

# *The Murder House*

by Susan and Dana

*The ghosts are moving tonight. Restless. Hungry.*

A solemn procession of five sleek black funeral cars following a hearse climbed the hill toward the odd-looking monstrosity of a house that sat at the top, holding court over the valley below it. Besides the chauffeurs behind the wheels of the funeral coaches, each contained exactly one solitary passenger.

In the first car that followed the hearse sat Jim, a rugged, handsome test pilot. He was no doubt a brave man, and he had been enticed by the promise of a needed payout to be even braver that night.

A handsome blonde woman sat in the backseat of the second car. Her name was Trixie, and she was a columnist researching a featured article on ghosts. Perhaps it was her gambling, though, that led her to accept the challenge to spend the night in a haunted house for a nice payout...if she survived.

In the rear seat of the third car sat Mart. He owned the peculiar house on top of the hill, and he had spent exactly one night in it. That one night was just enough time for him to be convinced that it was haunted by the ghosts of seven people who had been murdered there. When the eccentric millionaire approached him about renting the house so that his wife could throw a “ghostly” soiree, he had been torn. In the end, he had agreed and was returning convinced that he was risking his life, but the money that the millionaire had promised if he spent the night was so tempting...

A keenly intelligent-looking but rigid man sat in the rear of the fourth car. A psychiatrist, Brian had explained to the party’s host that spending the evening in a haunted house would help his work on hysteria, although there was a touch of greed reflected in those dark eyes as his car approached the house.

A young and pretty girl stared out the window of the fifth car, taking in her gloomy surroundings high above the lights below. Diana worked as a secretary at the eccentric millionaire’s company and had been chosen to attend because she was greatly in need of the money, as she was the sole support for her whole family.

The somber procession finally reached the top of the hill, and the five passengers exited the black cars. They eyed each other and the house nervously before tentatively moving as a group toward the large patio surrounding the house. Large metal gates squeaked closed behind them. As one, they all looked up at the imposing structure before them, bizarrely fashioned from interlocking concrete blocks carved with intricate relief ornamentation. The house had been built in the Mayan revival architectural style, based on ancient Mayan temples. As bizarre as the façade was, the view of the valley below was equally as stunning, and the five gazed silently at the twinkling lights below. Still, no one spoke a word.

The front door swung open slowly, a tacit invitation, and the group entered the extravagant entryway, leaving the front door open behind them. A sweeping staircase that turned at a ninety degree angle at its midpoint stood before them. A heavy wooden door stood closed on the wall to the right of the front door. The entryway itself was richly decorated with an ornate crystal chandelier studded with a multitude of candles, priceless Oriental rugs, and Chippendale furniture, some of which displayed odd—but clearly expensive—sculptures. Darkly painted portraits of long-dead men and women lined the mahogany staircase. Only the profusion of cobwebs marred the grandness of the entrance.

It was Jim who finally broke the silence as he firmly set his overnight bag down on a large table that sat in the middle of the entry hall, a massive eyesore of some kind of a lamp/sculpture combination covered in cobwebs taking up most of its surface. “Well, where is everybody?”

*The Murder House*

Di was the first to respond as she also set her chic overnight bag down on the table, although unlike Jim, she set her case down very delicately and kept both of her hands on the handle. "This isn't a very warm welcome, is it?"

Mart lingered close to the door to the outside, nervous energy emanating from him as he tensely clutched the handle of his overnight bag. "Only the ghosts in this house are glad we're here," he stated. His proclamation caused Jim and Diana to stare at him as though he might be crazy. Brian emitted a sarcastic chuckle, as Trixie looked at the doctor with raised eyebrows.

Trixie, always inquisitive, asked, "Are we all strangers to each other?" She gave a nod of her head toward Jim and Diana, her two hands clutching a utilitarian yet stylish train case. "Don't you two know each other?"

Jim looked at the pretty black-haired girl in front of him. "I don't even know your name."

The girl smiled and offered her hand. "I'm Diana."

The rugged test pilot, who was dressed in a sport coat and tie, took the proffered hand and shook it. "Jim."

Trixie continued with her inquisitive questions, ever the reporter, almost looking as if she was ready to pull out her stenographer pad and a pen and quickly jot down notes. "Is Dan Mangan a friend of yours?" she asked, referring to their mysterious host.

Jim replied, with a careless, debonair air, "I've heard of him, but I've never met him."

Diana spoke up, moving to stand next to Jim. "I work for one of his companies, but I've never seen him."

Trixie stated, "I've never met the man either. Just a phone call." She turned to the dark-haired man beside her, who sported a nicely tailored suit complete with the requisite perfectly folded handkerchief peaking out of the pocket, and continued her relentless questioning. "Do you know him?"

Brian gave a small laugh, shook his head, and answered simply, "No."

The outspoken, persistent blonde turned to Mart, who was still apprehensively looking around at the entry hall as though he expected something to attack him at any minute, and boldly stated, "Then you're the only one of us who does."

The haunted-looking man immediately issued forth a denial. "I don't know him. All the details about renting the house were done by mail," he protested. The dignified three-piece suit he wore, with its conservative pinstripes, contradicted his anxious countenance and obvious belief in ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night.

Brian looked at the blonde standing next to him, smartly dressed in a belted tweed overcoat with jaunty lapels and a striking ornamental brooch, assuming that she would be the one able to answer a question of his own. "He's quite wealthy, isn't he?"

Trixie nodded, her pert curls and pearl-drop earrings bouncing with the effort. "Millions."

"And five wives, I believe," Brian continued.

Trixie smirked. "Four, I think, so far." Her mischievous smile clearly indicated that she truly believed that the "so far" was an accurate prediction of their host's future matrimonial situation.

"A fifty-thousand-dollar party for only five people is a little steep, even for a millionaire," Brian observed as he looked around.

*The Murder House*

Jim took a few steps farther into the house, looking around the dark and gloomy entrance hall. “Well, if I were going to haunt somebody, this would certainly be the house I’d do it in,” he observed with an acerbic—and charming—smile.

Suddenly, the front door swung shut with a loud bang, causing the crystal chandelier to clink and sway above them. All five of the guests jumped at the sound and then, as if controlled by puppet strings, looked briefly at the swaying behemoth of a light fixture above them before turning toward the front door. Within seconds, though, Diana nervously asked, “Who closed the door?”

Jim strode purposely to the front door. He grasped the door knob and tried to open it. It would not budge.

“This thing is made of solid steel,” he said, looking it up and down. Meanwhile, the chandelier continued to twist and sway violently above them, gaining momentum and becoming noisier by the second. Jim drew his attention from the immovable door to the chandelier and, with lightning-fast reflexes, leapt to where Diana stood, pulling her from underneath the heavy crystal fixture seconds before it came crashing down where she had been standing only moments before, the candles flickering out as they fell through the air.

Trixie, Mart, and Brian stared in shock at the shattered mess of glass and candle wax littering the expensive rug beneath their feet. Meanwhile, Diana stared at her savior, the look of shock on her face indicating that she was desperately fighting the instinct to scream and run from the house. Jim held the girl to console her as he, too, stared at the broken chandelier.

None of them saw the shadowy figure, dressed in an impeccable dinner jacket, who stood above them, looking down over the banister from the second floor. He leaned forward slightly, peering down at the scene below him, and before withdrawing down the hall, opening the door to a lowly lit bedroom suite furnished with dark mahogany furniture that perfectly matched the bleak atmosphere that the house exuded. Heavy draperies were drawn over the windows. The man crossed the room and knocked on an inner door of the suite.

“Our guests are here, Honey, and fortunately, still alive. Is your face on yet?” he asked.

A tall, lean blonde wearing a pajama set covered by an open robe sashayed out of the dressing room, ignoring the man’s question, and instead began complaining about the dust and dirt. “Couldn’t you have had this place cleaned?” she finished as she began searching through a suitcase that sat open on the bed.

Dan Mangan smiled at his wife. “Atmosphere, darling. You know how ghosts are—never tidy up.” He crossed the room to stand behind her. “That’s a very fetching outfit, but hardly suitable for a party.”

Smiling sweetly, Honey responded, “I’m not going to the party.”

“This spend-the-night ghost party was your idea, remember? Since it’s going to cost me fifty thousand dollars, I want you to have fun.”

“The party was my idea until *you* invited all the guests,” she returned, stabbing an accusing finger at him to emphasize her point. She continued in that vein, her voice petulant and peevish, “Why all these strangers? Why none of our friends?”

“Friends? Do we have any friends?”

Still smiling a saccharine smile, Honey replied, “No, your jealousy took care of that.”

*The Murder House*

Dan's face became serious. "I had a reason for inviting each of our guests. I wanted a kind of cross-section. From psychiatrist to typist, drunk to jet pilot. They all share one thing—they all need money. Now let's see if they're brave enough to earn it."

"And you call this a party?"

"Could be," Dan returned, his voice an odd mixture of anticipation, dark humor, and contempt.

The two continued their verbal jousting as Dan poured two glasses of champagne, insisting that his wife would attend the party. She remained stubbornly opposed to doing so, and the conversation spiraled downward. Only their tones remained civil, belying her complaints about his jealousy and possessiveness. Even his accusations that she had once tried to poison him were emitted in a modulated urbane tone.

His contemplative face didn't give a hint of his inner thoughts, and his sudden grab of her shoulders, forcing her to look at him, was all the more shocking as a result. "Honey, you'd do it again if you thought you could get away with it, wouldn't you?"

Honey stared at him defiantly, giving a shake of her flaxen mane. "Darling, what makes you think that?"

"Something about you," her husband responded, letting his grip loosen before he finally gave her shoulders a little tap and let her go altogether. "Hanging is uncomfortable, I hear—in case you have any more ideas."

He strode to the door and opened it, turning to her one last time. "Don't let the ghosties and the ghouls disturb you, dear."

Honey kept her cool smile on her lips as she said flippantly, "Darling, the only ghoul in this house is you."

"And don't sit up all night thinking of ways to get rid of me. It makes wrinkles." And with that, he was gone, the door to the bedroom suite shutting firmly behind him.

Dan made his way downstairs, intent on joining his guests in the living room. As he approached, he could hear one of them speaking passionately about the house and deduced that it must be Mart. He was telling the story of how his sister-in-law had murdered his brother. The murderess' sister had been present and had been murdered, as well. In his excited voice, Mart explained that the bodies had been hacked up and various pieces found throughout the house, with the exception of their heads. Dan paused in the hallway to listen.

"So there are two loose heads drifting around in here somewhere?" Dan recognized the voice as belonging to Jim, the pilot.

Mart lowered his voice, but Dan could still hear his words. "You can hear them at night. They whisper to each other and then cry."

Dan next heard Trixie's crisp voice, which he immediately recognized from their brief phone call. "Since our host isn't here, would anybody care to mix me a drink?"

The psychiatrist responded, "Certainly. What will you have?"

Dan took that as his cue and entered the living room. Five pairs of curious eyes turned toward him, and he smiled. "Good evening. I'm your host, Dan Mangan. Since we're all strangers to each other, let's get acquainted with a drink."

Mart immediately approached his host. "Mr. Mangan, I advise you to call this party off now. The ghosts are already moving, and that's a bad sign."

*The Murder House*

Dan smiled tolerantly and continued on as if Mart had not spoken. He moved toward the bar while apologizing for his wife's absence, noting that she would be late. After asking his guests for their drink preferences, he began pouring amber and clear liquids from crystal decanters, saying, "Now, before the party begins, let's go over the details. The caretakers will leave at midnight, locking us in here until they come back in the morning. Once the door is locked, there's no way out. The windows have bars a jail would be proud of, and the only door to the outside locks like a vault. There's no electricity, no phone, no one within miles. So, no way to call for help."

"Like a coffin," Mart stated.

Dan looked up from the drinks he was pouring to stare at Mart. After a beat, he smiled—a secret smile, a mysterious smile, a smile that was in no way benign—and then returned his attention to the glasses in front of him, continuing, "So if any of you decide not to stay for the party, you must let me know before midnight. Of course, if you leave, I shan't be able to pay you anything."

Brian spoke up then. "I'm interested in your reasons for this...party...aside from the pleasant company."

Dan smiled. "Ghosts, doctor. I think everyone wonders what they'd do if they saw a ghost, and now my wife has given us all the opportunity to find out."

Brian chuckled, but there was no humor in the sound. "Amusing. Ghosts, et cetera, being only creations of hysteria, your party should be a success."

Dan motioned toward Mart. "Mart, here, guarantees genuine ghosts."

"Seven, now." He looked around at the assembled guests, a dour look on his face, before saying ominously, "Maybe more before morning."

"That's cheerful," Dan remarked drily.

"Four men have been murdered in this house, and three women," Mart continued in his dour manner as if Dan had not made a remark.

Brian could not resist commenting, "You planned your party very well, Mr. Mangan. Four of us are men, and three are women." He smiled. "A ghost for everybody."

Dan turned toward the current owner of the house and made a request. "Mart, why don't you take us on a tour of the house and let's see what happens?"

Mart led Dan and his guests through the house, stopping in one room to point to a large stain. "See that stain? Blood! A young girl was killed here and whatever got her wasn't human." He looked around and noticed that Trixie was standing underneath another stain that marked the ceiling. "Don't stand there!" he cried.

Trixie looked surprised. "What do you mean? Where?" She started to move but then looked down at her hand. A large drop of blood sat on the smooth skin on the back of her hand. Another crimson drop fell next to it. She looked up in shock as Mart arrived at her side.

"Too late," he said grimly. "They've marked you."

Trixie made no comment as she used a handkerchief from her purse to clean the red liquid from her hand.

"Ridiculous!" Brian stated in a superior tone. "The roof probably leaks."

Trixie smiled. "That must be what it is. Who would want to haunt me?"

Brian commented in a dry voice, "Mart, you're the life of the party."

*The Murder House*

Dan smiled. “Oh, he hasn’t started yet. Wasn’t there a man who put his wife in a wine vat or something?”

“That was down in the cellar,” Mart said as he began moving toward a door, the guests following him. “There’s been a murder almost every place in this house.”

The blond man led them down a steep flight of stairs into the cellar. The group stopped in front of a large rectangle cover that sat in the middle of the floor. As Mart explained that one of the previous owners had decided to make wine in the cellar, he started to turn a pulley on the wall, which drew the cover up, revealing a pool of dark liquid in the floor underneath.

“Mr. Norton did a good deal of experimenting with wine, but his wife didn’t think it was any good, so Mr. Norton filled the vat with acid and threw her in. She was supposed to stay down, but the bones came up.” He paused and looked at the group, the utmost expression of seriousness on his face. “Funny thing, none of the murders here were just ordinary—just shooting or stabbing. They’ve all been sort of wild and violent. Different.”

Diana, leaning over to look into the pool, nearly lost her balance and was immediately pulled back by Jim.

Mart looked clearly shaken. “Thank God you didn’t fall in.”

Di looked up, frightened. “You mean there’s still acid in there?”

Instead of answering directly, Mart moved to pick up a trap with a dead rat, holding it over the pool of dark liquid. He sprang the trap and the rat fell into the liquid, which hissed and bubbled.

“It destroys everything with flesh and hair, just leaves the bones.” Mart then moved to the wall and used the pulley to close the lid, remarking, “My, it’s dry and dusty down here.”

Dan, looking rather disconcerted, responded, “Well, there’s a cure for that upstairs. Come on.”

As the rest of the group departed the cellar, Jim caught Diana’s arm before she could follow them, encouraging her to stay down there with him for a moment. The two made flirtatious small talk for a few minutes, discussing the proposition their host had made—ten thousand dollars for spending the night in the house. As they spoke, Jim began opening and closing the myriad of doors lining the walls of the cellar. He suddenly disappeared into one of the doorways, and the door slammed shut behind him. Diana frantically tried to open the door he had disappeared behind, but it was stuck and wouldn’t open no matter how hard she tried.

Becoming frantic, Di cried, “Jim! Jim!” She looked around, her eyes wild as they surveyed the cellar. Suddenly, Diana became motionless. The candles that lit the room from their sconces on the walls began to flicker, and an eeriness descended over the damp, dank space. Di’s attention was drawn to an open doorway on the opposite side of the room.

Out of the darkness of the doorway emerged a ghostly figure. A tall, lean woman with wild platinum hair and a black dress that covered her from neck to ankle seemed to float into the main room of the cellar and then just as quickly retreated back into the darkness.

Di let out a small cry and ran toward the stairs. She found her way to the living room, where Dan, Brian, Mart, and Trixie sat enjoying drinks, and burst inside, crying, “Help me, please! Jim is gone, and there’s a ghost!”

Without waiting for a response, the dark-haired beauty turned and fled the room, rushing back toward the stairs that led to the cellar. Startled, the other guests and Dan hurriedly followed her. They were right behind her when she reached the door through which Jim had disappeared.

*The Murder House*

She cried, "We'll have to break it down! It's locked!"

Dan easily opened the door and looked at her. "Locked?" He carried a candle and lit it on one of the candles that adorned the walls. He entered the small space beyond the door and found Jim on the floor. He and Brian rushed to help him up. The handsome man got to his feet groggily and touched his head.

"Are you all right?" Dan asked.

"Nothing money won't cure," Jim replied sardonically. "I must've...I must've bumped my head."

Brian's analytical eyes took in the empty, small space. There was nothing on the floor, nothing hung from the walls. It was a simple, cement cube of a room. There was nothing for Jim to bump his head on. "The only way you could bump your head in here," the doctor observed, his fingers lightly grazing the back wall of the closet-like area, "is to run head on into the wall. You didn't do that, did you?"

Jim stared at him, his eyes glazed, his expression unsure.

"Let's put a bandage on that," Brian said when no answer was forthcoming. He helped Jim from the room, Dan on the other side of Jim, and Diana trailing behind as they headed toward the cellar stairs. Mart stayed behind with Trixie, gazing at Jim contemplatively.

"I wonder why they didn't kill him."

Trixie looked at Mart. "Who?"

"He didn't bump his head. They hit him."

"They?"

Mart didn't seem aware that the journalist was staring at him, waiting for an answer. With a confused expression, he turned back and glanced into the small room in which Jim had been found. Clearly receiving no answers from whomever "they" were, he turned and headed toward the cellar stairs, Trixie following him, looking at him with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

As they entered the living room, where Jim was lying on the sofa, they overheard Dan say to Di, "When you came in, Diana, you said something about a ghost."

Di nodded. "There was *something*."

Dan continued his questioning. "What did it look like?"

Di thought for a moment and then responded, "It was wearing a black thing that went all the way to the floor."

Brian asked her if she had been frightened, and Di nodded. Brian turned to his host and proclaimed, "That, Mr. Mangan, is hysteria."

Dan countered the doctor's proclamation with two questions. "How do you explain what happened to Jim? Was that hysteria, too, doctor?" With that, he moved over to the bar. Mart followed him.

"The ghosts are coming closer, Mr. Mangan."

"You really believe in your pet ghosts, don't you, Mart?"

Mart stared at the eccentric millionaire somberly. "Before the night's over, you will, too."

Dan decided to change the subject and offered his guests drinks. Trixie rose from her chair and approached the two men standing at the bar, accepting her host's offer. Meanwhile, Jim and Di left the

*The Murder House*

living room to go explore. Jim explained to her that he wanted to find out what exactly had happened to him.

Di nervously followed the young pilot to the cellar, glancing around her as if she expected something to jump out at her. She watched as her companion looked around the barren, closet-like room that he had been locked in. He knocked on the walls and seemed to find a different sound in one spot. At that, he began measuring the inside of the room as compared to the outside and then moved on to measure the small room next door. When he discovered that the measurements didn't quite match, he had an idea.

"I'm going to knock on the wall, and when you hear me, you knock on this wall," he instructed the young typist as he left to return to the room in which he had been locked.

After a few moments, Di heard a faint knocking, and she knocked back. As this continued for a few moments, the hairs on the back of Di's neck stood up. She suddenly felt as if she was not alone. She slowly looked over her shoulder and was frozen in shock and panic. A woman—a woman with a horrible, contorted face and wild hair—stood before her, her gnarled, bony hands reaching toward the terrified girl. As she screamed and screamed, Diana realized that the woman had no eyes. Instead, the sockets contained two milky white balls. Finally, the grotesque figure in the neck-to-toe black gown floated past her and out the door.

Jim, hearing her screams, came running into the room. Di staggered into his arms, collapsing in relief at the sight of someone familiar and safe.

"I saw it again!" she cried, on the verge of hysterics. She pointed toward the doorway where she had seen the horrible vision disappear. Jim held her in his arms as he moved her toward the main room of the cellar, with its myriad of doors, odd-looking contraptions, and a vat full of acid simmering just below its floor covering. He held up his candle but saw no apparition.

"Where did it come from, Di?" he asked, a puzzled expression on his face.

Di pointed toward the room that she had been in while knocking on the wall. The two re-entered the room and looked around. There was no other exit, no place for anyone to hide. Like the room Jim had been knocked out in, there was nothing adorning the walls of this room, nothing sitting on the floor or tucked into a corner. It was just...empty.

Jim looked around, exasperated. "If it ran out of here," he said, gesturing toward the only entrance to the room, "I'd have seen it."

"Jim, it doesn't run. It just floats."

"Yeah, but why didn't I see it?" he questioned.

Di's fright turned into indignation. "You don't believe me."

Jim couldn't help himself. He chuckled. "Well, how can I?"

Jim regretted his words the instant that they were out of his mouth, but it was too late. Di had already pushed passed him and was halfway across the cellar. He watched helplessly as she hurried up the cellar stairs.

At the top of the stairs, Di was surprised to find a handsome, honey-haired blonde woman waiting for her. The woman introduced herself as Honey Mangan and led Di to the room that was to be hers so that she could freshen up.



*The Murder House*

After practically interrogating the young woman, Honey decided that she was not having an affair with her husband, but then she wanted to know why Di and the pilot were wandering around the house alone.

Di struggled to respond. "Well, I was in the cellar with Jim...Mr. Frayne. I just left, that's all."

Honey looked at her, her expression intense. "Don't do it again. Don't go anywhere in this house by yourself. Now fix your face, and I'll come by for you in a few minutes." As she spoke, Mrs. Mangan strode across the bedroom toward the door.

Di tried to protest. "But I—"

"You're in danger," Honey said, her hand on the doorknob as she prepared to exit. "We all are."

"But who?" Di asked.

Honey stared at the beauty before her. "I hope for your sake you never find out." With that, she opened the door and exited into the hallway.

It was there that the party's hostess ran into Jim, and the two introduced themselves. As she had done for Di, Honey showed Jim to the room that he was to occupy that night. She also questioned Jim, just as she had the young typist, about the events of the evening.

When Jim told her that Diana had thought that she had seen a ghost and he had kidded her about it, Honey became serious. "I wouldn't joke about anything else that happens here tonight."

Jim grinned at his hostess, still unconcerned. "Now, don't tell me you're taking all this seriously."

"Aren't you?" she asked him, her hazel eyes wide.

"I'd like to find out what hit me," Jim admitted.

"Jim," Honey began, reaching for his hand, "if I need help, may I count on you?"

Jim looked puzzled and even a little embarrassed. Why would his hostess ask him such a thing? Out loud he said, "Yeah, sure. I guess so." His voice then changed and grew more brusque. "Look, what's going on here anyway? I mean, what is it with this party business?"

Honey stated, "This is no party. He's planning something."

"Your husband?"

Honey gave a slight nod and said, "I wish I knew what it was."

"It must be something big if he's gonna lay out fifty thousand."

Honey shook her head, her honey-colored tresses swaying with the movement. "The money doesn't mean anything. He has a reason for getting us all up here to this dreadful old house."

"What for?" Jim wanted to know. With his usual practicality, he pointed out, "He doesn't even know us."

"Maybe that's exactly why you're here," Honey stated.

"Well, what can he get away with?" Jim continued to try to understand the situation—and Mrs. Mangan's odd behavior.

"He thinks big money like his can get away with anything. You know, of course, that I'm his fourth wife. The first simply disappeared, and the other two died." Honey turned pleading eyes toward the handsome pilot standing in front of her. "Jim, I don't want to join them."

*The Murder House*

Jim's face was the epitome of seriousness. "You mean he..."

Honey interrupted. "Oh, his doctor said they died of heart attacks. Two girls in their twenties."

Jim digested the improbability of two girls in their twenties both dying of a heart attack while married to the same man. "Well, what can he do?" he asked helplessly.

"My husband is sometimes insane with jealousy. Nothing matters to him then. Please be careful," Honey pleaded with him.

"Would he hurt you?"

Honey swallowed. "He would kill me if he could." As though fearing that she might have said too much, Honey turned and left the room, quietly shutting the door behind her. She saw a shadow in the hall, and assuming that it was her husband, she hurriedly padded down the hallway and entered her bedroom suite. She quickly sat down at the dressing table and picked up her silver brush, running it through her golden strands as Dan entered.

"Honey, you're missing all the fun. Diana Lynch was almost killed by a falling chandelier. The pilot bashed his head in."

"Is he badly hurt?" Honey asked as she looked up at her husband, although she already knew the answer to her question.

"The saturnine psychiatrist bandaged him up." Dan rubbed his hands together and smiled wickedly at his fourth wife. "Don't you want to go and console him, as you do most men in your fashion?"

The two continued to exchange barbs with perfectly civilized voices and mannerisms until Dan said, "Hurry up, darling."

"Dan, for the last time, I am *not* going to your party," Honey stated. Her voice was still silky smooth, but there was an undercurrent of iron.

"For the last time, it's not my party but yours, and you *are* going."

He took several menacing steps toward her, even as she once again defiantly declared, "I am not."

Dan gripped her hair in his hand and pulled a little tighter each time Honey emitted a crisp denial. Finally, she could take it no more, and at his repeated "Are you ready, dear?", she finally responded, "Yes. Damn you."

Dan loosened his grip only slightly as he leaned down toward her. "Would you adore me as much if I were poor? All you want to be is a lovely widow." He released his grip. "It's almost time to lock up the house. Then your party will really begin." He paused, a sinister pause, full of pregnant anticipation. "I wonder how it'll end?"

Dan left the room and knocked on the doors of the guests, reminding them that it was nearly midnight and they needed to gather in the living room. He headed downstairs to make the final preparations and wait for his guests.

Meanwhile, in her room, Di was trying to freshen up before meeting everyone downstairs. She opened her overnight case. A look of revulsion and horror claimed her pretty features as her frightened brain registered what she was seeing. She screamed and backed away from the grotesque head of a woman that lay nestled in her case, as if it belonged there...

Di ran out of her room but took a wrong turn in the hall. She reached a dead end, and in her fright, she desperately tried to find her way back to somewhere familiar. A hallway she'd recognize. Her violet eyes

*The Murder House*

looked this way and that, but she was too panic-stricken to register what she was seeing as she groped her way down the hall, lit only dimly by candlelight. Diana was still trying to find her way when two bony, claw-like hands reached for her from behind. A tall, thin man grabbed her, one of his skeletal hands clamped over her mouth, while the other held her arms rigidly against her body. Di struggled against the figure, who then spoke.

"Come with us. Come with us before he kills you," the man said in a low, sibilant voice.

At that, Di broke free and emitting a piercing scream as she fled down the hallway.

Meanwhile, Trixie, Mart, Brian, Di, and Dan were gathered in the living room. Jim joined the "party" and immediately noticed that Di was not present in the gloomy.

"Where's Diana? Miss Lynch?" he asked.

Before anyone could answer, Di barreled into the room. She strode straight up to Dan and announced, "I don't want to stay here!"

Dan looked at the frightened young woman, concern written all over his face. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Diana, what happened?"

Before she could respond, there was the creaking sound of rusty hinges. The door opened to reveal a grotesque couple. She was dressed in a long black gown, her white hair flowing wildly around her ghastly face, her milky white orbs staring unseeingly straight ahead. He was tall and thin, his gnarled bony hands at his side. The couple stood stock still, just staring into the living room.

Dan was the first to speak. "That's Jonas Slydes and his wife. They've been caretakers here for years. She's blind, you know."

At that, Di turned to Jim, who had been standing at her side, and she repeated her earlier plea. "I'm not going to stay here!"

Dan strode over to the psychiatrist. "Doctor, it looks like we have a real case of hysteria on our hands."

Brian looked over at Diana with an assessing eye and then turned back to Dan. "I think she's just a little upset, not hysterical."

Dan was saved from having to reply by the entrance of his wife. Honey stood in the doorway, her regal golden-haired good looks and immaculate evening gown announcing her presence in a way that mere words could not.

"Good evening," she said, crossing the room to stand with her husband, who then made all of the introductions.

After Dan had introduced everyone to his wife, Diana turned back to Jim and hissed, "Get me out of here."

Jim turned to her. "What about the ten thousand dollars?"

"I don't care," she insisted in a low voice. "He wants to kill me!"

"Who wants to kill you?" Jim asked, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise as he worked to keep his own voice low so as not to be overheard by the other guests and the Mangans.

"Mr. Mangan," Di whispered in a low voice as she involuntarily looked toward their host.

Before Jim could respond in any sort of coherent way, the object of their focus began speaking.

"May I have your attention please?"

*The Murder House*

Dan's voice was methodical, entrancing as he explained the rules of the evening.

"I think you remember the bargain we made if you stay all night. Ten thousand apiece. If any of you don't survive, fifty thousand dollars will be divided amongst the rest of you. If I should die..." At this morbid statement, the enigmatic man paused and smiled grimly at his assembled guests—with a lingering pause as his eyes met his wife's—before finally continuing, "You will be paid by my estate.

"When the doors are locked from the outside by the caretakers, we'll be forced to stay in this house until morning. If any of you decide not to stay, you must leave with the caretakers now. You won't have a chance to change your minds later because there'll be no way to get out."

As Dan paused and looked at his guests, Di once again turned to Jim and whispered fiercely, "I don't want to stay!"

Her proclamation was enunciated by the tinkling sound of the chandelier above them swaying in a sudden wind that swept through the room, causing the curtains to sway and the candles to flicker. It was disconcerting to say the least. A loud, metallic clang made everyone in the room jump. No one could miss Dan's look of surprise at the sudden sound change to cold anger as he realized that the caretakers were no longer standing there, even though it was not yet midnight. With purposeful strides, he exited the living room into the entry hall, tramping across the shattered remains of the chandelier that had fallen earlier, and tried to open the front door.

To no avail.

It was firmly locked. The vault of a door was firmly sealed. Like that of a tomb. Everyone could hear the faint sounds of an automobile's engine catching and then revving up as it drove away, the sound becoming more distant as the car put space between itself and the haunted house on the hill. No one could mistake the fury on Dan's face as he approached Mart, who cowered slightly in the anger of his host.

"It's not midnight yet. Who told them they could leave?" Dan demanded.

Mart shook his head, baffled. He said in a small, bewildered voice, "They never leave before midnight."

"Well, they're gone," Dan stated coldly. He stared angrily at Mart and then seemed to realize that nothing could be done. His face became charming once again, his smile once again in place. "I was going to ask you whether you wanted to stay or not, but it seems that the caretakers have made the decision for you. We're all locked in now."

Di immediately spoke up. "But I don't want to stay."

Dan looked truly regretful. "I'm sorry, my dear, but it's too late now."

At that, Honey walked over to her husband. "Darling, haven't you had enough of this silly game? Get some cars up here and let these people go home. But pay them first."

At that, Dan smiled down at his wife and placed a strong arm around her shoulders. "This is *your* party, remember?"

He looked at the five faces staring at him, their expressions registering anything from fear to calculated interest. He said, with an almost jovial air, "In spite of my wife's faith in my ability to do the impossible, we will all have to stay in this house until eight o'clock in the morning, but we have some party favors for you in these little coffins."

*The Murder House*

At that, he began to open the seven small wooden coffins sitting on the table before them, each the perfect size to hold a small Colt 38 caliber handgun. "This is my wife's idea," Dan stated, picking up one of the Colt Model 1903 Pocket Hammers, "although I think it's rather dangerous."

Dan seemed to be waiting for them to come and claim their party "favors," but everyone, including Mrs. Mangan, just stared at the tiny coffins and their dubious contents. In response, Dan raised the Colt that he had picked up and continued, "I suppose you know how to use one of these things, but in case you don't, you just press down on this lever with your thumb." As he spoke, he demonstrated how to cock the hammer on the back of the handgun. "And then, pull the trigger." He took aim at a vase on the mantle and did just that, creating an explosion of gunpowder that propelled a bullet, followed by the explosion of pottery as the bullet found its mark.

He grinned, his jovial expression disconcerting, given the gravity of the situation the seven found themselves in. "See? They're loaded."

At that, he handed the pistol to Mart, who accepted it and then waved it around rather nonchalantly before he expressed his primary fear. "These are no good against the dead, only the living."

At that, Dan began to hand out the handguns to the guests. When Diana hesitated in accepting hers, Jim encouraged her to take it. There was some discussion about the guns—and their acceptableness at a "party"—before Di suddenly turned to Mart.

"Mart, you said your sister-in-law killed a man and a woman here and cut them up?" she asked.

Mart stared at her in his drunken fog and then nodded.

At his encouragement, Di continued. "You said they found hands and feet, but they never found any heads."

Again, Mart nodded.

"Would you like to see one of those heads?" At this point, Di's voice had taken on somewhat of a hysterical note. Mart's face went blank as he clearly tried to comprehend what the beauty before him was saying. Everyone else went still as they looked at the young woman, afraid that she was coming unhinged. She looked around at all of them. "Would you all like to see one of those heads?"

Mart nodded, still in that foggy trance-like state, as if she was talking to him and him alone.

"Well, then, just follow me!" Di exclaimed as she strode from the room. The invited guests followed her, even as Honey stayed behind to try to argue with her husband that she did not need the gun that he had issued her. Dan took it from her without a word and, with a mysterious smile, placed it in one of the coffins as she strode defiantly from the room to follow Ms. Lynch and the other guests.

Once in her room, Diana ordered Mart to look in her suitcase. He did...and revealed the average contents of an average suitcase.

Brian approached the astonished woman and offered her a sedative. At this point, poor Diana could take it no more and began to scream, "Get out! Get out, all of you! All of you, get out of here and leave me alone! Just get out of here!"

Once in the hallway, Dan and his guests discussed whether it was all right to leave her by herself. Although most of the guests were worried about leaving her alone because of her mental state, Mart was thinking about another aspect altogether and stated that, "They're closing in on her. There could be a million people around her, but if they wanted her, they'd get her."

## *The Murder House*

In the end, Trixie agreed to listen for any unusual sounds and be there for the young woman if she needed her. Jim thanked Trixie and headed to his room. The young pilot was not used to being inactive, and, after pacing for some time, finally decided to check on Diana. She was in the room adjacent to his, and there was an adjoining door between them. He knocked softly and called her name. When she didn't answer, he tried the door knob. It twisted easily in his hand, and he cautiously entered her room, again calling her name. It was obvious at first glance that the room was empty, the door to the hallway wide open. Wherever Di was, it was not there. He hurriedly crossed the room to look out into the hallway, calling her name a third time, more loudly. As he stepped back into her room, wondering what action to take next, the closet door swung open behind him of its own volition. A woman's head hung from a hook, strung up there by its long hair.

Jim slowly approached the horrifying object, finally grabbing it and running into the hall, searching for Di. He met up with Mart in the living room. He thrust the gory head toward him.

"What do you know about this?" he asked roughly.

Mart responded, "They've taken her. In a little while, she'll be one of *them*." When Jim demanded to know where she was in a loud and angry voice, Mart told him, "It's too late. It's too late. You'll never find her again."

"Mart, if you know where she is, you'd better tell me now," Jim said, his voice lower, but his tone still menacing.

Mart cried, "She's gone! She's gone with them. There's nothing you can do about it."

Before Jim could press the matter further, there was a scream from the entrance hall followed by a choking sound. He turned and ran into the entrance way and, seeing no one there, began to run up the stairs, suddenly stopping at the sight before him. He gaped, motionless, unable to believe his eyes. It wasn't until Brian appeared from the upstairs hallway and commanded, "Let her down!" that he was mobilized into action.

Jim quickly untied the end of the rope that was tied to one of the banisters and, with Brian's help, slowly lowered the female body hanging above. Delicately, Brian lifted the body and carried it into a nearby bedroom, laying it solicitously on the bed. Jim looked on in shock. Dan suddenly came running into the room, apparently summoned by the scream.

As he looked down at the woman on the bed, Brian was the one to break the news.

"She's dead, Mr. Mangan. Your wife hanged herself."

"Suicide." The sole word uttered from Dan's lips reflected his shock and sadness at the sudden turn of events.

Jim, still determined to find Diana and realizing that there was nothing he could do for Mrs. Mangan, left the room so that his host and the doctor could have some privacy. As he strode down the hall, he heard his name being called.

He turned and saw Diana hiding around a corner.

"Di!" he cried, immediately running to her.

"Jim! Hide me, please. Hide me!"

"What's the matter?" Jim asked as he put comforting hands on her shoulders.

*The Murder House*

"Hide me!" the distraught young woman repeated. Jim quickly escorted her to her bedroom, where she sat down on the bed and explained, "He tried to kill me. He grabbed me and choked me and put me in that room, and then he went away and left me. He thought I was dead."

"Who?" Jim asked anxiously, kneeling next to her.

"Mr. Mangan," Di choked out through her tears.

"Are you sure about this?" Jim asked.

Di shook her head. "I don't know. It was dark, but it must've been him."

Jim thought for a moment. "Has anybody seen you since he left you?"

Again Di shook her head as she rubbed her throat. "I heard some people in that room, but I went by, and nobody saw me."

Jim decided that Di was strong enough to hear the news of the evening. "Mrs. Mangan is dead."

Di turned shocked violet eyes toward her savior. "But how?"

Jim stood then, a grave look on his handsome features. "Mangan said that she committed suicide, but I think somebody killed her."

"Him?" Diana spat out the word.

Jim did not respond but instead began to pace the room, inspecting the iron bars on the window, clearly looking for a way out of the cursed house. As he was making his inspection, he could hear someone knocking on the door to his bedroom. He put his fingers to his lips in a gesture of silence for Diana and hurriedly crossed her room into his. Jim opened his door to reveal Brian, who indicated that he was convinced that Mrs. Mangan's death had not been suicide and that he wanted to meet with the other guests to discuss the situation. Jim agreed to meet in the living room, but before he went, he returned to Diana's room and instructed her to remain silent and hide in the room until he returned. Before he left, he picked up the pistol sitting on top of the chest of drawers and said, "And if you have to, use it." He set the gun back down and headed toward the living room.

Mr. Mangan and his guests, minus Diana, gathered in the living room. Everyone was in agreement that Mrs. Mangan had been murdered. No one believed that it was a suicide. Dan was convinced that one of the guests had murdered her. Jim argued that they were strangers to Mrs. Mangan and had no motive. Brian flat out accused Dan of murdering his wife, to which Dan replied that he'd certainly not be so dim-witted as to murder her in an obvious way in front of a house full of witnesses. Mart was sure that the ghosts had gotten her. Finally, Jim announced that the arguments were getting them nowhere. There were six more hours before they could summon the police to the party that had ended in murder, so it was safer to stay locked in their rooms.

Brian agreed. "If we all stay in our rooms, we'll be safe because the innocent will have no reason to leave his room, and the guilty will admit his guilt if he or she does."

"And we all have guns," Jim stated.

"And we're all agreed?" Dan asked.

"Oh, I wish this night were over," Trixie stated.

Suddenly pulled from his usual stupor, Mart stood up, exiting the chair in which he had been sitting, and walked over to where the three men stood, somewhat away from where Trixie stood. "Rooms? Guns? I tell you, it doesn't make any difference. They aren't through with us yet."

*The Murder House*

At that, the guests and Mr. Mangan climbed the stairs to the second floor in somber silence, saying goodnight as they entered their rooms one by one. Jim immediately went to Diana's room through the connected door and explained the situation. He admitted that he was convinced that Mangan had killed his wife because she asked for Jim's help earlier in the evening. Following this revelation, Jim ordered Di to stay in her room with the door locked. He then left the room.

Alone, Di paced about nervously. A thunderstorm was rolling in, which did nothing to ease her panicked mind or improve the eerie atmosphere surrounding the house and the party. Suddenly, every last candle in the room was extinguished, as if by a mysterious wind. Diana froze in the darkness, unsure what to do. As she stood looking out the window, she realized that a piece of rope was snaking its way inside. Paralyzed, Di watched as the rope came nearer to her and then began to wrap itself around her ankles. Still, she was unable to move—unable to react other than to stare in disbelief and dread. Then, to her horror, as she looked out the window she realized that the rope was attached to something. The other end was wound around Honey Mangan's neck. Honey herself floated outside of Di's window, staring at her with a sad, unnatural look. The ghostly apparition appeared to flicker as the sky was lit with lightning before being once again plunged into darkness.

"No," Diana whimpered. Her voice grew stronger as she repeated her denial of what she was seeing. "No! No! No!" Even as the young typist cried out, Honey's ghost began to retreat, along with the rope that had bound Diana's ankles. Di grabbed the gun and then fled from the room, crying "No! No!" over and over again. She was so distraught that she barely registered the fact that the candles in the hallway were still lit, clearly not having been affected by whatever strange wind had smothered those in her room. She ran through the maze of hallways and then stopped short as she rounded a corner.

In front of her, Honey Mangan hung lifelessly from the ceiling, her dead eyes open but unseeing, her face a grim death mask. Di screamed and screamed, over and over again, backing into a doorway. She might have stayed and screamed there forever if a large, hairy hand with claws hadn't reached around the door toward her shoulder. That galvanized her into action, and she ran past Honey's body, down the stairs, and into the living room.

"Jim?" she called, but to no avail because the living room was empty. As she stood there, debating what to do next, the old organ that sat in the corner of the room began to play an eerie tune, unseen ghostly fingers massaging the keys. Unable to take it anymore, Diana ran from the room.

Meanwhile, Brian approached Dan's door and knocked. When Dan opened the door, he pointed the gun at the psychiatrist.

"An admission of guilt, doctor?" he asked with a cold smile.

"Certainly not," Brian said haughtily. "There's either somebody else in this house or one of us has left his room. Did you hear anything?"

Dan listened intently. "Organ music?"

Brian nodded. "That and someone walking."

The two agreed to search the house, Brian overriding Dan's protests that they search together by practically ordering his host to search the downstairs while he searched the upstairs.

As soon as Brian was satisfied that Dan had headed downstairs, he entered the room in which Honey had been placed. He approached her on the bed.

"It's almost over, darling," he said lovingly to the exquisite honey-blonde woman lying there looking so peaceful. "Every detail was perfect."



*The Murder House*

At that, Honey stirred and opened her eyes. “What’s happening?” she asked as she sat up.

Brian smiled. “We’ve done it. The perfect crime. Beautiful.”

Honey stood and looked at her lover intensely. “Has she killed him?”

“Not yet, but she will.”

Honey slipped off her robe, revealing the harness underneath. “Get me out of this hanging harness,” she commanded, and Brian immediately began to do so. “What’s taking that girl so long? What time is it?”

“At first, I couldn’t get Diana to want to protect herself with a gun, but after you appeared at the window, everything began to work just as we planned. You were wonderful. Just the touch that finally drove her into complete hysteria.”

“It’ll be worth all of our planning, darling,” Honey said to Brian. “Where’s Diana now? What’s happening?”

“On her way down to the cellar, so scared she’ll shoot the first thing that moves,” Brian returned.

“And Dan?”

“On his way to the cellar, too.”

“Brian, are you sure none of them will suspect us?” Honey asked worriedly, staring into space as doubts began to cloud her mind.

“Of what? An hysterical girl accidentally shoots somebody? Who would suspect that we planned it that way, that we drove her to it?”

“What about my suicide?”

“Just a ghost-party gag,” Brian explained. “We’ll claim it was a dummy since I was the only one who touched you.”

“And the caretakers?” Honey continued to worry.

“Well, they had no idea what they were really doing.”

Honey finally looked at Brian. “What about Diana? She’s not stupid, you know.”

“Darling, believe me,” Brian reassured her, “everything we planned is working perfectly. Diana is sure that Dan murdered you. She thinks Dan attacked her in the cellar, not me. And now Diana’s almost out of her mind with fear. The heads, the music, your hanging. I tell you, when Dan walks in, then she’ll shoot him.”

“It’s taking too long,” Honey fretted. “Oh, Brian, you ought to be there.”

Brian leaned in and kissed Honey passionately, and she wrapped her hands around his back as if reaching for a lifeline. He drew back, and she regretfully pulled her arms away in response.

“When you hear the shot, come down to the cellar,” Brian instructed and then hurried from the room, leaving Honey standing there, contemplating her situation.

Meanwhile, Di carefully made her way down the cellar steps and looked around at all of the doors. So many doors for a cellar. So many unexplored nooks and crannies where anyone—or *anything*—could hide. She heard footsteps behind her. Diana whirled around and aimed her gun.

“Diana!” Dan cried. “No!”

*The Murder House*

But it was too late. In her panic and terror Di pulled the trigger and shot Dan, who fell to the ground.

Realizing what she had just done, Di screamed and ran up the cellar stairs. Hearing her depart, Brian stepped out from behind one of the many doors, contemplating Dan's body. He used the lever to open the cover over the vat of acid and crossed the room to where Dan lay. He dragged the body toward the vat of acid. Suddenly, the lights went out, followed by a choking sound and then a splash.

Honey, who had been listening for the shot, now hurried to the cellar. She found the cellar as it should have been, with the candles now lit, and looked around, seeing neither Dan nor Brian.

"Brian?" she whispered. In response, the door to the cellar that she had just entered through slowly closed, its hinges creaking. She slowly moved closer to the open vat of acid, peering in to satisfy her curiosity. Then, to her horrified eyes, she watched a skeleton slowly rise from the pool. She ran to the door that led to the stairs, but it would not open. She stood, helplessly, while the skeleton exited the pool and moved across the floor toward her.

*At last you've got it all.* Honey couldn't believe her ears as she listened to her husband's voice, seeming to come from the skeleton that stood before her.

*Everything I have, even my life,* the disembodied voice continued as Honey cried out and ran, trying to find a way out of the cellar and away from the horror, but none of the doors would open.

*But you're not going to live to enjoy it.*

Honey froze near another door that would not open, realizing that she was trapped, and the skeleton reached out a bony hand and placed it on her shoulder.

*Come with me, murderess, come with me.*

Honey screamed over and over again, running away from the door she had unsuccessfully tried to open and toward the center of the cellar. She turned, watching the skeleton, and backed closer and closer toward the vat.

"Honey! No!" Trixie cried out, sitting straight up from her dream. Once her mind struggled out of its sleepy fog, the young detective chuckled to herself as she realized that she had fallen asleep during Bob-White movie night. The club members had decided to watch a classic horror film in honor of Halloween, and Trixie ruefully thought that it must have affected her more than she thought considering the fact that she had dreamed about the movie, replacing the original characters with herself and her friends.

It was then that she looked around and realized that she was not on the couch at Crabapple Farm. She rubbed her eyes, sure she must still be dreaming. She pinched herself. She closed her eyes and opened them again. She bit her tongue. Nothing worked.

She was absolutely sure that she was wide awake.

And sitting in the living room of the haunted house that she had just been dreaming about.

Trixie took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. The edges of the dream still tickled at the back of her mind. The locked doors, Honey's grotesque, bloated face as her lifeless body dangled from the ceiling, the blood dripping down Jim's forehead, Diana's screams of terror...

"Get a grip, Belden," she said out loud, just to hear something, *anything* that wasn't Honey's last petrified shriek before she fell into a vat of acid. "Think. *Think.*"

*The Murder House*

Senses. Her mind stumbled forward, eager to grasp something new and different than dwelling on the stubborn mists of her nightmare. She closed a hand around the faded cloth of the old-fashioned couch on which she was sitting. The color was no longer brilliant but a bilious green, a spring poked the middle of her back in a nagging, uncomfortable way, and dust coated her hand when she used the arm of the old sofa to push herself up.

“Old house. Old-fashioned furniture,” she murmured to herself. A musty smell permeated the room, not that terrible, crushing, stealing-your-breath feeling she’d had in the tunnel in Virginia, but the smell of mold hiding, creeping through the hidden spots, rotting things from the inside out, and leaving a distinct, stale odor.

The room was a large one, littered with couches and chairs, all in a similar style that put Trixie in mind of the 1930s. The wall was papered with long-faded fabric, the molding dark and depressing. Painted portraits of people sure to be long dead shared wall space with candle sconces.

The only lights in the room were the despondent flames trying to take hold of what looked to be a very wet couple of logs in the fireplace opposite her. “Okay,” she said, as she moved instinctively toward the one source of warmth and brightness in the room. “Someone must be here somewhere. Fires don’t just light themselves.”

She knelt in front of the fireplace, examining the logs, trying to think of things Jim had taught her. The kindling that littered the top of the logs was the main source of the small fire. The logs themselves did not appear to have been yet set aflame.

“The fire couldn’t have been started too long ago,” Trixie mused. Her eyes flicked upward toward the fireplace’s mantle. A statue of a dancing cupid, ringed with cobwebs, smiled benignly from one end, while a pair of brass candlesticks, sporting two half-melted candles and a thick coating of dust, nestled together on the other.

Without hesitation, Trixie rose to her feet, grabbed one of the candlesticks, and returned to her perch to light the candle from the sparks of the dwindling flame. She then lit the other candle from the one she held in her hand and returned it to the mantle before turning around to survey the rest of the room.

On the far side of the room was what looked to be the outline of a large set of doors. With small, hesitant steps, Trixie walked across the room, avoiding what appeared to be, on closer inspection, open and torn hardback books. Half-empty bookshelves graced either side of the large doors, their contents spilled out onto the floor around them and in front of the exit. It took Trixie several minutes to stack and remove the pile of heavy tomes that blocked her path.

## *The Murder House*

With a deep breath, Trixie pushed down the handle of the door, expecting to find resistance. The door, however, swung open easily at her touch. She peered inside and found that she'd entered a large hallway.

The chandelier above dripped with haphazardly spun cobwebs, linking crystal to crystal. Empty spaces where candles had formerly been indicated that no light would be readily forthcoming from the large fixture. Trixie noted the tail end of a staircase that led to the second floor along one wall. Several of the intricately carved posts were missing from the banister, and the gaping holes on several of the upper steps did not make Trixie eager to climb upward.

The blood-red carpet that had once lined the center of the hallway's scuffed wood floor, too, had worn away, leaving streaks of crimson thread to show rough dimensions of where the carpet had been. Most of the center of the rug had long since vanished.

But it was on more careful inspection of the floor for damage before walking further on it that Trixie noted something completely unexpected.

The carpet's outline highlighted a woman, curled on her side, not moving, on the floor. Long, slender legs encased in jeans, a bright purple NYU sweatshirt and a head full of honey-colored hair turned burnished gold in the light of the candle told Trixie that she knew that form almost as well as she knew her own.

"Honey!" she shrieked. "Oh, my God. Honey!!"

Sparing thought only long enough to set the candlestick down on a nearby hallway table, Trixie dropped to the floor, heedless of how sturdy it might or might not be, and began to frantically shake her friend's shoulders. "Honey? Oh, Honey! Please don't be dead. Oh, God. Please don't be dead!"

Her friend's eyes shot open, and Honey pushed back at Trixie, irritation flitting across her face. "Trixie! Stop. Stop!" She scooped herself up and shifted her shoulders back and forth with a bit of a groan. "I'm not dead. Whatever are you talking about? Just because I fell asleep during the movie is no reason..."

Honey's voice stopped. It was obvious the hazel eyes, which were now wide open, had had a chance to process her surroundings and had hurried the results to her brain. Her mouth fell open as she took in the shadowed hallway, the creepy, flickering flame of the candle and the cobweb that spun from the corner of the adjacent table to the floor. Her voice, when it came out, was no louder than a whisper. "This is *not* funny."

*The Murder House*

Trixie, who had already exclaimed in happy relief upon seeing her friend so obviously *not* dead, halted midway in process of hugging Honey. “Funny?” she demanded as she sat back on her heels in disbelief. “*Funny?* You think this is some sort of joke I’m playing on you?”

“We were watching a *movie.*” Honey’s voice was a strange combination of terror, indignation and stubborn intractability. “Did you and Mart think this up to scare me? Dump me in the old mansion, and turn off all the lights, and...”

“What? Honey! You aren’t even making sense!” Trixie gestured angrily with her free hand. “Jim’s uncle’s house burned to the ground. And if he was going to rebuild it, he certainly wouldn’t be rebuild it to look like it did before it burned down!”

Honey stared at her friend, uncertain. “But...”

“Mart and I may be dumb about a lot of things, and yes, we both like jokes,” Trixie continued, “but we aren’t stupid or mean enough to dump you, asleep, in some big old haunted-looking house that could fall down around your ears any second.” She brushed a few stray curls away from her eyes. “And even if we were, do you really think that Brian or Jim would let us do it?”

Honey took a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I just...I’m sorry.” The golden-haired girl rubbed her hands on her jeans and looked around her, fear still lingering in her hazel eyes. “Where *are* we? Are the others here, or are we alone?”

“I don’t know,” Trixie admitted. She pointed over to the open doors. “I woke up in that room over there on one of the couches after one of the worst nightmares ever. No one in that room but me.” The melting wax on the candle hit the flame and sizzled, startling the two young women. “Gleeps,” Trixie said. “This creepy old place is making me so jumpy!”

“Me, too,” Honey replied as she wrapped her arms around herself. “So, what do we do now?”

Trixie bit her lip as she tried to peer down the hall, past Honey. “I suppose we ought to look to see if there’s some way out of here.” She got to her feet and wiped her hands on her jeans as she looked around her. “The stairs don’t look too promising. There are big holes in several of them.”

“That’s all we need to do is fall down a set of wrecked stairs and break our necks,” Honey said with a groan. “Maybe we should check this floor first?” She, too, got to her feet. “I mean, we’d have to exit on the ground floor anyway, right?”

*The Murder House*

Trixie chuckled, although the chuckle was a bit nervous. “Yeah, you’re right.” She hesitated a moment before she continued, “I just still had that movie in my head. You know, where they all get locked into that scary house all night and can’t get out?”

Honey shivered. “Oh, don’t even say that!”

“Yeah, sorry,” Trixie said with a rueful smile. “Even I am not crazy about that idea.” She turned around, picked up the candle and started looking around slowly with the candle held out in front of her. “This looks like a main entryway,” she said, doubt tingeing her voice. “Maybe if we go that way...” Trixie gestured toward the dark-shadowed doors that faced the staircase. “...we’ll get outside. Then, at least, we might have an idea of where we are.”

Honey nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me,” she said.

The two young women walked cautiously across the entryway, being careful to avoid places in the wood floor that had splintered, especially one area opposite the room Trixie had awoken in, where pieces of the concrete wall had done serious damage, the large blocks half-way buried in the floor.

Trixie put a hand on the elegantly curved door handle and pushed.

The handle responded well to Trixie’s push, but the door only opened a few inches before coming to an immediate halt. Trixie frowned.

“Why won’t the door open?” Honey demanded. “What’s wrong?”

Trixie pushed harder, leaning her weight against the door. “Something’s blocking it from outside. I can’t...” Honey hurried over next to her and added her weight to Trixie’s. Both women pushed to the limits of their strength, but they were not successful in moving the door any further than Trixie had already done.

“Okay,” Trixie said, brushing some of her blond curls out of her face in frustration. “That’s not going to work.” She turned to her friend with an eyebrow raised. “What about one of the windows? I mean, that’s how we got into the miser’s mansion...”

Honey, however, wasn’t paying attention to her friend’s comments. Short, rapid, panicky breaths echoed in the hallway. The sound of heavy, thudding footfall came shortly after.

“Where is he? Oh, my God! What...? What have you *done*?”

*The Murder House*

Trixie's eyes widened as she turned to follow the sound of the high-pitched, horrified woman's voice. "Who is that?" she demanded of Honey.

Honey shook her head. "Oh, God, Trixie." She gulped down air, fear flitting across her face. "What do we do?"

The footsteps grew closer. This time, the footfall sounded different. Slower. More cautious. And as if made by someone bigger. Stronger.

"No." Fright leached into the woman's voice. "No! No! No!" The last "no" was nothing more than a terrified shriek that was cut off, leaving a deadly silence in its wake.

Trixie could feel the hairs on her neck stand up as the footsteps grew closer. She swallowed hard, trying to moisten her suddenly bone-dry throat. Honey clutched at her arm, and the two women stood together, frozen, as a tall, muscular figure stepped into view. Trixie quickly blew out the candle and held it up, with no qualms about doing what she could to protect Honey and herself. The figure crossed the entryway in the same cautious, halting manner, and then, as it neared the two Bob-Whites, Honey screamed, and Trixie pulled back her arm to hit the figure with the candlestick.

But before she could land a blow, a strong, muscled arm grabbed hers and stopped her mid-blow. "Trixie!"

Both girls stopped stock-still for a moment before the oh-so-familiar voice became real to them. They both immediately ran into Jim's arms.

"You took ten years off my life!" Trixie accused him, even as she tightened her arm around his waist.

"I took ten years off of *your* life?" he shot back in kind. "I was this close to a concussion and a coma, thanks to you." After giving each of them a squeeze, Jim grabbed Trixie's hand to squint down at the candlestick she held. "What *is* that you were trying to kill me with?"

"A candlestick. I found it in the other room." Trixie gestured half-heartedly at the room she'd awoken in. "And I wasn't trying to kill you!"

"Could've fooled me," he said. "That thing was about six inches from making my head into a pancake."

*The Murder House*

Trixie sniffed. "Well, then, don't sneak up on Honey and me in some haunted mansion, and you won't have to worry about your head turning into one of Mart's favorite breakfast foods."

Jim tousled her curls and gave her a quick kiss and a grin, before turning to his sister. "Hey," he said, his voice much gentler. "You okay?"

"No, no. I'm not okay." She stomped her foot, her breathing still short and agitated. "I was watching a movie in Crabapple Farm, lying with my head on Brian's lap, and I woke up in a creepy, nasty, falling-apart mansion with cobwebs in my hair, ghosts screaming and you jumping out of the shadows nearly scaring Trixie and me to death. No. No. No!"

"Honey," Trixie began, glancing at Jim before she reached a hand toward her friend.

Jim put an arm around his sister and hugged her tightly. "It's all right," he said. Jim gave her a bracing smile. "We've managed to blunder our way out of these paranormal situations before, right?"

"Oh!" Trixie said, her eyes growing wide. "I completely forgot! It's near Halloween again, isn't it?" She looked around her with growing interest. "Maybe one of our ghost friends has brought us here to solve some sort of old mystery!"

Honey looked distinctly unenthusiastic. "Brian has it right," she grumbled. "Paranormal stuff sucks."

"Well, speaking of Brian," Jim interjected, "since we're all usually brought into these things together, maybe it would be a good idea to see if he or any of the others are here somewhere in the mansion." He looked from one to the other of the girls. "Seven heads being better than three, no one left alone in a creepy old house...that sort of thing?"

"Honey and I have already tried the front door, and it wouldn't open. Something's blocking it," Trixie said. Trixie's mystery-take-charge-itis had turned on in full force, and the curly-haired blonde had a face lit with eager anticipation. "So we might as well explore the house and see what we find."

Jim looked from Honey, resigned and unthrilled, to Trixie, her blue eyes dancing with excitement and lively curiosity, and laughed. "Is this how you two always start out to solve a mystery?"

"I'm a lot more interested in mysteries when I'm not in a creepy haunted mansion," Honey said, a ghost of a smile hovering on her lips.

"I'm *more* interested, in that case," Trixie said cheerfully.



“Well, let’s get looking then. The sooner Trixie gets her mystery solved, if our past experience is any indication, the sooner we can all go home,” Jim said.

**Meanwhile...**

“Are they new ones?” the voice tickled Mart’s awareness as he shifted his legs, trying to get more comfortable up against the back of the couch. The weight of Diana’s head on his chest, while always pleasant, didn’t make it easier for him to move, and his leg was getting numb.

“No,” another voice replied. “They’re still kicking around. See how good their color is?”

“Well, if what I hear is right, their color won’t be good long if they stay here.”

Mart frowned in his state of half-sleep and muttered, “Trix, I think the DVD’s over.”

“DVD?”

“A movie. One of those moving pictures. You can watch them in your house now. You get your own little movie screen.”

“What’ll they think of next?”

Mart could no longer filter out the dialogue and keep asleep, no matter how much he wanted to. His blue eyes blinked open, and he looked across to where the TV had been moments earlier.

Instead of the television, however, he found himself on a broken tile floor, leaning against a cabinet, gazing into a room that looked like a kitchen. He squeezed his eyes shut in disbelief before opening them again to look around him.

The kitchen was huge. White cabinets lined the entirety of one wall, the paint cracked and peeling. A freestanding, old-fashioned stove lined up next to an ancient refrigerator, both slightly dented, but not too much worse for the wear. A large painted table and chairs sat at the other end of the kitchen, cobwebs and dust littering their surface.

As he gradually absorbed his surroundings, Mart suddenly noticed that he and Diana were not alone in the old kitchen.

Five men, all dressed in suits that spoke of a much earlier era—the 1930s or the 1940s—gathered around the large table. None of them were very old. Four of the men couldn’t have been much older than 26 or 27. The last one might have been 35, and he was obviously the one in charge of the others. He exuded an aura of determination, and the other men showed him obvious deference. He sat at the head of the table, his fedora hat pulled low over his face.

“Well, I sure hope they think of somethin’ better for their women to wear. Look at that broad. You can’t even see her gams under that get-up. It’s worse than those huge tents my grandmother used to wear,” one of the younger men complained.

“But you haven’t seen the bathing suits they’ve got now. I saw one of the neighbors once when I got outside for a little bit. Tiny pieces of fabric that barely cover a thing.” The man’s voice was wistful, and his eyes closed with a delicious smile across his craggy face. “That’s way better than your grandmother’s get-ups.”

“He wakes up.” This voice came from the leader. The voice was gravelly, with a heavy tinge of Irish in it, and immediately caused the four other men, who’d been lounging, to straighten and look toward him intently before turning, as one, to follow his gaze toward Mart and Diana.

The voice was pleasant enough, but there was something about it that put a chill down Mart’s spine. And the chill was even fiercer upon realizing that he could see *through* the five men sitting around the table. He moistened his lips and swallowed hard before he asked, “Who are you?”

“Who am I?” the leader gave him a speculative look. “Well, well. He doesn’t remember me, boys.”

The “boys” all laughed at this. The laughter was loud enough to get Diana stirring but not awake. Diana, who could sleep through freight trains, plane crashes and the *1812 Overture* with cannons. Mart hoped she slept a little longer.

“You and your gang paid my life a visit. I thought I’d return the favor.” He poked a finger up to the brim of his hat, tilting it upward so that Mart could see his face.

Mart’s sharp intake of breath was audible. His best friend, Dan Mangan, was staring at him, his ghostly visage lean and savage-looking.

But no. Wait.

The man at the table had a hardness to him he’d never seen in his friend. Scars lined the blue-ish face and his dark hair had a definite wave to it, unlike his friend’s thick straight locks.

But there was a definite, strong resemblance.

Mart’s mind scrambled through his “gang’s” brushes with the paranormal, and he skidded to a halt as he remembered Thomas Clarke, the FBI, the stock market crash, and a very distinctive speakeasy in Hell’s Kitchen. His face reflected his startled recognition.

“Ah. Now he remembers me. I feel so special.” Donovan Mangan’s lip quirked up in a half-smile, causing the men around him to laugh again.

“What do you want?” Mart asked, swallowing again to try to soothe his suddenly dry throat.

“What do I want?” Donovan repeated, his voice thoughtful. “Money. Lots of it. A dame. One with big...” He imitated, in a time-honored fashion, the curve of a woman’s chest. “Oh, yes, and...” His eyes narrowed into an icy glare. “I’d like not to be dead.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with you being dead,” Mart protested.

“Not exactly, no,” the ghost acknowledged, “but it was because of you interfering goody two-shoes that I went after Charles Stillman in the first place.”

Mart could feel his heart trying to climb up into his throat. And Diana was definitely stirring. He could tell the signs—her shifts against his chest, the soft little sighs she made that would turn into deeper yawns. *Crap*. His leg was now completely numb, and he didn’t think, if he tried to stand up, that it would support his weight. He certainly wouldn’t be able to support a half-awake Diana.

“I’m in the middle of Central Park. I have no idea how I got there.” Donovan’s face was one huge scowl. “And I go back to my speakeasy and I’m cleaned out. The feds have my ledgers, my girls and my booze. And who’s missin’?” His face grew hard and mean. “Charles Stillman. That stool pigeon. He got out on bail and flew the coop.”

Mart didn’t say a word. He couldn’t. He was that terrified.

*The Murder House*

"I tracked that bastard down. All the way out to California. Hiding in this big old fancy mansion under a different name. Charles Blank. What kinda name is that?" Donovan scoffed. "And here he is, swimmin' in money, and he's using *my* connections to run his own bootlegging business." He thumped a fist against the table, but his hand went through the old wood rather than making any sort of noise. "That pansy who couldn't even look at me without soiling himself!"

The other men chuckled at this, nodding in agreement at his words.

"I found the lying coward. Me and the boys made a personal house call."

When he got to this part of the story, however, all the men sobered. Hard, angry looks crossed all of their faces.

Mart, in spite of himself, was curious. "So, what happened?"

Donovan scowled but did not reply.

"We searched the house," one man offered.

"Top to bottom," another interjected.

"Couldn't find the rat anywhere," said a third.

"Not until we got to the basement."

All of them fell silent. Then, Donovan finally spoke, his voice cold, bitter and furious. "That little rat shot us in the back. All of us."

"An ambush! Out of nowhere!" one of the men said in indignant, angry tones.

"He killed...all five of you? And lived?" Mart's face showed his incredulity.

"Somehow, he did," Donovan growled. He then pushed back the chair in which he was sitting, and the chair actually did scrape across the floor, away from the table. "And I want you and your little friends to find out how."

Mart gaped at him. "What? How in the world are we supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." Donovan smirked at him. "But I don't get to go on to the other side until that little mystery is solved." He shrugged. "So you ain't leavin' until you solve it."

With a snap of his fingers, Donovan got the other men to their feet. In a kind of noisy single file, they, one-by-one, disappeared through the door out of the kitchen. And Mart, watching them, could see exactly what Donovan had meant. Each ghostly figure was riddled with bullet holes across the back of their jackets.

The last one hesitated, just before he followed them, and said in a low voice, "You might ask the wife. He got her, too. Her and that doctor she was palling around with."

With that, he, too, disappeared through the door.

Mart waited, holding his breath for a few moments, before he finally let it gush out. He glanced down at Diana, whose body was as stiff as a board, her eyes tightly screwed shut. "Di?" he asked softly. "Are you awake? Did you hear...?"

Diana's eyes blinked open, and even in the very limited light, he could see, from the intensity in the way that she was staring at him, and the violent turbulence in her violet eyes, that she'd heard every word Donovan had said.

"I hate ghosts," she said in a vehement, passionate voice. "I hate them with the blazing fury of a thousand suns."

**In the basement...**

Dan groaned as he sat up, massaging the back of his neck. He looked over at Brian, who was leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees. "I feel like I got hit by a Mack truck."

Brian's handsome face was grim. "I think we did." He touched the back of his head gingerly. "I've got a good-sized goose egg. How about you?"

Dan winced as he felt around the base of his skull. "Yeah, me, too. Wonder what he got us with?"

"We're just lucky we're not dead," Brian replied, "or that our brains aren't scrambled."

"Well, the jury's still out on that one," Dan said with a grimace. "My brain *feels* like it's been scrambled." He shifted his head from one side to the other, wincing all the while he did. Finally, he squinted, peering around him. "Where are we, anyway?"

"I've been trying to figure that out," his friend admitted. "It looks a little like a wine cellar, but more like one you'd find in someone's home. Not much in the way of wine left on any of these racks." Brian gestured at the wooden structures around them. "And there are cobwebs everywhere. I don't think anyone's been down here in quite a while."

Dan fumbled around, searching through his pockets until he, in triumph, pulled out his key ring. On it was one of the mini-flashlights Jim had given each of the Bob-Whites many years previous. "Jim's made me into a real-life Boy Scout. Always prepared."

Brian gazed at him a moment before he gave a wry smile. Then, he patted his own jeans and pulled out a matching flashlight on his own key ring. "I completely forgot about those things."

"I'm just glad Jim was so insistent." His smile faltered then, thinking of his red-headed friend. "I hope the others are all right. They were all sleeping when we went into the kitchen."

"Let's just not think about that right now. I don't..." Brian's voice trailed off, and an agitated look flitted across his face before he continued, "I can't think about them right now or I'll go crazy."

Dan nodded. "You and me both." He exhaled and then got to his feet, cursing under his breath as the room began to spin.

"Shaky?" Brian asked, his tone rueful as he, too, got to his feet.

"Again, Mack truck and my head." Dan switched on his flashlight and shone it around the room. "We're definitely in a basement of some sort. Big, by the looks of it."

"Need me to look at your head?" Brian asked.

Dan shook his head and then groaned as he immediately regretted the motion. "Not yet. Maybe later. Let's concentrate on figuring out where we are and how we get out of here." He pointed the light toward where they had been sitting. "These are wine racks," he agreed. "Looks like there are a handful of bottles down here at the bottom." He crouched down and pulled out a dusty bottle from one of the lowest shelves. His eyebrows went up as he looked at the bottle. "Homemade," he said. "Vintage 1930."

"Homemade. Like...bootlegged homemade?"

"If the vintage is 1930, then I'd say, yeah." Dan looked at the bottle more closely. "Not much else on the label. It's blank other than the date."

*The Murder House*

"I'm surprised it's still here," Brian said as he switched on his own flashlight and shone it around the other wine rack, sending its beam over the empty shelves. "Even something homemade like this you'd think would have gone quickly in 1930."

"Well, it's so dark down here, and these bottles were in this far corner on the bottom." Dan shrugged. "Maybe they thought they'd grabbed everything, and they just missed these." He turned the bottle over in his hand a moment before he grinned up at Brian. "Wonder what this would taste like?"

"Vinegar, likely," Brian said dismissively. "I wouldn't drink it."

"You never know. Sometimes, wine improves with age."

"Illegal bootlegged moonshine wine?" Brian gave Dan a wry look. "I rather doubt it."

Dan laughed. "All right. You've convinced me." He winked at his friend. "If Trixie were here, though, she'd be game."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Trixie goes blindly into danger and gets kidnapped more often than most people change their clothes. She's hardly a role model for safe behavior."

"Still..." Dan looked at the bottle again before he sighed and replaced it on the shelf with the others. Then, he got to his feet. "Okay, so we've got the wine part of the basement over here." He took a few cautious steps forward, sweeping the flashlight around, highlighting various parts of the darkened room.

Several large, empty wooden crates were piled up against one concrete wall. A small window near the top of the wall had no curtain but also let in no light, indicating that it was pitch black outside or the window was covered with something he couldn't see.

A large, old-fashioned furnace took up a good portion of another corner, but it made no noise at all. After the two young men checked it, they found that it wasn't running.

A roller-washer was stored against another wall, but it, too, showed no signs of recent use. The rollers were worn, but they and the tub were bone-dry.

The only other thing of interest in the dark room was a set of rickety stairs going upward. Brian flashed his light on them before turning to his friend. "Well? What do you think? Should we go up?"

"No other way out of here, so I say yes."

The two young men headed toward the staircase when the loud peppering of gunfire echoed through the room. Dan and Brian quickly ducked behind the stairs, knocking over a few empty jugs that rested there.

"What the hell was that?" Dan demanded.

Brian shook his head, his face white and grim.

Once the noise stopped, the two friends cautiously looked about them, trying to figure out what exactly was going on.

It was then that they saw them.

The prone bodies of five men, lay in a groaning heap, blood pouring from gaping wounds, spilling out onto the concrete floor below.

"What the hell...?" Brian exclaimed.

The blue-gray smoke cleared, and the moans of the men lying there soon died away. It was only then that it registered to the two Bob-Whites that what they were seeing was not a true pile of just-

*The Murder House*

murdered bodies, but a vision of a murder that had happened a long time ago, yet eerily seeming as if the scene were being played out in front of them—a flickering old black and white movie of horror.

But as they rushed out to where they saw the ghostly bodies, the vision shimmered before them and then vanished, leaving only the dark stain on the concrete. And even that soon blended in with other stains on the floor, returning the room to its normal ordinary basement-ish look.

They stood, staring at the floor for a long time, before Brian slapped a hand to his forehead and groaned. “Damn it.”

“I guess we’re out to solve another paranormal murder,” Dan said lightly.

Brian gave his friend a sour look. “I hate the supernatural.”

“Really?” the voice was well-cultured, bored and yet curious. “Why is that?”

Brian and Dan whirled around, shining their flashlights around the room until both beams hit the stairs.

Sitting on the stairs was a man with matinee idol good looks, wavy blond hair and a small pencil-thin mustache. He lounged on the old stairs, one foot dressed in a shiny black evening shoe dangling over one of the steps.

He was obviously dressed for an evening out—in 1930. He wore a dinner jacket and a fancy bow-tie. The only thing that marred his otherwise excellent appearance was the gaping hole in his chest and the seeping bloodstain that had darkened his pristine shirt from white to splatters of black.

“Excuse the interruption,” the man said, giving an airy wave of his ghostly hand. “I couldn’t help eavesdropping. It’s hard to avoid it in my...situation.”

Brian stared, dumbfounded, as the ghost leaned up against the banister, looking at them over it. “I need a drink,” the young doctor-to-be said in a hoarse voice.

The ghost’s mouth quirked up on one side. He waved a hand toward the wine cellar. “I think there are a few bottles left of Blank’s stash over there.” His nose wrinkled as soon as he said the words. “But, to be honest, it wasn’t very good when it was new. I can’t think that it’s improved any over the past several decades.”

Dan glanced at his friend before he swallowed and asked, “Are you...uh...one of the...?” He faltered and then stopped, unsure of exactly how to phrase the words “one of the stiffs from the pile of bodies” in a way that sounded conversational and not incredibly rude.

“One of the what?” the ghost asked. He followed Dan’s pointed stare at the floor. “Oh! The bunch of dead gangsters? No.” He smiled. “I was dead long before they came around.”

“How many...dead people are in this house?” Brian asked, his face clearly indicating that he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Seven. That I know of.” He shrugged. “One can never say definite numbers about these things, but I’ve never seen any others. And I’ve been hanging around here for years.”

“Seven,” Dan repeated.

“Yes. Seven.” The ghost’s gaze seemed to narrow as he stared at the two young men. “Now that I think of it, you remind me of one of them. Kind of an eerie resemblance. Are you some relative? Looking to put the past to rights or something?”

“What?” Dan stared at him before he shook his head in denial. “No. I...no.”

*The Murder House*

“Well, that’s good. I don’t think letting those men live longer would have done anyone any good.” He raised an eyebrow. “He seems to have supplied all the genes that were necessary to get you here. I suppose the rest doesn’t really matter.”

“You seem very...calm for being a ghost,” Brian said.

“Do I?” The ghost shrugged again. “I suppose it’s more simple resignation than anything else. It’s not like I can really *do* anything about it anyway.” He stood and actually appeared to use the staircase as he descended into the basement. “I’m not much for hanging around corners and yelling, ‘Boo!’ at unwary strangers.”

“So, if you’re resigned to being dead,” Brian continued, a puzzled expression on his handsome face, “then why are you still here? Don’t you...I don’t know...go on?”

“Go on to the mysterious great white light?” He smiled sardonically. “I would, if I could. But I’m tied to her, and *she* is not resigned.” He rolled his eyes. “Not resigned at all.”

“She? Who’s she?” Dan asked.

“Blank’s wife. Or...she was, anyway. Before he killed her—and me.” He tilted his head and spread his hands in front of him. “I think he killed those gangsters, too.” He studied the floor as if he could see the scene laid out in front of him.

“Wait. What? Who is Blank?” Dan demanded. “He *killed* all of you?”

“Well, yes. At least, I assume so. I never did see who actually pulled the trigger on me, and they all died after I did, so I can’t speak for them. I do know that he was crazy with jealousy over that wife of his. Thought I was sleeping with her.” He let out an exasperated sigh. “She was a hysteric, or so I thought. Convinced that her husband was dealing with gangsters and that he wanted to kill her. She spent hours in my office babbling about it.” He shook his head. “I thought *I* was the one who was going to need the psychiatrist’s couch after dealing with her. The last thing I was going to do was have sex with her, no matter how pretty she was.”

“But you think her husband killed five gangsters in his house,” Brian pointed out, “and he *did* have illegal liquor in his basement.”

“And he did end up killing her,” Dan added, “according to you.”

The ghost laughed a little, giving them a rueful smile. “Sometimes, even the hypochondriac is actually sick.”

Dan and Brian exchanged a look before Dan turned back to the ghost. “So, what, exactly, are we doing here?”

“No clue.” The ghost yawned. “Are you ghost hunters looking to rid this house of us?”

“You can stay here forever as far as I’m concerned,” Brian said dryly, “but something tells me that if we don’t want to keep you company for eternity, we’ll need to find a way to help you find that big white light in the sky.”

“Well, good luck with that.” The ghost chuckled. “You haven’t got just one murder but seven to solve.” He quirked up one side of his mouth again before he continued, “I was in the house for all seven murders, and I still have no idea how he did it.” He straightened the cuffs on his evening jacket, gave them a sardonic look and said, “What makes you think you’ll figure it out?”

And then he vanished.

Both men stared at the empty place in front of them where the ghost had been standing a moment before for a long moment, saying nothing, until Dan finally said in a wry voice, "And you hate the supernatural."

**Meanwhile, upstairs...**

"Where should we look first?" Trixie asked Jim and Honey, curiosity and interest bubbling out of every pore of her. She gazed around the somber entry way. "The room I was in, I was alone. And I found Honey out here in the hallway." She tilted her head up to give Jim an inquisitive look. "Where did you end up?"

Jim shifted a little uncomfortably before he finally admitted, "The bathroom." He laughed a little ruefully. "I'd just finished answering a call of nature at your house when they got me."

Honey frowned. "When they 'got' you?"

Jim rubbed the back of his head and winced. "A tap to the back of the head. No idea how they got to me, because the door was locked and I didn't hear a thing."

"They *hit* you?" Trixie demanded. She pulled on Jim's arm until he bent down enough so that she could see the back of his head. "Ouch. You're going to have a nasty bump back here."

"See? This is why I didn't want you hitting me with that candlestick," he said lightly. "I may be hardheaded, but I'm not sure even I could survive two blows to the head in one day without having some problems."

"I didn't get hit on the head, though," Trixie said with a frown. She looked at Honey. "Did you?"

Honey shook her head. "No. I feel fine."

"Well, you two were asleep," Jim pointed out. "As were Mart and Di." He gave the girls a flash of his grin. "Mart was snoring. I remember Brian and Dan snickering about it when they headed to the kitchen. That's what woke me up in the first place." He stopped suddenly, sobering. "They were awake, too." His face grew troubled. "I hope they're okay."

"We're going to find out," Trixie said, threading her free hand through his. "And we'll do whatever is necessary to make sure they're all okay."

Jim squeezed her hand before he gestured at the unlit candle in his girlfriend's hand. "I know why you blew out the candle, Trix, but we could probably use some light on the subject, don't you think?"

"Oh, listen to the Boy Scout," Trixie said with a snort. "Where's that flashlight you keep bugging us all about carrying?"

Jim looked chagrined. "I left my keys on the table in your living room."

"Mine are in my purse," Honey added with a sigh.

"And how about you, Shamus?" Jim chucked her under the chin. "I know you rarely listen to me, but..."

"I do so listen to you," Trixie protested, "but I was at home and not planning on going anywhere. My keys are..." She waved the candlestick. "Well, they're somewhere in my bedroom, I think."

"Suffice it to say that none of the three of us have a flashlight," Jim summarized. "So, it might behoove us to relight that candle."

"Oh! Yes!" Trixie tugged on Jim's hand, intent on leading him back to the room in which she'd first awakened. "There was a fire lit in here, and, I think, another candle on the mantle."



*The Murder House*

There wasn't much left of the fire when the three Bob-Whites returned to the living room. But Jim was able to get both candles lit from it. He gave Trixie one and Honey the other. "I think, under the circumstances, that I'd like to keep my hands free."

Jim put his hands on his hips as he surveyed the room. "You came out over there," he said to Trixie, tilting his head toward the door they'd just re-entered. "There's another door over there," he began.

"And one over here," Honey added, pointing toward a matching door on the same wall.

"Door number one or door number two?" Trixie quipped.

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other," Jim replied with a shrug.

Trixie hesitated a moment before picking her way across the damaged floor, heading toward the door on the right hand side of the room. Jim and Honey followed her.

She pushed on the door, finding no handle, and the door swung open with a groan.

"Needs oil," Trixie commented as she headed through to the next room.

The room was a formal, old-school dining room, with dark, heavy furniture more reminiscent of the Victorian age than the 1930s. The chairs were high-backed with maroon cushions. The chandelier above the table, like the one in the hallway, was made for candles but had none installed in it. A large sideboard ran along one wall, a fireplace similar to the one in the living room on the other. The room, like the previous ones, was littered with cobwebs and dust but completely free of any signs of habitation.

"No one here," Trixie said. She ran a finger along the ridge of the table as she walked around the room, not really paying attention to the décor. Her mind was already focused on what came next.

"Well, there's another door here." Honey gestured to a door in the opposite wall. "I'll bet it goes to a kitchen of some sort. Do we try that?" She bit her lip and glanced back to the door through which they'd just come. "Or maybe we should go back to the parlor and go try the other door?"

Trixie had already poked her head out of a third door and then closed it. She grinned. "That's just going back out to the hallway."

Jim studied the two doors and then reopened the one through which they'd just come. "Let's cover all the bases before we leave a room. That way, we won't miss anything."

The two young women nodded and followed him back into the gloomy parlor. They walked over to the second door on the left and opened the door, peering in.

"It's a library," Trixie said as she entered the room, holding her candle up. Shelves lined every wall of the large room, most of them empty of books. A couple of moth-eaten armchairs were nestled near to the fireplace, and a large mahogany desk took up a large portion of one area of the room. A library ladder, attached to the shelves on the far wall, added a old-world feel to the room.

Honey stepped up to one of the shelves, fingering one of the remaining torn books sadly. "Daddy would be so upset by this room." She shook her head. "Why didn't the owners clean out their belongings when they left? And why are all these books like this?"

"Maybe they died," Trixie said, her voice matter-of-fact and practical, "or maybe they had to leave in a hurry." She waved an airy hand. "No one's lived here for years and years. People probably have broken into the house and stolen stuff. Damaged things."

"Nosy neighbors wanting to explore old mansions," Jim said, tugging on one of Trixie's curls.

*The Murder House*

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Honey and I never damaged anything in your uncle's house."

"This house kind of reminds me of yours, Jim," Honey said in a sad little voice. "Lots of grief here." She replaced the book gently on the shelf. "You can feel it."

A choked sob came out from the far corner of the room. "You *understand*."

All three Bob-Whites froze. Honey turned a pale face to look in the direction from which the voice had come.

Sitting on the library ladder was a pretty little woman, no taller than Trixie. Her blond hair was cut in a bob and styled with the era's Marcel waves. She wore a little black and white tailored suit, elegant in style, and a pair of white gloves. Or, rather, they had once been white. Large stains could be seen on the fingers and palms of the gloves.

Honey gasped sharply.

Even Trixie was startled into silence as the woman climbed off of the ladder, turning her head to showcase long trails of blood down the side of her face and a rather distinct bullet hole on the side of her temple.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said, her voice trembling. "I've been waiting for so long."

"What..." Honey could barely make the words out. Her hazel eyes were riveted to the wound on the side of the woman's head. "What happened to you?"

"I was shot. Killed by my bastard husband." The woman's voice switched from pain to fury in a millisecond.

The three Bob-Whites stared at her in disbelief.

"And he got away with it. Like everything else he did." A scornful scowl crossed her face. "Running with gangsters, a still in our basement for making illegal liquor, a different floozy in his bed every night of the week, and he has the gall to think that I...I...am cheating on *him*. With my psychiatrist, of all people!" She began to pace, back and forth, across the room, her hands gesturing in wild sweeps. "He got to die an old man in a bed somewhere. Probably with some young nurse fluttering her eyelashes at him, feeling sorry for the old man whose wife betrayed him." Her eyes flashed. "And I was twenty-six years old when he killed me. Twenty-six! He killed my doctor and then made it look like *I* did it and then killed myself. Like I shot John in the back. In the *back*. Like a coward."

"Why, that's terrible!" Trixie exclaimed.

"That's awful," Honey echoed Trixie, her face distressed.

"You understand. You believe me," she said, her lips trembling. "I knew you would. I knew you'd be the ones to make it right."

Jim had not said anything during all of the time the ghost had been speaking. He looked rather grave, leaning against one of the bookshelves, studying her. So it was almost a shock for the three women when he asked in a low voice, "How did you know that we were the ones to make it right? How did you even know us at all?"

The ghost turned, her attention suddenly focused on Jim. The weird intensity of her gaze made both Trixie and Honey uncomfortable. Trixie frowned, and Honey edged a little closer to Jim, almost as if to protect him.

"You men are all alike," she said, her eyes narrowing. "You never believe anything a woman says."

Jim's eyebrows rose at her comment, but he didn't interrupt her.

"John never believed me either. Not until he got a bullet tearing through his heart." She shook a finger at Jim. "Well, you're going to believe me and make Charles get what's coming to him, or you'll all be joining me."

Jim straightened at her words, and Honey gave the woman a dismayed look. Trixie spoke what they were all thinking. "Joining you?"

"Oh, didn't I say?" She smiled a not very pleasant smile. "This house is being torn down tomorrow morning. Dynamite will blow this place into a pile of rubble. They already checked the house for living occupants this afternoon, so they won't be back for you."

Honey gasped and reached out for Jim's hand. Trixie stared at the woman in shock. "Exactly what do you think we can do?" she demanded.

"All of us. All seven of us were murdered in the basement." She fingered the bullet hole at her temple, a reminder of her terrible plight. "And none of us have been able to figure out how he did it." She pointed a finger at the three Bob-Whites. "And we brought you here to do it for us."

"How in the world are we supposed to do that?" Jim shouted, his green eyes incredulous.

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I'm sure such clever detectives as you all are will figure it out."

She smiled again, a strange, almost terrifying, little smile before she vanished.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Honey's voice was desperate, close to panicking. "What are we going to do?"

Jim glanced down at his watch, his face grim. "I've got one a.m. on my watch. I don't even know where we are or if that time's even accurate."

"Well, we can't concentrate on what time it is," Trixie said firmly. "We need to see if the others are here. If they are, they can help us." She strode over to the door that led back into the living room. "And we have to warn them and get them out. No one gets left behind."

### **Meanwhile...**

Mart winced as he stretched his legs, forcing Diana to move. "Do you think you can get up?" he asked her. "My legs are asleep."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Diana said as she scrambled to her feet, dusting off her jeans as she did so. She looked around the kitchen with distaste. "Why are haunted houses always so creepy? Dust everywhere, spiders probably lurking in every corner ..." She shivered. "And it doesn't help that I've got that old spooky movie playing in my brain."

Mart rose and began limping around the kitchen, trying to work out the pins-and-needles feeling in his legs. "Ow. Ow, ow, ow!"

"I said I was sorry," Diana retorted, her voice irritated.

"I wasn't blaming you. Ouch. Just give me a...damn it!" Mart grabbed onto one of the counters and bent forward, blowing out a breath. "You'd think it would feel *good* to get the blood back flowing into the tissue again." He exhaled through his teeth.

"It doesn't. Never has. Never will." Diana pushed a long strand of blue-black hair out of her face. "Why have these ghosts kidnapped *us*? And who was that leader gangster?" She shivered again. "You said

you knew him." Before Mart could say a word, Diana's face blanched. "Gangster? Wait. Not him. Not..."

"Yes, him," Mart confirmed. "And he is none too happy with us for messing up his life in 1929." He finally straightened, shaking out one leg and then the other. "Looks like we saved Honey's great-grandfather and sent Dan's off to his death instead."

"How are we responsible for what happened to him?" she demanded.

"Well, if we hadn't gotten him arrested, he might have lived to a ripe old age in New York City, uninterested in a vendetta against Charles Stillman." Mart ran a hand through his hair. "But we can't worry about that now. We need to find out what happened to Donovan Mangan and his cronies so that we can get out of here and go home."

"Okay, okay," Diana said, looking nervously around the room. "So, how do we do that?"

"Well ..." Mart hesitated, at a loss for words for a moment, before he recovered and said, "They spoke about the basement. They were murdered in the basement. Maybe we should start there."

Diana closed her eyes and let out a pitiful moan. "The basement. Going down into the basement of a creepy dilapidated house." She opened one violet eye and glared at Mart. "Like that ever ends well in the movies."

"Good thing we're not in a movie, then!" Mart said, giving his girlfriend a bracing smile.

The door through which Donovan Mangan and his men had exited swung open suddenly. Diana let out a little scream, and Mart whirled around, putting himself between her and whomever was entering the room. The eerie glow of candlelight lit up that dark corner of the room. A moment later, a very familiar head of tousled blond curls poked around the open door.

"Trixie?" Mart asked in disbelief.

"Mart? Oh, my God! Mart!" Trixie hurried into the room, followed close behind by Jim and Honey. "And Diana! Oh, I'm so glad we found you!" She set the candlestick on one of the counters before she gave her brother an enthusiastic bear hug. "Have you been here all this time?"

"I don't know how long we've been here," Mart said, returning his sister's hug as Honey made her way over to Diana to give her a hug of her own. "We woke up in here on the floor."

"Where are Brian and Dan?" Jim asked.

Mart frowned. "Not with us. I haven't seen them."

The redhead's face grew troubled. "They weren't asleep like the rest of you. Damn it. I hope they're all right."

"What is going on?" Diana demanded. "We've got ghosts threatening us, and Brian and Dan are missing. And we just saw...well, *Mart* just saw him. I had my eyes closed."

"Saw who?" Trixie whirled around to stare at her friend. "The crazy lady?"

"Oh, God. There's a crazy lady?" Diana turned a panicked gaze to Mart.

"What crazy lady?" Mart asked.

"The dead wife of the owner of the house. Her husband killed her. Her and the psychiatrist she was seeing." Trixie gave Mart and Diana a knowing look. "Just like in the movie!"

*The Murder House*

Diana paled. "But the movie...they were dumped in a pool of acid. There isn't a pool of acid in this house, is there?" She squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my *God!*"

Mart put his arm around his girlfriend and glared at Trixie. "Please tell us that this poor woman did not die from being dumped into a pool of acid."

"Oh, no. No. Just shot." Trixie tapped her temple with her finger. "In the head." She wrinkled her nose. "It was kind of gross. Blood was running down her face."

Jim gave his girlfriend a disgusted look. "Trixie, you aren't helping."

Honey, ever tactful and obviously concerned about the rather pale, frantic look on Diana's face, interjected, "She was nice, in a way. Was very grateful about us being here and was hoping we could help her solve the murders that happened in this house."

"Nice up until Jim asked her why we'd been brought here," Trixie said with a frown. "Then, you could see why she was seeing a psychiatrist. She got all weird. And Jim was just asking her a question."

"Suffice it to say," Jim said, with a stern look at Trixie, "that we don't have a lot of time to figure out what happened to the ghosts in this house. According to the wife, the house is set to be demolished in the morning. Dynamite's been placed at various points outside, Trixie and Honey have tried to get out the front door and had no luck, and the contractors already checked for life inside the house this afternoon, so it's not likely anyone would come in and find us before the blast goes off."

"What?!" Diana and Mart exclaimed as one. Mart shook his head. "So that's what Mangan was talking about. Damn it! This isn't good."

"Mangan?" Trixie asked, a frown etching her brow. "I thought you guys said that you hadn't seen Dan or Brian."

"We haven't," Diana said. "And that's just it. *Donovan* Mangan. You know? The gangster Charles Stillman was running with back in New York in 1929?" She hissed. "He's one of the ghosts. Him and his four buddies came here to murder Charles Stillman, who was living here under an assumed name, and ended up getting a bunch of bullets in the back for their trouble."

Jim let out a low whistle.

Trixie, as usual, looked intrigued. "He's here? Wow. And he came to kill Charles Stillman? Did he?"

Mart shook his head. "No. Stillman managed to kill Mangan and his four friends. None of them know how."

"And the wife did say that her husband lived to be a ripe old age," Honey mused.

"Dirty rat," Diana said in a scathing tone. "If I could just see him right now, I think I might off him myself!"

Mart laughed and put an arm around her. "That's my girl!"

"Everything seems to be pointing to the basement," Trixie said. "Mangan told you they were murdered there. The wife told us that seven people were killed in the basement. Whatever we're looking for will be in the basement."

"He might have some sort of remote-controlled booby trap set up in the basement," Mart pointed out.

"But if he did," Honey said, "he's not here to activate it." She waved a hand, indicating the gloomy, dust-filled room. "No one's lived here for years, and the house is condemned."

"We still should be careful," Jim said, a frown etching his forehead. "Seven people already died in that basement. We don't need to add five more ghosts to this wreck of a house."

"No argument there," Diana said, edging closer to Mart, her violet eyes nervous.

"Maybe we'll find Brian and Dan here, too," Honey said. "I'm really worried about them and the fact that we all seem to be here, and yet, we haven't seen them."

"Me, too," Jim agreed. "Hopefully, we'll either find them, or determine that they're not here at all, or ...." Realizing what he'd implied, Jim frowned and then quickly said, "Let's just hope we find them and that they're safe."

"Agreed," Mart said firmly.

Trixie looked around her with interest. "So, what are we waiting for? Let's find the basement!"

### **Back in the basement ...**

"So, a murder to solve," Dan said, glancing at Brian, who was scowling at the place where they'd seen the pile of bodies.

"I don't see how we're going to do that!" Brian knelt down to look at the floor. "Obviously, they were shot, but with what kind of gun? And where could this guy have hidden it?" He looked up at Dan. "It seems rather incredible to me that this husband would have been lucky enough to not only bump off his rival, but his wife, and five gangsters and manage to escape unscathed."

"Well, if he were hiding somewhere where he couldn't be seen," Dan mused.

"I'll give you that, but where could he hide?" Brian gestured with his flashlight around the room. Again, he highlighted the stack of empty crates—all see through. The wine racks—again, see through. The blank wall in front of him, and the staircase going up.

"Maybe he had something else down here when he was here," Dan offered. "Some sort of cabinet? Or a portable wardrobe or closet?"

"But he'd have to open the closet to shoot out of it or have some sort of hole drilled into it through which he'd stick a gun. But I don't see how he could kill five gangsters without at least one of them figuring out where he was and shooting *him*." Brian pointed to the dark stain on the floor. "These men were ambushed. Completely. And they didn't look like they saw it coming to me."

"No," Dan agreed. "I don't think they knew what hit them." He joined Brian, squatting near the floor. "Perhaps there's a trap door in the floor?" Before Brian could reply, they both heard the squeak of a door being opened.

In alarm, the two friends looked at each other, and with one mind, hurried under the stairs to hide.

Cautious steps echoed through the large cavernous basement, and glowing candlelight was the first thing the two Bob-Whites saw.

"It's awfully dark down here, but I think it's okay."

Brian and Dan exchanged a glance, both recognizing the voice as one long familiar to them. "Trixie?" Brian called out.

Trixie stopped on the staircase, her foot hovering above the basement floor. Finally, she turned and a smile split her face. "Brian!"

The other Bob-Whites soon joined Trixie. All of them were chattering at once.

“Woke up in the kitchen...”

“Did he bean you in the head, too? My head is *killing* me!”

“We saw that crazy lady. The wife. Up in the library.”

“Her psychiatrist sure thought she was crazy—until he ended up shot.”

“Your great-grandfather, Dan. He’s one of the gangsters who died here!”

“If we don’t find out who murdered these people, we’re going to end up blown up in the morning!”

The cacophony of noise was such that the room seemed filled with activity. Finally, Jim let out a sharp whistle, startling the others into silence. “Hey, guys! I think it’ll go a lot easier and a lot quicker if we don’t all try to shout each other down!”

Mart gave Jim a quick grin. “Oh, but it’s so much more fun that way.”

Jim snorted but did not otherwise reply to Mart’s sally.

“Well, Brian and I have kind of looked around the basement. There really isn’t a good place to hide that’s obvious,” Dan pointed out.

“And he had to have hidden somewhere,” Brian said. “That vision we saw of those gangsters being killed—the guys were ambushed. Gunfire coming from everywhere. Or at least, it seemed that way. I don’t think any of them got off a single shot.”

“They mentioned being ambushed,” Diana agreed. “And they were not happy about it. He shot them all in the back.”

“In the back,” Trixie muttered. She looked from Brian to Dan. “Where were they standing when they were shot?”

Brian hesitated before he walked over to the middle of the large room, away from the wine racks and the furnace. “About here, wouldn’t you say, Dan?”

Dan nodded. “And they were facing this way when they fell.” He turned to look at the crates, his back to the wall behind them.

“So, if the gunshots came from behind them,” Trixie mused, “they must have come from this wall.”

The six other Bob-Whites stared at the blank wall. “I guess there could be a hidden room,” Honey said slowly. “But how would he get in?”

“There’s usually some sort of trip that opens it,” Trixie said, her small hands running over the wall, looking for indentations or cracks that would indicate a rift in the wall.

Mart joined Trixie in her search. “This wall looks pretty solid to me,” he said, his voice doubtful.

“Even if there were a room there back then,” Brian pointed out, “he could have gotten rid of it. Knocked down the wall, painted over everything...”

“But then where would he bury the bodies?” Trixie gave her brother a knowing look.

“The...the bodies?” Diana stuttered out.

“He had the psychiatrist and the wife written off as a lover’s quarrel. The wife killed him in some sort of fit. Jealousy? I don’t know. Something.” Trixie continued talking as she kept up her quest of searching the wall. “But five dead gangsters? All shot in the back?” She shook her head. “No. They’ve got to be

*The Murder House*

buried down here somewhere. He couldn't risk lugging five bodies out of the house to bury in the backyard or out to his car. Nosy neighbors. Curious dogs digging. Way too risky."

"Okay, I'll give you that," Jim said as he, along with the others, joined Trixie at the wall. "But this floor is cement. How would he..."

"Cement overshoes," Dan said grimly. "The floor might have been a dirt or wooden one before."

Honey groaned. "I don't even want to think about it."

Trixie stood up as she neared the end of the wall, looking at it with a frown.

"I'm not finding anything," Mart complained. "It just looks and feels like a wall to me."

"There *has* to be a trigger around here somewhere." Trixie scowled.

"Maybe your psychiatrist friend knows where the room is," Jim said lightly.

"No." The dry voice interjecting into the conversation startled them all.

Brian looked up from where he was inspecting the wall and gave the ghost a sour look. "You again."

"Well, the gentleman did ask about me." The ghost was leaning against one of the wine racks, studying them as they made their way across the wall. "And in answer to your question, no, I have no idea about any secret room. Although that would explain a great deal."

"Can't you go through walls?" Trixie demanded. "I thought ghosts could do that."

"The gangsters upstairs went through the door," Mart added. "Literally through it."

"I mostly vanish and reappear," the psychiatrist said thoughtfully. "And I only seem to be able to go places in the house I'd been before." He shrugged. "So, I do a circle of the hallway, the living room and the basement, depending on my mood. Mary has the run of the place, as do the gangsters, but they all refuse to come down here to the basement." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Bad memories, you know."

"So, you can't go through the walls?"

The ghost shook his head. "Sorry. No."

Trixie frowned, looking around the room, her hands on her hips. "There's just got to be something..." Her voice trailed off as she stared at the one thing that seemed slightly out of place in the large basement.

Candlestick in hand, she walked over to the old washer, standing by itself. The unit consisted of basically a tub, sitting on four legs, with a roller attachment that hooked onto the tub by the means of a small arm jutting out from the side of the tub. The roller mechanism was attached to a crank, which would pull clothes through to wring them.

Trixie ran a hand around the inside of the tub and then up the crank and over to the rollers. Then, she knelt down to look at the washer, which appeared to be settled into the cement floor. She tilted her head to look at the psychiatrist, who was following her actions with some interest. "Are these washing machines usually cemented to the floor?"

He straightened and then sauntered over to where she was. "I can't say that I ever spent a lot of time fussing with wash tubs. I sent my clothes out to be cleaned." He gave her a thoughtful look. "But I can't say I heard of anyone wanting to cement their wash tub to the floor." He smiled. "Makes it very



*The Murder House*

difficult to drain the dirty water out.” He poked at the tub with a ghostly finger. “And I think these things are usually on wheels. So you can move them around.”

“That’s what I thought,” Trixie said, as she laid down on the floor so she could look under the tub.

The others had joined her near the washing machine and were all inspecting it themselves, when Trixie gave out a shout of triumph.

“What?” demanded Mart. “What did you find?”

Trixie pulled herself out from under the washing tub and scrambled to her feet. “There’s a mechanism down there that looks like some sort of lever. A thick wire or cable or something like that goes down one of the legs into the floor.”

“And the other end...?” Jim asked.

“Goes up here.” Trixie tapped the crank that attached to the roller.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Turn it!” Mart said eagerly.

“Hold on a minute,” Brian cautioned. “Seven people have died in this spot. Who’s to say that whatever turns this doesn’t set off some booby trap?”

The ghost cleared his throat. “Why don’t you seven go stand over there?” He gestured at the staircase. “I’ll turn it.”

“But how...?” Diana gazed at the ghost, her eyes wide.

“There are one or two things I still can do, lovely one,” he said with a wink.

Diana gave him a startled look before a shy smile crossed her face. She fluttered her eyelashes at him before she followed the others over to the stairs.

The psychiatrist then turned his gaze toward the washer. His eyes grew steely, as if he were remembering something extremely terrible and unpleasant. Then, with a full bodied push, he pressed down on the crank.

A groan echoed through the room. He pressed again, and the wall began to shudder and then move.

Several turns got the wall to move far enough along to reveal a door-sized opening in the wall. After that, the crank no longer would move, even after one or two of the live Bob-Whites put their weight on it.

Trixie darted her head inside the room, holding up the candle, which went out right away. Jim strode over to where she was standing and put a restraining hand on her shoulder. “Dead air, Trixie. Remember?”

Trixie stepped back and gave him a sheepish grin. “I was excited. So sue me!”

Dan joined them there and brandished his flashlight. “Let’s stay on this side of the wall, shall we?”

The flashlight shone around the little room. A series of mirrors hung at various angles inside reflected back places inside the room. Levers ran along the back of the wall at different heights, which looked as if they could be slid open.

“That’s how he could aim and shoot,” Dan murmured. “Reflections on the mirrors and a little door opened at just the right level.”

## *The Murder House*

Trixie gestured toward the arsenal along the wall in back. "He's got guns of just about every shape and size here. Even a Tommy gun," she said, pointing to the large weapon. "That probably took out those gangsters."

"Hey! The rest of us would like to see inside, too," Mart complained.

Trixie, Dan and Jim reluctantly moved away from the door to allow the others to look in. As Trixie waited for the others to finish, she glanced over at the psychiatrist. "Do you want to see?"

He gave her a small smile and shook his head. "I may not have known where the bullet came from, but I knew *who* it came from. And that was enough for me."

"You think it will be enough for them? I mean, now that we know how he did it?"

"Maybe," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. He sighed. "At least, it should be enough to get you out of here before the building comes down in the morning." He winked at them. "If they're still around, I'll let them know you solved the mystery."

"I thought for sure you'd just vanish when we found the solution," Brian said, looking at the psychiatrist with a frown.

"Perhaps there are things here I still must do." He shrugged again.

"I'm sorry," said Diana, who gave him a troubled look.

"Don't be," he said. He gave them all a flash of his smile. "This is the most interesting evening I've spent in years." He looked upward for a moment as he said, "Now. It's time to get you folks home. Let's see. How do I do this again? Oh, yes..."

He snapped his fingers, and the seven Bob-Whites shimmered in front of him ever so briefly before they vanished from his sight.

His smile drooped then as he stared at the silent, empty room around him. He'd felt the others go—the cold fury they had emanated for decades that had kept the damp, deep chill in the house was now gone. He didn't know why he hadn't joined them.

The house would be gone in a few short hours. And then what?

He whistled, a sad, forlorn little whistle, and wished desperately that he, too, could have escaped.

"Something still left for me to do," he whispered. "I wonder what that is."

## *The End?*

**Dana's notes:** What can I say that I haven't said every Halloween since 2003? I love plotting with Susan and then watching as she takes our basic ideas into fantastic places I never could have dreamed of. I love our annual tradition so much, I picture us as two little old ladies giggling over Halloween plots in a nursing home. :)

Many thanks to Susan for her edit of my parts and for writing her part while working at a stressful job *and* going to school! Super Woman, she is!

This is an entry for Circle Writing Event #6, Trixie As.... We've chosen to write all of the Bob-Whites as...well, you have to guess! :)

Thank you so much to everyone who is so supportive about our annual paranormal story. It means so much to Susan and me that you all seem to enjoy it so much! You all rock!

Happy Halloween!

*The Murder House*

Dana Word Count: 7,511  
Movie Dialogue: 2,643

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**Susan's notes:** It is far too much fun to do these stories with Dana every year. I can't believe how many years we've been doing this already! We have such a good time, and I totally agree with Dana that I can see us being two little old ladies and giggling over Halloween plots. \*grin\*

Dana did a Herculean effort on this story this year. She not only found a copy of the script for us but watched and transcribed the original dialogue from the movie. (I don't even want to think of how long a project that was!) She rocks!

It was definitely a down-to-the-wire thing this year, trying to get all of this done before the Halloween deadline for the CWE. But that's half the fun, having to race to the finish line. \*grin\*

Thanks to Dana for her edit and being the awesome woman that she is. It is so fun to plot, write and work with her!!

Book references are intentional and made with love. Did you catch them? ;)

Charles Stillman and Donovan Mangan are characters created for our earlier Supernatural Reality Story, The Murder of Thomas Clarke. See what happens when you play with time? LOL!

A picture of the washing machine can be found here: [http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-svKhR5hWtII/T66UOXsFrFI/AAAAAAAAABVo/q-mPE3WXkMo/s1600/wash\\_machine.jpg](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-svKhR5hWtII/T66UOXsFrFI/AAAAAAAAABVo/q-mPE3WXkMo/s1600/wash_machine.jpg) Aren't you glad you don't have to use one like that? LOL!

"Gams" are women's legs. The Boy Scout motto, of course, is "Be prepared." (And you just know Jim was a Boy Scout.) Mack trucks are an actual brand of truck. Good sized ones that you probably wouldn't want to be hit with. ;)

The Marcel wave is a very distinctive hairstyle that was very popular in the 1920s and 1930s for women. Read more about it here and see examples: <http://chicvintagebrides.com/index.php/bridal-looks/finger-marcel-waves-stylish-hair-of-a-bygone-era/>

And the Tommy gun is the famous rat-a-tat-tat gun from the 1920s and 1930s, short for the Thompson submachine gun. You can read all about it here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thompson\\_submachine\\_gun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thompson_submachine_gun)

Thanks to all of you who look forward to this story every year and who are so supportive of this continuing project of Dana's and mine. We really truly appreciate you guys so much! You guys definitely do rock!!

Susan Word Count: 12,284

Total Word Count: 22,438

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