story of a priest invited over to consecrate the newly built house who was instead murdered by the angry house owner who had sent the invitation as a trap for the pastor that had spoken out about his many vices to the townsfolk. As completely in-stride as he had been when he had argued with- *bullied*- Jennifer (who, to her credit, had not backed down) after Amber's disappearance, shouting her down and enticing us all to stay

inside and continue the tour over her protests, claiming that Amber's disappearance was an act she was clearly putting on to scare the group- "Quite a flair for the theatrical, that girl!"

Were we that gullible? Or had we *wanted* to believe him? Maybe we felt like we'd truly touched the supernatural, something unknown and *exciting*, and we didn't want to give it up, despite our misgivings.

The human talent for self-delusion and rationalization is surprisingly powerful when we decide we want something.

And so, we believed him. That time. But, despite Jennifer's 'Kooky Kristian' ravings, I have to admit... she had much more attention from her captive audience than she'd had a moment beforehand. If she hadn't, we might still have Brian.

Yeah, two people gone missing in a haunted house. That's not a cause for worry.

In fact it was so absurdly 'not a cause for worry' that I continued to stand there, mouth gaping like a fish out of water, bereft of any reply, as Charlie finished fiddling with the Wi-fi card and pulled out something that looked like a cheap, black, plastic eye.

What the...?

"You know what? I'm convinced."

And he really meant it; Brian Armstrong had studied sports long enough to know when to throw in the towel.

"Something is going on here, little lady. And I think we need to get these people out of here until we can figure out what it is. This isn't theater, and Windsor's slime for trying to pretend it is."

Jennifer nodded gratefully at him. She was, he figured, very gratified to finally have an ally.

"Get everybody else out here, and I'll get 'em out of here."

Jennifer moved off along the hallway towards the parlor room as Brian silently fumed.

The chandelier falling hadn't worried him. Heck, it was so clichéd and overdone that Windsor had probably arranged it himself. He'd even bought into the teen-girl-disappearing-was-an-act line. But that bookcase? Solid oak, probably about 8 tons heavy, and, realistically, with a center of gravity and stable mounting that should have precluded its falling forward at all? And falling at the exact moment that Don Murphy was walking past it? Now that was just silly. And landing just right on a 'conveniently discarded' serving knife, flipping the tip and sending it shooting into the wall a few inches from his own head? That was also so theatrical that it felt like Windsor's work, but there was no way Windsor could have arranged it. No, he'd locked eyes with Murphy, still on the floor with Alex on top of him- now that was a tackle that made his coach proud- and seen written in that expression the same sentiment written in his own, as the knife wobbled with an absurd flubber-sound in the wall beside him.

There was no way this was normal. No way Windsor could explain this. It was psychotic. Whether Windsor was some fiendish mastermind with machinery installed on that forbidden-to-explore third floor to arrange all this, or someone was stalking and trying to kill them, or there really were sadistic spooks (or demons, as Jennifer oh-so-helpfully suggested), something demented was going on here, and they needed to get everyone out.

A low, powerful creak sounded behind him.

He spun, dropping into a defensive crouch- one that admittedly would be more use against a running back than an evil spirit- and saw... nothing there.

He straightened, chuckling nervously. This place was really starting to get to him.

Jennifer rounded the corner with the rest of the group in tow, Windsor clearly annoyed at having his schedule- or his attempted soothing of the now-frazzled nerves of the group- interrupted. As soon as they'd all rounded the corner, Brian put on his best 'Voice of authority' and addressed the group.

"All right, listen up, people. I don't know about you, but I'm not really interested in paying for the opportunity to be killed."

That got their attention.

"Now, something screwy is going on around here. I don't know what. But until I do, I don't think anyone should be in this..." he paused to look around "...frickin' weird house! This thing has gone far enough! So, we are all getting out of here. Now."

Windsor started forward, opening his mouth to protest. Brian didn't give him the chance.

"So, you have two choices. Either you can follow me out- or I can carry you out. It's up to you."

He spun around and headed for the spiral staircase leading down to the first floor.

"Now, I am going to unlock that front door, and then we are all going to march right out of it and get this thing straightened out- with-" He glared at Windsor, silently offering him just one chance to come clean about whatever he knew about this madness, "-Or without the aid of the police."

He turned around and moved at a brisk walk towards the staircase, the group erupting in questions all at once, even the house creaking loudly as if groaning in displeasure. He hit the stairs at a brisk walk, almost dancing down the steps. It seemed a lot better illuminated than before; in fact, there was a shaft of light- "Don't go into the light, Carol-Anne!" Heh- coming down from the hole in the ceiling.

Wait... that hole in the ceiling... it couldn't be sunlight, that hole led to the third fl-

I was dumbfounded all over again. This was getting to be a habit. Sure, you could count my reactions to Amber disappearing and Alex shoving me out of the way of that bookcase as more of confusion than dumbfounding. But the slack-jawed shock after rounding the corner to the staircase, wondering about the flash of light that seemed to come from just beyond it, to see no trace of Armstrong whatsoever? That was dumbfounding. So was this.

"A webcam? Are you setting up a *webcam*? What is *wrong* with you, man?"

This was beyond bizarre. Was the man about to set up a concession stand next? Jennifer had ceased her debate with Alex and come over to stand beside him, looking as if she were preparing to defuse a blow-up. Which, I admit, I was just about ready to provide.

"People are missing here. Injured. Some may be *dead*. The house is full of ghosts that are trying to kill us, and as near as we can tell, the stairs up lead to angry ghosts and the stairs down make people *disappear*! We are trapped on the second floor of a haunted house, and I don't think you are *taking this SERIOUSLY!*"

I was building up a good head of steam when Leyla moaned, softly. Instantly, we all forgot what we were doing- except for Windsor, of course- and went over to her side. But it was a false alarm; she was still out cold.

"Don't panic, Mister Murphy. At least not until I get the feed started."

The voice was calm, cool, collected as ever.

I almost lost it.

"Are you psychotic?! You think I'm putting on some kind of performance for you? I'm not pandering to a psychopath! What kind of maniac is more concerned with his-"

"Calm DOWN, Mister Murphy. This is not becoming."

"I don't care about appearances, you buffoon! I'm talking about our *lives*! In danger! We are all going to-"

"Don't say it, Mister Murphy."

He offered a wan smile.

"It's too melodramatic."

The house seemed to shudder in agreement. Something crackled overhead, like a foot on a floorboard of the attic.

Windsor's back was to me, fiddling with his laptop; he seemed, if anything, annoyed by the distraction to his log-on procedures. Frankly, I was amazed that he could get a signal out here at all... and amazed that

I could still be distracted by such idle thoughts in the middle of all this. His shoulders slumped a bit as I continued to rant in his direction.

"You want dramatic? I'll give you dramatic! I'm going to take that laptop and smash it over my knee if you don't use it to connect with 911 *right now*. Maybe a ladder truck at the windows can-"

"Shut up, Mister Murphy. You're becoming tiresome. Sit down before you do something we'll both regret."

He almost sounded threatening. Or would have, if I wasn't a head taller than him.

"Regret?! I-"

"Are you going to keep repeating the end of my sentences back to me as a question?"

"-think you'll find I can be a desperate man, *Mister Windsor*, when my life is in danger-"

"Well then, would it calm you down if I told you that you're in no danger? Oh, but please do try not to lose the hysteria entirely; it will make for a great scene."

I glared at the back of his head.

"Drop the act, Windsor! You're not in control of this; this isn't part of some plan-"

"Yes it is, Mister Murphy. The act is dropped. This is, in fact, *all* part of the plan."

Okay, then, so certifiably insane. Or an axe-murderer. Good to know for future reference.

"So there are no ghosts? This is all your doing, somehow? You sick, twisted-"

"The spirits are quite real, Mister Murphy."

I sneered at him while simultaneously looking for something heavy that I could use to hit him over the head with if he suddenly went 'the Shining' on us.

"So, you just happen to be privy to their murderous plans, then? What, are you secretly a ghost in your spare time?"

He spun around to face me so suddenly that if he'd wanted to kill me, he could have; I was shocked into motionlessness. The fire of madness that all of those novels describe 'burning in their eyes?' I knew what it looked like now.

"I know, Mister Murphy, because they speak to me."

Leyla shivered and wrapped the shawl a little tighter around her bare shoulders, knowing that it wasn't her sleeveless blouse that was making her cold. There was something.... eerie about this place, beyond the strange events occurring within it.

Leyla was easygoing. Fun at parties. She had an always-try-everything-once policy... that she was now considering revising. First the girl disappeared... then the coach. Alex didn't seem to be frightened, but he was about the only one who wasn't. Especially when the gas mains- which she knew, everyone knew- had to have been cut off for years- burst into flames to block their attempted dumbwaiter-escape to the first floor. Flames that had died the moment they left. They were well and truly trapped upstairs, and already one of the floorboards had splintered, almost sending Jennifer tumbling down into the inexplicably-active boiler; there was no (sane) way down that way, either.

Up ahead, Windsor suddenly stopped. He'd been wending his way through the hallways towards the parlor 'base camp' which he now claimed would be a safe place to regroup and plan. Now, he was staring-

-now they all were starting, transfixed, at a book, floating in the air. It swooped and flapped, like a hovering bird, gently back and forth, while one of the lanterns that Windsor had placed throughout the house hovered over it, bobbing gently. Leyla stopped beside a grandfather clock, ticking serenely, the soundtrack to this eerie but otherwise silent scene.

Leyla.

Leyla jumped. No one was behind her... had- had it been...?

Leyla, come and join us.

Leyla wanted to cry out, to shout for help, but she found her vocal cords unwilling to respond- whether from fear or outside interference, she didn't know.

"What do you want?" She thought, wondering if it could hear her.

We want you, child.

Leyla's breath froze in her throat as the clock's ticks receded in her ears. Was that-?

We want you to be with us. Come and experience bliss, dearest daughter.

Her mother's accent, her manner of speaking; there was no mistaking it. "Mama?" she thought.

It's so beautiful here, child. Come and be with us!

"Mama? Show me, I want to see it!"

I can't, my sweetness- not unless you are with us. I've missed you so! Come and be with us?

She couldn't decide whether to be enthralled or terrified. After all these years, could it really be her...?

"How, mama? How do I do that?"

Just agree to it, sweetheart. All you have to do is agree.

"Agree to... become a ghost?"

Agree to come and be with me. I've missed you so, dearest daughter. I don't want to be apart from you again...

Leyla's thoughts were racing now, and if it wasn't her imagination, so was the ticking of the clock beside her. Or perhaps it was the pounding of her own pulse in her ears. This couldn't be real, could it? She didn't even believe in ghosts. And now, her mother was asking her to...

You just have to agree, sweetness. I can't do anything unless you agree of your own free will. Please say yes! Please let us be together again...!

This felt... wrong.

Say yes!

There was something else... not another voice exactly...

Please!

Yet speaking to her. Telling her this wasn't real. Telling her not to trust the voice...

I miss you!

It wasn't her mother. And the other voice... the not-voice... struck a cord with her heart, like a tuning fork's pitch syncing with the strum of a string...

Don't leave me, my child, my precious child-!

Both the not-voice, and her heart, vibrated in one accord; perhaps this, once, long ago, was what a man had meant when he coined the phrase 'rang true.' The grandfather clock beside her, laboring furiously, rang too; vibrating in seeming sympathy-

I love you so much!

-somehow, she knew, simply knew in the core of her being, that the not-voice was speaking the truth. And whatever was using her mother's voice wasn't.

Don't be deceived, sweetness!

"No." she said. "I won't. I'm sorry..."

Please, I love you so much...

"...If it really is you, mama-"

It's me, dear child! Say yes! Be with me!

"-then we'll be together soon enough; I won't live forever." The clock roared, its frenzied ticking sounding more like a drumroll than a metronome. Her heart hammered to match.

I want you now- say yes, child!

"I can't, mama." She thought, tears in her eyes; she could hardly resist the sound of her mother's tearful pleading. "I don't know why, but I just... can't!"

Say YES!

It didn't sound like mama any more. Not at all.

Leyla finally found her voice back.

"No!" she shouted aloud.

Fine, snarled the voice, a sneer in its tone. Have it your own way!

And beside her, the grandfather clock exploded like a grenade, gears and cogs and parts scattering everywhere. She didn't see the drive gear, both clock-hands still attached, that flew through the air towards her temple in the space of a split second; and after that, she didn't see anything at all.

I looked into the eyes of a madman. He was. He had to be.

"They speak to you?!"

Voices in this house wouldn't surprise me. Leyla had seemed almost like she was speaking to someone before the accident. Sometimes, the house itself almost sounded like it had a voice. But, to dialog with the ghosts? That was something else entirely.

"There you go, turning my statements into questions again."

I didn't have a response to that; there was nothing in his reply that I could phrase as an outraged question, and nothing else save that had a claim staked in my brain at the moment.

Windsor continued.

"Yes, they speak to me. We've been planning this for weeks. They can do things for you- wonderful, amazing things- all you have to do is say 'yes.'"

Alex spoke.

"Whoa- wait, man. You've been holding out on me? You're actually... communing with the spirits?"

"This is all according to plan, my boy. No one's been seriously hurt. They're just helping to make the day a little bit more dramatic, that's all. Disappearances, spooked survivors- it boosts ratings!"

"Ratings?" I'd found a question-convertible phrase. "RATINGS?!?!"

He shrugged. "Ratings. You know... like on TV?"

He turned back to the laptop.

"There's an entire stadium full of people in... Tennessee, somewhere, I think... waiting for this linkup. And you, my dear-" He turned to Jennifer, "-It's wide eyed little innocent faces like yours, recounting their tales of terror, that will hook the masses. I mean, face it-" He turned to me, "-That's the kind of face that really can't lie to you, is it? The audience will *trust* her. It will be a phenomenon! The ratings will spike, I'll be in syndication; the real deal, the true paranormal expert! And after the webcast is done, I'm sure dear Amber and coach Armstrong will show up again, safe and sound. The spirits just want to make a good show!"

I will freely admit, for a second time a really amazing zinger should have been at my lips where only a dumbstruck, dumbfounded, disbelieving slack-jaw now hung.

It was Alex who spoke.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, man. The spirits don't even like it when you ask their names-"

"Oh, they want this as much as I do, my boy; I will be famous, and they will be worshiped by the masses- they are very, *very* ready for worship."

I could tell Jennifer had a few things to say about that, but I beat her to the punch.

"You're sick! We're not going to help you sell anything; if your ghosts want to be famous, let them make their own on-camera appearance!"

I crouched by the couch. Leyla seemed to be coming around, but she was far from being able to walk.

"We're taking Leyla and finding a way out of here, right *now*- and getting her some medical help! Right?"

I looked to Jennifer, and she nodded resolutely. I looked to Alex. He was clearly torn; he could see the mania in Windsor just fine, but he wasn't ready to leave just yet; he really, *really* wanted to see those ghosts.

"Alex, I can't carry her by myself; please, I need your help."

His confused expression hardened into a mask of resolve, and he nodded, crouching beside me, helping me lift her.

"No! Stop!" Windsor was shouting now. "You will not ruin this moment!"

We were halfway to the door already. This was my last chance for a major, climactic zinger. A Bondian-one-liner of intellectually gigantic proportions. A chance to leave the bad guy reeling from my rapier wit.

"Oh yes, we are!"

Nuts.

We hardly even broke stride, Jennifer falling in beside us, supporting Leyla's head.

"Alex, wait..." Windsor's voice was pleading now. "The spirits are impressed with you- they want to meet you!"

Alex stopped dead in his tracks. So did I, as I was holding the other side of the woman we were both carrying.

"They say... they say they want to speak through you, to take you as their vessel; their voice!"

Alex turned, slowly. I was now supporting Leyla on my own.

"All you need to do is say yes! Right here, right now, the spirits will show themselves to you!"

Windsor was wide-eyed, practically manic in intensity, but Alex seemed not to notice. He was entranced by the possibility; there was that lousy enthusiasm of his- of all the times-

"Alex, don't!" It was Jennifer. She looked... taller, somehow. Stronger. Determined. This was a battle she was not going to lose; not to Windsor, or to anyone else. "You may not believe what I had to say about testing the spirits- but these 'spirits' have tested themselves!"

She stalked towards him, never breaking eye contact.

"Would friendly spirits- good spirits- have a spokesman like Charlie Windsor doing their bidding?"

Windsor and Alex both flinched at that one.

"Would they trap us here? Attack us? Are these the actions of friends?"

Windsor roared like an angry panther. I jumped, but Jennifer and Alex seemed not to even notice.

"You were not invited here!!!"

Jennifer ignored him.

"Look at Leyla, Alex."

Alex didn't move. It was Jennifer's turn to shout.

"Look at her!"

Alex turned toward us, looking dazed and uncertain.

"Is *that* the work of friends?"

Windsor roared- a more pathetic sound, this time, and offered his counter.

"Don't listen to her- she's jealous! She wasn't chosen; you were! Say yes, and the spirits will make you their own."

Alex winced. He wanted it. More than anything, he wanted it, I could see it in his eyes. He glanced again at Leyla, then turned slowly to face Windsor.

"Dude..." he said, slowly.

Windsor nodded in anticipation.

Jennifer bowed her head.

I held my breath.

"...there's such a thing as going too far."

He turned around and hefted up Leyla between us, pointed towards the door.

The house screamed.

It was a horrible sound that seemed to screech and echo from every direction; the sound of a cat being run over by a man being kneed in the groin while his fingernails ran roughshod over a blackboard and someone ripped sheet metal in two.

Windsor gasped in horror, and I turned to follow his gaze; the webcam was turning to look up at him.

The house began to shake. There was a low rumble, like an earthquake, but different, somehow. Bits of plaster began to fall from the ceiling.

The sound of wailing came from above the ceiling, and the tramping of feet.

The walls cracked with hairline fractures.

And a jet of flame erupted from the webcam, swallowing Charlie Windsor whole.

I'm fairly certain that more happened, but we were too busy running for our lives to see it.

The hallway was a cacophony of flying objects; books, candles, pieces of grandfather clock- we just charged through, heedless of the impacts. We ran 'as if the Devil himself was at our heels' because he very well might have been.

And then, we reached the stairs.

Beside the spiral staircase ran a side-hall, with a door in set in the wall that lead up to the attic. Below us, on the ground floor, a receiving room large and ornate enough to double as a dance floor, covered in an intricate circular tile work, led to the front door... which was *open*.

From behind the door to the attic, a bright light was shining. It was brilliant, even from the thin line spilling out from beneath the door. A second shaft penetrated down from a small hole in the ceiling, creating a pool of illumination further down the stairs. Somehow, the light looked very cold, sterile, harsh- a burning, unpleasant light.

We all exchanged glances. This could not be good.

"The light that zapped coach Armstrong?" Alex wondered aloud, speaking what we were all thinking.

I looked over at Jennifer. Her head was bowed, her eyes were closed, and she was muttering softly to herself; poor kid- it was obvious that she couldn't cope with this.

"All right, look- I'm guessing that if we touch that light, all Hell's gonna break lose," I ventured. "I don't think Jennifer can handle this, so I'm going to go down first. Then, you can hand Leyla down to me, and then help Jen. Sound good?"

Alex nodded.

"Just think of this as the world's weirdest heist movie- this is the laser beam you have to slip under at the beginning of the caper."

I edged down onto the first step.

I was still there. Good.

I edged down to the second. Then the third.

At this rate, the light-shaft from under the attic door was going to cut across my waist by the time I reached it.

I leaned back onto the stairs.

And then, I started sliding down on my back- not easy to do on the stairs.

"Just think of it as the world's weirdest game of limbo!" Alex encouraged from above.

My feet were now under the level of the rays; I had room to spare. I could see the shaft of light dancing and shimmering, as if something were moving back and forth in front of the distant light source. The rumbling was almost deafening now.

My knees moved past the shaft. Now, I was almost halfway past, about to put my head under the shaft of light.

A hand touched my shoulder. I... may have screamed like a little girl. The memory is hazy.

It was Jennifer, lying on her stomach, beside me on the stairs. She smiled at me, reassuringly. Clearly, she was as certifiable as Windsor.

"Don't worry, you're not doing this alone!" She shouted over the din. Then she closed her eyes and went back to her murmuring, her hands clasped in front of her.

I slide my face under the light-shaft. For a second, I swore I could see through the sheet of light- like it was a window above me, looking at something so strange and incomprehensible on the other side, I couldn't make it out. My back was aching and I was drenched in sweat.

My elbows were out on the other side now... but the rest of my body was underneath it, inches below it's very *solid*-seeming rays. I held my breath as I eased my way down.

Now, only my head remained underneath the coruscating rays.

I lifted myself with arms and legs like I was doing the crabwalk back in grade school, and slowly pulled my head out. There. I was past the horizontal shaft of light spilling from beneath the attic door, and so was Jennifer. Now, all that was left was the vertical beam that bathed half the stairway before me, like those pools of light that Jack Sparrow and Barbosa fought in and out of in the first Pirates of the Caribbean.

Alex shouted something from the top of the stairs, but I couldn't make it out. I started toward the second pool of light, spilling down like a street lamp on a gloomy sidewalk from the hole in the ceiling. Or rather, a gloomy streetlight on an even gloomier-

Without warning, my foot slipped out from under me, and the world cartwheeled. I was tumbling down the stairs, directly towards the pool of light, with no way to stop myself.

Jennifer's murmuring rose to a shout, though I have no idea what she said.

The world stopped. Wouldn't you know it? I was smack-dab in the middle of the light.

Only it wasn't touching me.

Something was blocking it; I was in a shadow.

I looked up at the hole in the ceiling that led up to the attic. The cold light was still pouring through, but there was something in the way. It looked like a lower-case 't'; it was all right-angles- maybe a cross-beam? Or a couple of rafters? I was sure there hadn't been a shadow there before. Still, I wasn't complaining. I was on my side, a narrow profile (well, not as narrow as it used to be, but I was running a treadmill on the weeknights), just barely within the safe confines of the protective gap in the light. I rolled to my feet, and there, in the shadow of the lower-case-t, I made my way to safety. I was at the foot of the stairs, on the last step, a 3-foot square platform. Jennifer helped Alex with Leyla's prone form, and they managed to make it down without slipping.

The open double-doors beckoned, a tantalizing ten feet away. The floor was bucking so hard that I could hardly keep my footing, and the roar was so loud that we couldn't hear each other. Odd... looking back, I couldn't see the shadow anymore. But, forward was where we needed to be, so forward was where I focused.

When I looked back, a wave of vertigo struck me.

The colorful swirls and patterns of interlocking circles that made up the tiling of the receiving room floor were spinning, dancing in maddening circles, looking for all the world like Disneyland's Mad Tea Party. I looked back at Alex, Jennifer, and Leyla. I noticed that all of their names had Es in them. For some reason, at that particular moment, it was hysterically funny. This was all just too absurd! Fighting down the giggles, I shrugged helplessly, then turned and leapt towards the door before I could talk myself out of it.

I hit the ground and the world started tumbling again. It was like jumping inside of a clothes dryer; the world spun, dizzily.

I heard Jennifer yelp as she hit the floor and was thrown off-balance, too. I could barely see her lose her grip on Leyla, who was also yanked out of Alex's hands; this drama was played out in spastic blurs and spins, intermittent glimpses, so that I wasn't aware that I'd even seen it until moments later.

The world started to go dark; I was nauseous and dizzy, and I couldn't move; I was spinning round and round on floor tiles that were impossibly moving like motorized carousels! I tried rolling over but just hit a different circle, spinning in a new, dizzying direction.

Then something slammed into me.

The world went light.

Not the cold, sterile light from the attic, but the warm, golden sunlight of-
-outside?

I hit the front porch rolling, tumbling off of it, and got a mouthful of grass. Alex was on top of me, a handful of my shirt in one hand, a handful of what looked like Jennifer's in the other, the force of the world's greatest tackle having carried us clear into the yard.

The noise was absent, having suddenly cut off as we passed through the doorway like a switch being flipped. It was perfectly quiet, a sunny afternoon. The ground was stable; though it took a good minute for me to realize this; the only motion now was in my very unbalanced equilibrium.

Alex let go of the fistfuls of cloth, and I saw Jennifer slump to the ground next to him, dazed. I lay there, cheek against the cool, dewy grass, as Alex flopped over onto his back and stared up at the sky, gasping in deep lungfulls of air.

Jennifer was the first one up; she had turned back to the house- she seemed to be shouting defiant words directed at the crumbling mansion, almost... *demanding* in the direction of the creaky old structure- but my ears were still ringing too much to make it out. I turned to look at the decrepit old-

It was beautiful. Gleaming, polished, in the middle of a now immaculate lawn.

Just the way it had looked in its heyday.

The door was still open, but the inside was pitch black; not even the distant shafts of light over the stairways were visible.

Alex still gasped for breath from the exertion of his run for freedom; and yet he looked... sad, almost wistful. His biggest adventure had involved giving up what he probably imagined was an even bigger adventure. Despite all that we'd just gone through, it looked like the house still had its hooks in his heart.

I dimly became aware of Jennifer's shouting.

"...ever you are, you can't keep what doesn't belong to you! They have to agree to it, don't they? That's what Windsor wanted; you can't touch them unless they choose you! So let *them* GO!"

The house moaned and creaked like the ancient thing that it was, though it never lost its beautiful appearance.

Jennifer invoked a name I hadn't heard since Sunday School, and the house shuddered again.

And two things happened at once.

Two figures shot out of the doorway and hit the ground with a sickening bounce, rolling to a stop several yards away. Jennifer seemed to collapse, as if the strain from a great battle were finally taking its toll.

And Leyla appeared in the doorway.

I should have run to the prone forms right away, I admit it. But I was transfixed- we all were- by Leyla.

Her bruise was gone. She looked warm, and radiant. The interior of the house behind her was bathed in a radiant yellow glow; though the light still looked... cold, somehow. As if the cold white light couldn't manage a warm look and so had simply tinted itself yellow, instead- which wasn't the same thing.

Leyla had on a shimmering gown of sparkling fabric, and a beatific smile. Her skin was clear, her smudged-makeup gone- she no longer needed it- and her sparkling eyes were fixed directly on Alex.

"We were wrong," She said, with a smile. "We misunderstood completely."

My mouth was too dry to say a thing.

"It was Windsor, all along. He had taken them, twisted them... he had done such horrible things!"

Her smile grew, if it was possible, even wider.

"But you did it, Alex. You saved them. You stood up to Windsor and broke his power over them. And they were able to defeat him. And now they're free!"

Swirling lights were now visible, cavorting about in the faux-sunlight behind her. Dancing, shimmering, sheet-like wraiths, cavorting in a hypnotically beautiful swarm behind her, like a school of dolphins.

"You've saved us all. And that's only the beginning."

Alex rose unsteadily to his feet, eyes still locked with hers.

"I said yes to them."

She turned, for a moment, though her eyes never left his.

"Jennifer was wrong to fear them; they have a paradise to offer us. These are good spirits, and they owe us a debt of gratitude. They want to take us-" She turned her head back towards him, "-to take you, to another plane of being. I've seen it. It's..." She seemed to be at a loss for words. "Incredible."

Jennifer began to stir on the ground.

For just a second, Leyla blinked, as if unnerved, and when she spoke again, she spoke much faster, more urgently.

"The time to ascend is now, Alex. Join us! Let them bring you into paradise!"

I could see the hunger still written in his eyes. And something else. Even though Leyla's words sounded just a bit melodramatic and silly to me, they seemed to be, somehow, exactly what Alex wanted to hear. He was the hero of his own story, the chosen one, the guy at the end of the movie with everybody cheering his name. The savior.

He took a step towards her.

"Just say the word, Alex, and we can ascend to paradise together. Just say... yes."

Then, for me, something broke the mesmerizing spell. Not just Jennifer stirring now, but the prone forms. I slowly began to talk towards them, unable to speak, to react, or to take my eyes off the vision of serene beauty before me. I knew I should say something, but somehow, I couldn't. It was as if this moment was between Alex and Leyla alone. It wasn't mine to interfere.

"Please, Alex- take my hand! Accept the offer! Receive a hero's reward! Your greatest adventure is waiting."

Alex bounded up the steps and onto the porch, less than a yard from the door he'd just come charging out of.

"I..." he stared deeply into her eyes, enraptured.

"You're a hero, Alex. You've earned this. Just say yes; all the adventure you've dreamed of is waiting..."

I opened my mouth; this didn't seem quite right.

"Alex, I, uh... I don't think this is-"

"Please, say yes. Come with me."

I tried again.

"Leyla, why don't you come down-"

"Say yes, Alex. Come, meet the angel of light and receive your reward."

Jennifer sat bolt upright, suddenly awake, her face a mask of urgent terror.

"No, Alex, don't!"

Leyla ignored her; so did Alex.

"Don't listen to her- she's jealous! She wasn't chosen; you were! Say yes, and the spirits will make you their own." Familiar words, now in a honey-sweet voice.

"You know me, Alex- now trust me. You saved us; if it wasn't for you, they would never have made it out, and the spirits would never be free. They are grateful!"

"Don't listen to her!" Jennifer cried, standing up shakily.

"Enjoy the adventure you've earned, Alex. Experience bliss. Receive a hero's welcome. Just. Say. Yes."

"NO!" Jennifer shouted desperately.

I don't know if Alex even heard her. He was too busy hearing what he wanted to hear. His eyes were hungry for adventure, for excitement, for that glimpse at the 'other side' he'd denied himself.

The human talent for self-delusion and rationalization is surprisingly powerful when we decide we want something.

Only a half-dozen feet away now, I could barely hear Alex speak. It was hardly more than a whisper.

"Yes."

Jennifer slumped in despair as Alex took one final step up, coming to stand beside Leyla. She put her arm around his shoulder, beaming, and turned to face me.

"You are all welcome, if you'd just accept-"

"Never!" Shouted Jennifer, tears now streaming down her face. I was inclined to agree with her.

I was almost to the prone bodies now; I finally managed to tear my gaze away to look at them. Already beginning to sit up, one of them was Amber!

"Very well," said Leyla, sounding satisfied. "Then we ascend to paradise alone."

Now that I was close enough, I could see that coach Armstrong, unconscious but looking none the worse-for-wear, was lying on top of someone. It wasn't two bodies; it was *three*.

"Get out of here!" shouted Jennifer, sobbing. "And take your *offers* with you!"

I rolled coach Armstrong over; he groaned and began to stir. And underneath him...

Was Leyla.

My head snapped up; I was already running towards the house before the thought to do so had entered my mind.

And there, in the door frame, was Alex.

And beside him, the burnt, desiccated corpse of Charlie Windsor hung limply, like a marionette with the strings cut, its arm draped around Alex's shoulder.

Alex grinned over at it, oblivious to the lifeless husk that held him near.

A voice that was most definitely not Leyla's purred from Windsor's charred lips, directed at Jennifer.

"One more that He'll never have... is better than nothing."

Lightning flashed and thunder rolled- but only *inside* the house. The bright flash that came from every door and window gave just a brief glimpse of a million moving somethings within. A bony hand was drawing the door shut from somewhere inside; the glowing, cavorting spirits behind Alex were dirty, tattered rags, flapping limply, almost dutifully, and the light was cold and white; sterile, dead.

And somehow, the light was dark.

It wasn't just cold light pretending to be warm light- it was white-tinted darkness, pretending to be light in the first place.

I had almost reached the porch when the door slammed shut.

The house groaned; a pathetic, keening wail of doomed souls, released from toil but never released.

The house grew. It seemed to be receding, getting farther away, larger-

No, it wasn't. It wasn't getting wider- the side walls were falling outward, like a sandwich board improperly propped up.

The front wasn't getting farther away, it was falling backwards, away from me.

The house collapsed, the four walls and ceiling hitting the ground in a cloud of dust as if there had never been anything inside at all. The hollow house lay in the sunny field, flat as a pancake

The only sounds were those of the three sleepers groaning, slowly waking, and of Jennifer's sobbing.

I walked over and put an arm around her; she was even more shaken than I was.

"It couldn't kill them; it didn't have the power." She whispered. "We all have a choice, you know... We can't be cursed *or* saved without our own compliance."

She was clearly in shock; I can't blame her; a simple upbringing in some sheltered Christian circles couldn't have prepared her for anything like this.

"Windsor made his choice a long time ago," She whispered, "But Alex... I had hoped..."

"Poor kid," I said, aloud "This has all been so much for you- life never prepared you to see something like this."

As if it had me- this was all too Twilight Zone for me to even believe, but somehow the words sounded right to my ears.

Jennifer looked up at me, her cheeks glistening with tears, regarding me with an expression of both sadness and resignation.

"Watching another lost soul go eagerly into oblivion because he believes what's waiting for him is paradise?"

"Well, I-"

"Watching someone who just has to say 'yes' to their only hope of salvation say 'yes' to the one who wants to destroy him instead?"

"Jennifer..."

"To have no more power to help a friend on the path to destruction than just to speak truth against the lies and hope that they'll listen? Professor Murphy... I see it all the time."