

THE PRETERNATURAL

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First and foremost, I thank Jesus Christ, my personal Lord and Savior, who helped to make my dream a reality.

Thank you, Kent, Gil Dawson, Richard Ray, and J. Abreu for your invaluable input.

To all fans of and believers in the paranormal.

Special note: All deaf and hard-of-hearing characters in this book communicate via sign language, which is indicated by the dialogue markers “he signed” or “she signed” unless specified otherwise.

PROLOGUE

Someone—or something—glided through the vacant house and stopped in the expansive living room.

Through the huge picture window, it observed in the distance a small convoy of trucks and cars as it wound its way through the streets of the quiet hillside town of Knollwood Meadows.

When Nathan and Josslyn Bryant perused hundreds of real estate classified ads online several months ago, a picture of a particular house captured their interest: an ultra-contemporary, two-story, four-bedroom, three-bath house designed in a futuristic configuration and situated near the top of a small hill.

They contacted the real estate agent, saw the place for themselves, and bought the house that day. It was a momentous occasion for most couples when they bought their first house. For Nathan and Josslyn, there was an added cause for celebration.

Both descended from multigenerational deaf families—DOD (Deaf of Deaf). Members of the Bryant clan had various degrees of hearing loss, which ranged from hard-of-hearing to profoundly deaf.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Josslyn signed to Nathan. She smiled as she looked out the passenger side window.

“Peaceful, too,” Nathan signed with one hand and nodded in agreement. He steered the U-Haul truck along Sierra Linda Drive.

“Those trees remind me of the ones back home in San Bernardo.”

They saw their new house up ahead, flanked by two other houses fifty feet away on either side. Even from here, they could see the back of the house which overlooked a sloping hill that led to the next street below.

The truck pulled up in front of the house and backed up the driveway. It lumbered toward the two-car garage and squeaked to a stop as the parking brake was put in place.

Both doors of the truck's cab popped open. Nathan hopped down from the driver's side, and Josslyn jumped out from the passenger's side. They were excited as they admired the view of the house.

A Chevy van drove up and parked at the curb in front of the house, followed by a Dodge pickup truck loaded and tied down with furniture, and behind it, a GMC pickup truck weighed down with more paraphernalia.

Nathan went to the back of the U-Haul truck and rolled out the loading ramp. Relatives, friends, and neighbors from Nathan and Josslyn's previous residence let themselves out of the van and trucks. They clapped and waved their hands in the air with joy.

Nathan's mother, Augusta, cradled her seven-month-old granddaughter, Maddie, in her arms. “I can't get over how beautiful your new house is,” she signed with one hand to Josslyn. “That ultra-modern style is not at all my thing, but it seems to work very well here. It has great bones and interesting features.”

“Thank you,” Josslyn signed.

“I've seen pictures of so-called ultra-modern and ultra-contemporary houses and other buildings, but they weren't as appealing as this one. This is the nicest and the best that I've seen. This one takes the cake.” Augusta looked at the roof. “I really like those solar panels.”

“Nathan and I appreciate the fact that the house is ‘green.’ We really love it very much.”

Augusta embraced Josslyn and planted a soft kiss on her cheek, then handed Maddie to Josslyn as they entered the house.

“You know,” Augusta signed, “the hardwood floors, the tiled floors, and the backsplash in the kitchen are just stunning! And I absolutely love the front door with the horizontal frosted-glass windows framed in black. It even matches the windows on the garage door. The architect has very good taste and obviously knew what he or she was doing when designing this house.”

Josslyn nodded with a smile.

Thor, a three-year-old black male Labrador, jumped out of the Dodge truck. He wagged his tail, barked on occasion, and ran up to the different people who milled about and carried boxes.

Josslyn noticed this and signaled for the dog to go into the house, which he did. She then watched the others, who went to and fro as they unloaded the van and trucks.

“Excuse me,” Josslyn signed as she waved her arms in the air to get everyone’s attention. “Sorry to interrupt. Please put all pets in the house first, where they will be safe, especially with all this activity going on. I would like them to be indoors where it’s cool, since it’ll be warmer later on. Whoever has the cat—” Trina lifted the pet cargo cage to show that she had the cat “—please put her in a room,” Josslyn signed to Trina, “either the bedroom or the bathroom, with the door closed and don’t let her out.”

Trina was Nathan and Josslyn’s fourteen-year-old daughter, a middle-school student who enjoyed English and reading comprehension. She loved to read and hadn’t decided what she wanted to do after she graduated from high school or what courses she would take if and when she decided to go to college.

She went into the house and found the bathroom down the hall, where she set the pet cargo cage on the tiled floor and released its catch so that the cat could roam about the bathroom. She left and closed the door, then went back outside to help unload furniture from the trucks.

Caden, her sixteen-year-old brother, was a high-school student who favored math though he didn’t enjoy history, whether it was US history or world history or any history. But he still made a conscientious effort to get good grades. He had been more interested in finance and economics, and aspired to be a day trader like his father, Nathan.

As an aside, it was commonplace that many deaf families had second, third, or fourth generation descendants who were born deaf.

Jared, a seventeen-year-old deaf friend of the Bryant family whose parents were hearing, picked up a box from the back of a truck and approached Josslyn and Augusta as he made his way toward the house.

“Your house is something else,” he signed to Josslyn with one hand as he held the box in his arm. “It’s very beautiful.”

Augusta concurred with a nod. “It is, isn’t it?”

Jared nodded as well. “The wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling windows framed in black are so cool.”

He walked into the house.

Nathan's father, George, carried a small box and walked up to Augusta and Josslyn.

"I wish our house had an infinity pool and a hot tub like yours," George signed to Josslyn as he shook his head. "The standard in-the-ground types are boring."

"I know," she signed. "Besides the pool and the hot tub, the house's *biggest* selling point, *the* dealmaker is the huge balcony on the second floor. Believe me when I tell you it's twenty feet across and juts out about seven feet."

"Incredible." George went into the house.

Evan carried a large box into the living room where Caden, Trina, and Jared stood. With a goatee and moustache, Evan appeared older than his eighteen years. He considered himself a close friend not only to Caden but to the entire family. Evan could hear well, but his parents were deaf. Speaking and signing at the same time became a habit for him whenever he was around deaf people, and he enjoyed his role as interpreter.

"Amazing space," he signed to them as he admired the room. "The recessed lighting in all the rooms, even in the outdoor areas, is awesome."

George met Nathan in the kitchen. "I'm very proud of you, son," he signed to Nathan. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, Dad," Nathan signed. "As you know, Josslyn and I worked hard to get to this point in our lives."

Nathan had graduated with a bachelor's in finance and while job hunting, noticed a sidebar ad on a blogger's site proclaiming anyone could make thousands of dollars by trading in penny stocks. From there, Nathan researched all he could about penny stock trading. In the interim, he had saved some money while he worked at an accounting firm and received some financial support from his parents.

Skeptical and curious, Nathan had enrolled for seven free video lessons taught by the proprietor of the blog site. Now, Nathan traded in penny stocks full-time.



Everyone continued to unload the van and the trucks as they moved in furniture and boxes.

Caden carried an animal crate with a pair of long-eared bunnies; a male and a female. He brought it inside the house and set it on the floor in Trina's room upstairs.

Josslyn hefted a medium-sized box and walked up the path to the front door. She saw Diva, the family's black cat, skitter around the foyer by the entrance and then run into the living room. Josslyn set the box down on the ground in a huff and followed Diva upstairs. She found Diva in the master bedroom as she stood on all fours with her back arched, her fur standing on end, her ears back and fangs bared. Diva hissed and yowled, which unnerved Josslyn.

“What’s the matter?” Josslyn signed to the cat. “It’s all right. We’re in a new home.” Pensive, she left the room and closed the door. She went downstairs to look for Trina, who came in with a few small boxes.

“Boy, it’s cold in here,” Trina signed after she set the boxes on the floor. She rubbed her arms to purge the chill.

“It is a little chilly in here,” Josslyn signed. “That’s because the house sat vacant for so long, especially with the windows closed.”

“But it’s such a warm spring day in March.”

“I know. Anyway, I need to ask you—where did you put Diva?”

“I put her in the bathroom down the hall. Why?”

“Well, someone must have used the bathroom and inadvertently let her out. I found her running around in the living room and had to chase her upstairs. She’s in the master bedroom with the door closed, and she looks pretty frightened.”

“I hope she’ll be okay, especially since she’s pregnant and will be having a litter soon.”

“Yes. That’s another month away or so. In the meantime, we’ll just have to keep an eye on her, what with the move and all, which can be pretty stressful for some animals.”

“I agree. I’m going to go up to my room now. I’ll be back down to get some more stuff.”

“Wonderful.”

Josslyn planted a light kiss on her daughter’s forehead.



Pizzas and sodas had been ordered for lunch. Everyone relaxed and savored the relief from all the hard work of the move.

They chatted in sign language, swapped jokes, shared silly stories, and laughed. The one-hour cooling-off period had been appreciated by all.

Nathan and Josslyn discussed what needed to be done. The videophone (called a VP) and the digital baby monitor needed to be set up and connected as soon as possible.

Josslyn wiped her mouth and hands with a napkin. “Plus, the flashing doorbell signaler,” she signed, “so that we don’t miss any incoming calls, delivery persons, or visitors at the front door. More importantly, we can’t afford to miss out on any unseen—and, of course, unheard—activities concerning the baby while you, me, or the kids are out of sight.”

Nathan chewed on a slice of pepperoni pizza. “Once we get the VP set up and connected,” he signed, “we’ll call to have a security system installed as well.”

“Yes. And we have to have smoke and carbon monoxide detectors with flashing strobes

installed, too.”

“Plus, the doorbell/door knock sensor.”

“Right. Oh, and we should have the house inspected by a licensed home inspector. After all, we bought the house on a whim.”

“True. I love you,” Nathan signed. He held up the standard three-finger hand sign for “I love you” with the thumb, forefinger, and pinkie finger extended.

“I love you, too,” Josslyn signed back.

It would take about a week to sort out and organize everything.

All in good time, Josslyn thought to herself.

Now that it was past sunset and dinnertime, hot dogs and buns were grilled on a large electric griddle on the kitchen counter.

Caden and Trina sat in the formal dining room. He texted a deaf friend on his smartphone, and she played a game that she'd downloaded onto her tablet.

Caden looked up and glanced around the dining room.

"Have you seen Thor?" he signed.

Trina pointed to a corner, then returned to her game.

Caden tapped the side of his leg with the palm of his hand. Thor sauntered over to him, sat on his haunches, and panted. Caden patted the dog on the head for several minutes, then stopped to reply to text messages from some friends while he and Trina waited for dinner.

Nathan came into the dining room from the kitchen.

"Your mother wants to know if either of you have checked to see if Diva is all right," he signed.

"She's fine," Trina signed. "Last time I checked, she was still in the master bedroom with the door closed."

"Please go get her and bring her down so we can feed her."

Trina went upstairs while Nathan returned to the kitchen to help Josslyn. He gathered the paper plates, Styrofoam cups, napkins, and condiments, which he set on the table.

"The hot dogs will be done in a few moments," Josslyn signed to Nathan.

He noticed Josslyn had a confused look on her face with furrowed brows.

"What happened here?" Josslyn signed, a little perturbed.

"What?" Nathan signed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, look at it." She gestured to the hot dogs and buns on the griddle. "Some of the hot dogs are burned and black in parts and the buns, too." She looked at the heat setting and saw that it had been turned to high. "I could smell them burning while I was in the den a moment ago. Did you turn up the heat?"

Nathan shook his head. "I was in the dining room, asking the kids about Diva."

Josslyn wondered if the dial for the heat setting may have been damaged while it was handled during the move. She knew it didn't turn by itself.

"I'll just make another set," she signed to Nathan, then turned down the heat, threw the burned hot dogs and buns into the trash, and placed fresh ones on the griddle.

They all crashed at 10:00 p.m., exhausted after a long, busy, and active day.

Maddie slept undisturbed in her crib while the others slept on mattresses with sheets and blankets on the hardwood floors in their respective rooms until they had time to assemble their beds.



Josslyn awoke at 7:45 a.m. She kissed Nathan on the cheek, then picked up Maddie from her crib and held her in her arms. Josslyn woke up at 6:00 a.m. every day to check for pending sales via Princess Daboola, an online boutique which she owned, and sold exotic handmade and ready-made jewelry.

Nathan awoke at 5:00 a.m. on most mornings to research over-the-counter pink sheet penny stocks to determine which ones he should buy, hold, sell, and/or short-sell. But this morning, he slept in late.

Josslyn left the bedroom and went downstairs to the kitchen. Her brows furrowed as she observed Thor and Diva lick a spot on the tiled floor.

What the heck is that? she thought.

She shooed the dog and cat away and let them out the back door into the yard. She went to the counter and gazed at an opened jar of marshmallow cream lying on its side near the edge. The marshmallow cream oozed from the mouth of the jar as if it had melted, and contents trickled down the cabinet door, dripping onto the tiled floor.

Josslyn assumed the kids had played a prank, but Caden and Trina were still asleep in their respective rooms upstairs.

She put Maddie in the high chair, then picked up the jar and looked around for the lid, but it was nowhere to be found. She tossed the jar into the trash and pulled several sheets of paper towels to wipe up the mess until it was cleaned.



The smell of coffee, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and apple cinnamon oatmeal permeated the house.

Caden and Trina came downstairs.

Josslyn stirred the oatmeal in the saucepan. "Did you come down here to make something in the middle of the night?" she signed to Caden and Trina.

"No," Trina signed. "Why?"

"I slept like a baby," Caden signed.

"I found an opened jar of marshmallow cream lying on its side on the counter with stuff coming out of it," Josslyn signed, "spilling down the cabinet door and on the floor. I just cleaned it up a while ago."

Nathan entered the kitchen. "I didn't come down to fix anything," he signed.

"At first, I thought it might've been a prank," Josslyn signed, "but I guess not."

"Maybe one of us didn't close the cupboard door all the way," Caden signed, "and it rolled out and fell, causing the top to pop loose."

Trina eyed the cupboard door. "I don't see how that's possible since it's closed."

"Now it is closed," Caden signed with exasperation, "but last night, it may have been left ajar or not pushed all the way closed."

Josslyn poured some oatmeal into a bowl. "I looked for the top and didn't see it anywhere. I even looked in the trash."

Trina took the bowl from her mother. "Thanks. Do you get the funny feeling that something strange is going on here?"

Nathan poured himself a cup of decaffeinated coffee. "What do you mean?"

Trina shrugged, unsure of how to best answer the question. "Strange things happening since we moved here."

"Well, it is a new house," Josslyn signed, "and it'll take some time to get used to it."



Later, everyone assembled their beds with the help of others in order to quicken the pace and lighten the burden.

Afterward, Trina filled a glass with orange juice, then went up to her room. She set the glass on her computer desk, pulled some clean clothes out of the dresser drawer, and went into the bathroom down the hall to take a shower.

Fifteen minutes later, Trina towel-dried her hair as she walked down the hall back to her room. Once in her room, she gasped in disgust. The contents of her orange juice had been splattered on her bedsheets and comforter. The glass was on the bed as well.

She turned and stomped down the hall to Caden's room. He had put on a blue T-shirt when she stepped into his room with an indignant look on her face.

"What?" he signed, puzzled.

"Why did you do that?" Trina signed with a huff.

"Do what? What are you talking about?"

“You never used to do that.”

Caden gazed at Trina with a questioning look.

“You’ve been playing pranks!” Trina signed. “First, the marshmallow cream in the kitchen and now this!”

“I swear I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m telling Mom.”

“Show me what it is before you go telling Mom.”

Trina left Caden’s room as he followed from behind. She entered her room and stepped aside to make way for Caden as he entered. She pointed to her bed with an outstretched arm.

Caden’s eyes widened with raised brows. “I didn’t do that.” He shook his head. “I would never do anything like that.”

“There’s always a first time.”

“That would be immature and irresponsible of me if I did that. I’ve never done anything like that before and you know it.”

“Well, someone did, and I don’t think Mom or Dad did it, and I’m sure our pets didn’t do it, either.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to tell you, but I’ll help you clean up and put clean sheets on the bed.”

“You swear you didn’t do it?”

Caden raised his hand. “Cross my heart.”

“All right.”

Caden changed the sheets after Trina pulled off the bedding and took them downstairs to the laundry room off the den. When everything was back to normal, Caden signed, “Everything cool?”

“So far, yes.”

“Good. Listen, could I borrow your tablet for a few minutes to call Evan until my VP is set up? My phone is too small to see him on the screen. I’ll give it back soon as I’m done.”

“Sure. Here.” Trina handed the tablet to Caden, who sat on her bed. He speed-dialed Evan’s number.

“Hey, Caden,” Evan signed as his face came into view on the tablet after two rings. “What’s up?”

“Wanna come over, visit for a while, and help with some unpacking, then maybe go swimming for a bit?” Caden signed.

“Sure. When?”

“Now is good, if you’re free.”

“I’ll be over soon.”

“Great. See you then.”

Caden handed the tablet back to Trina. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” She pulled up the game to resume playing.

Caden left Trina’s room and went back to his room to unpack, sort, and organize until Evan arrived.



Nathan twisted the last screw with a screwdriver into the doorbell/door knock sensor on the front door’s interior, which faced the foyer and the living room beyond.

The strobe light flashed into his eyes, which made him step back in surprise. He shook his head and let out a sharp exhale. At first, he thought he might have touched a sensor, then surmised the device might have been defective due to the handling during the move. He looked through the three horizontal windows embedded in the door, saw part of a man’s torso, and realized someone stood there. He opened the door to see Evan.

“Hey, Nathan,” Evan said and signed at the same time.

“Hi, Evan,” Nathan signed. “Come in. I was just putting the door sensor on the back of this door.”

“Caden asked me to stop by for a while.”

“Sure, come right in.” Nathan closed the door as Evan went upstairs to see Caden.

“Hey, Caden,” Evan said as he signed. “Good thing you called when you did. I was kinda bored with nothing to do, ya know?” He heard a low, guttural growl, which gave him a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach and made his skin crawl; the throaty intonation sent shivers down his spine. He furrowed his brows as he scanned the bedroom.

“What’s wrong?” Caden signed.

“Is Thor here?” Evan asked.

Caden glanced around the room. “I don’t see him here.”

“Is he in the house?”

Caden shrugged, noncommittal.

“I just heard a growl,” Evan said.

“I thought I heard something too, but wasn’t sure.”

“Really? I know you can hear some things from time to time, but I didn't think that growl would have been loud enough for you.”

“Well, apparently it was. Kinda creepy, too. Let me check.”

Caden clapped his hands to get the dog's attention and waited a moment. He clapped again, but the dog did not come into the room. He looked out the window near his bed and beckoned Evan to come to the window and look.

Evan saw Thor and Diva lying on the grass in the front yard. “Strange. I know I heard a growl or what sounded like some type of animal sound.”

“I wouldn't know for sure.” Caden shrugged with raised brows and pointed an index finger to each of his ears, his face a comical smirk.

“Yeah, yeah,” Evan said with a playful shove on Caden's shoulder. “I know you're deaf.”

“Ha ha,” Caden signed with a silent laugh. “Where did you hear it?”

“Here, just a moment ago, after I walked in.”

“Weird.”

“You're telling me.”

Later that day, after Evan had gone home, Josslyn sat on the hardwood floor in the den, pulled a medium-sized box toward her, and opened it. She withdrew five wooden crosses of the same size. Nathan stood at the other end of the den, bent over boxes of various sizes.

Josslyn flapped her hand to get Nathan's attention.

"Yes?" Nathan signed.

"I'm going to put these crosses in the living room, master bedroom, kitchen, dining room and one here in the den."

Nathan nodded his approval.

Josslyn laid the crosses nearby and continued to sift through the box. "I just thought of something," she signed to Nathan. "Instead of having a big housewarming party, how about a small one with some relatives and a few close friends?"

Nathan nodded. "I like it. I have to say, I'm really not up for having a large gathering with a bunch of people and a lot of food with all the hoopla."

"I feel the same way."

"On another subject, just want to let you know that instead of throwing away the newspapers, I'm going to put them in a large box and set it aside so we can use them for Diva when it's time for her to give birth."

"Great idea! I was thinking the same thing, but you beat me to it."

Josslyn rose from where she sat and carried the crosses while she walked into the kitchen to look for a jar of nails that were on the counter by the microwave oven. She stopped when she saw a column of several cleansers lined up to perfection in the middle of the tiled floor and parallel to the counters on either side of the kitchen.

What the heck? she thought.

She laid the crosses on the counter and went back to the den. She beckoned to Nathan with her index finger and went back into the kitchen. In a moment, Nathan met Josslyn in the kitchen with an inquisitive look on his face. She tilted her head in the direction of the floor. He observed the column of cleansers lined up and gazed at her with a questioning look, his brows raised.

"I think the kids are playing games," Josslyn signed. "I may have a sense of humor, but this is a bit silly, especially at their age. First, it was the melted marshmallow cream and now this."

"Do you want me to get the kids?"

"No, I'll take care of it."

Josslyn went to the back of the house and stood by the double sliding glass doors. She looked at the backyard, where she saw Thor and Diva lounging in the sun by the pool. She went upstairs and looked in Trina's room.

Trina was sitting up in bed, talking with a friend via the Delos Video Relay Service app on her tablet. She looked up from her tablet. "Yes, Mom?"

"Come with me," Josslyn signed.

"I'll call you right back," Trina signed to her friend on the tablet. She disconnected the call and laid the tablet on the bed, then left her room and went over to where she saw Josslyn standing in the hall outside Caden's bedroom.

Caden sat at his computer desk, where he sent and received text messages from several friends via his smartphone. He looked up when he saw Josslyn in the hall.

She beckoned to him with her hand, turned around, and went downstairs. "All right, what did you do with them?" she signed in exasperation, indignant.

"What are you talking about?" Trina signed, confused.

"You know what I'm talking about," Josslyn signed.

"I just know that I don't know what you're talking about," Caden signed with a silent laugh and slapped his leg. He put on a straight face when he saw the look of anger etched on his mother's face.

"There were bottles of cleansers lined up here," Josslyn signed. She indicated with her arm where and how they were lined up. "Now, they're not there."

"Maybe Dad put 'em away," Trina signed.

"I told him to leave it and that I'd take care of it." Josslyn squatted and opened the cabinet doors under the kitchen sink. The bottles of cleansers were there. "I know I didn't put them away, and I told your father to leave them alone. I don't think they grew legs and walked into the cabinet, either." She rose and went into the den. "Did you put away those bottles of cleansers?" Josslyn signed to Nathan.

"No," he signed. "I've been here, sorting through the boxes."

"The bottles are not on the floor. They've been mysteriously put away."

"That's funny," Trina signed. "A glass of orange juice was splattered on my bed, and I thought Caden did it as a prank, but he swore he didn't do it."

"It's true," Caden signed with a nod. "I would never do something like that. I even helped her clean up the mess."

"Something funny is going on around here," Josslyn signed, "and I will have you know that pranks or jokes of this sort will not be tolerated."

"I've said that strange things have been happening since we moved here," Trina signed.

Josslyn nodded, contemplative. "I'll admit it doesn't make sense."

Later, she hung the five crosses in the kitchen, dining room, den, living room, and master bedroom. She also placed a Bible on the nightstand on her side of the bed.

Nathan hooked up the VP and turned on the sixty-inch flat-screen TV and the VP to ensure they worked.

Next, he put up the smoke/carbon monoxide detectors in the upstairs and downstairs hallways and in all four bedrooms as well, the fourth being the guest room. Then he set up the wireless digital video baby monitor.

Two days later, an installer from Cernix Home Security came to the house and set up the security system and cameras throughout the property.

“Now, bear in mind,” the security installer said to Nathan and Josslyn, as he used some hand and arm gestures while he spoke, “when the alarm goes off and you receive a call from the Cernix Home Security Center, someone will ask for the password. You choose the password. Okay?”

Nathan nodded and turned to Josslyn and reiterated to her what had been said. Nathan could hear a bit better than Josslyn and had the habit of checking that Josslyn understood as well.

“Yes,” Josslyn signed with a smart-alecky smile. “I got it the first time.”

After the installer left, Nathan signed, “What password would you like to use?”

“I thought of ‘safe,’ but it’s too common. How about ‘deaf?’” Josslyn signed.

“Perfect!”



Nathan looked online for a licensed home inspector with outstanding credentials and found one. He placed a call via VP and scheduled an appointment to have someone come out to do a thorough inspection.

“Everything checks out,” the inspector said to Nathan and Josslyn a few days later after he had completed the inspection. He gave them an “okay” with his thumb and forefinger, then handed Nathan his written report, which showed no discrepancies.

Thus far, Nathan and Josslyn were content with how everything had come together.

Early one afternoon, sometime before lunch, Josslyn gave Maddie a bath in the kitchen sink. As she rinsed off the soap, her eyes were drawn to the LED lights on the digital baby monitor as they blinked. Curious, she looked at the monitor in which she could see that the camera’s eye focused on Maddie’s crib in the master bedroom.

Well, there’s no one there, Josslyn thought. Wonder what could be making the lights blink? Maybe it’s some ambient noise like static or the wind blowing in through the window.

The crib was empty, yet she noticed a transparent and formless shadow in a vertical stance as it moved from right to left across the screen on the monitor.

Josslyn pressed her face near the monitor for closer inspection and better clarity. Whatever it was, it didn't appear again.

The lights blinked again, which made her flinch. She dried her hands on a dish towel, then placed one hand on the baby monitor's speaker. Her palm sensed soft, dull vibrations as sound filtered through the speaker. She realized it wasn't a sound; it was more like someone speaking in rhythmic low tones, which said the same thing over and over with a quick brief pause between utterances.

Josslyn dried Maddie, picked her up, and scampered upstairs to check the master bedroom. It baffled her when she did not see anyone in the room. She looked at one wall and fear filled her when she saw a scrawled inscription above Maddie's crib:

RUB-A-DUB-DUB, DEAD BABY IN A TUB

That's when she realized those were the words which the low tones through the baby monitor's speaker was saying over and over. It matched the cadence of the words on the wall.

Lunchtime, Caden thought to himself as his stomach growled. He went downstairs to the kitchen and made a ham-and-cheese sandwich, then headed back upstairs.

When he reached the top of the stairs and turned to go down the hall to his room, he saw that his bedroom door was closed. He wondered if his sister might have closed the door, then assumed the wind must have shut it. He opened the door and eyed the window that overlooked the east side of the house. The window was closed. He couldn't remember if the window had been open or closed earlier.

Caden opened the windows, then sat down to eat his sandwich and check his e-mails.

Trina entered Caden's bedroom. "I just came from the kitchen where I made my lunch," she signed, "and saw that my bedroom door was closed and the rabbit cage had been moved from one end of the room to the other. Were you in my room?"

"No," Caden signed. "Not at all. I've been here the whole time on the computer."

"Well, I know I didn't close my bedroom door or move the rabbit cage."

"Maybe Mom or Dad moved it for some reason and closed the door out of respect."

"No, I don't think so. Abbott and Costello have been in the same place I put them after we moved in, and I only close the door when necessary, which isn't often."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, Trina. But you could always ask Mom or Dad, if you want."

"Nah. That's all right. I'm just gonna let it go for now."

"Are your bedroom windows open?"

"I don't know. I didn't think to check if they were open or not. I don't even remember if they were open or closed before I went downstairs to fix lunch."

"Do you get the feeling that something weird is going on here?"

"I sure do."

"It feels like I'm being watched and the doors and windows supposedly open and close on their own."

"I don't feel as if I'm being watched, but I'm seeing things that I can't explain. Do you think someone—maybe a neighbor—is watching us?"

Caden shrugged. "Maybe it's our minds playing tricks on us, especially since this is a new house and we're still getting our bearings after moving in only two weeks ago."

"Yeah, that could be it. Anyway, I'm gonna go back to my room."

Trina went to her room and sat at her vanity table to eat her lunch. She felt something brush the outer part of her ear. *What was that?* she wondered as she brushed her right ear with her fingers and glanced around the room.

Josslyn stood in the laundry room off the den and scanned along one wall which had a built-in workstation with a row of cubbies, some shelves below it, and drawers along the bottom. Opposite that wall was a modern-style stacked washer-and-dryer unit.

She had washed one load of bath towels, hand towels, and washcloths, folded them, and distributed throughout the house in their proper places.

Upon entering the master bedroom, Josslyn stopped in mid-stride and saw that all the dresser drawers were opened. Some of Nathan and Josslyn's clothes, underwear, and socks were hung over the drawer doors, strewn on the floor, and tossed on the bed.

Josslyn gazed at the disheveled mess before her, distressed. She set down the laundry basket in a huff. She was pretty sure that Caden and Trina didn't do this. She even knew the pets couldn't have done it, either. Abbott and Costello were in their crate, Diva hadn't been seen around much, and she didn't think Thor was capable of causing this mess.

Caden and Trina walked by the master bedroom and noticed Josslyn standing there among the mess.

"What happened in here?" Trina signed.

"What's wrong?" Caden signed.

Josslyn shrugged and shook her head. "I'm not sure." She scanned the room and wrung her hands. "I'm beginning to think there's a ghost in this house."

Nathan and Josslyn stood on the front porch one morning; he with a mug of decaffeinated coffee, and she with a cup of Earl Grey tea and honey. Josslyn had placed a plate of bagels with cream cheese and lox on an outdoor table.

Trina soon joined them and set a plate of breakfast muffins next to the bagels. "I'm going to fix myself some hot cocoa," she signed. "Caden said he'd be out shortly."

"Okay," Josslyn signed and sipped some tea.

Nathan chewed on a bagel and sipped some coffee.

They observed the neighbors walk by, smiled and waved "hello" and "good morning" to a few of them, but none of them looked their way.

Josslyn elbowed Nathan with a knowing smile. "You were a naughty boy last night, weren't you?"

"Who, me?" Nathan signed. "Naughty? What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on. You know." Josslyn suppressed a giggle and winked once at him.

"I do? Sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You had your hands all over me last night. You really got me going pretty good."

"Really? If I did, I would've remembered. Otherwise, I was dead asleep."

"You don't remember?"

Nathan shook his head. "Not at all. As I just said, I would've remembered having done that."

"Wow! Maybe I was dreaming, but I doubt it. It seemed—and felt—pretty real."

"Did you wake up or open your eyes to see if I was touching you?"

"Well, I was in that place between awake and asleep, but I didn't open my eyes or turn over to face you. I just lay there, enjoying your loving touch and caress."

"For the life of me, I have no recollection of doing anything to you last night."

"It's not like you to forget something like that."

"Yeah, I know."

"How strange."

Trina came out with her mug of hot cocoa and waved with a smile to a passerby, but that person walked on without a glance toward the Bryants.

"Wonder why they're ignoring us?" Trina signed.

It dawned on Josslyn that the people weren't walking in front of their house along their side of the street. In fact, they walked up to a neighbor's house located on either side of their own house, then crossed the street to the other side, and walked over two or three houses down in

either direction, then crossed back over to the same side and continued on. It seemed as if they avoided the Bryants' house on purpose. This perplexed Josslyn and she found this disconcerting. *It's sort of like a scene right out of a Twilight Zone episode*, she thought.

"Maybe they're not ignoring us," Josslyn signed to Trina. "Maybe they're just wary since we are new to the neighborhood and we are deaf, so they don't know us yet. Being strangers can be somewhat unnerving to some people. When a person has a certain type of disability, it can be even more unnerving and unsettling to others. We'll just have to be optimistic and give them some time to warm up to us and get to know us. Before we know it, not only will they be our neighbors, but some of them will be our new friends."

Trina sipped her cocoa and mulled over her mother's words.

A wolf howled at 2:47 a.m.

The nervous rabbits stirred in their crate in Trina's room.

The skittish cat scampered in the upstairs hall, then ran downstairs to the living room and bolted out the kitty door in the kitchen.

The agitated dog barked and gazed through the sliding glass partition at the backyard beyond the swimming pool. Thor lifted his head with his ears perked and observed Diva leap and bound across the backyard from left to right, then disappear into a hedge of bushes. Thor barked again, bared angry-looking teeth, and growled, then barked again. He stood on his hind legs and scratched at the partition with his paws. He panted as he observed the backyard beyond the pool. Then he stood on all fours, turned, and sauntered away to Caden's bedroom. He listened to ambient sounds as well as Caden's breathing while the boy slept. Thor then lay down on the floor in the middle of the room and dozed off.



Yellow mist with a greenish radiance swirled on the bedroom floor around Nathan and Josslyn's bed.

Nathan opened his eyes and blinked a few times to adjust to the darkness. Disoriented and groggy, he pivoted his head and looked around the room with walls painted black. He could see that he was in a cellar, not his bedroom.

A dim, hazy light from two stairways at opposite ends along one wall illuminated the cellar. Numerous black candles were perched on five-foot-tall wrought-iron candle stands. The flames of each candle fluttered about, and their heat made the room sultry.

Nathan lifted his head a few inches off the bed and observed silhouettes of a group of thirty-three people, both men and women, huddled close together in a semi-circle about six feet from the foot of the bed. Clad in dark robes with hoods over their heads, they stood silent and faced the bed.

Nathan noticed a strange and unusual sensation on his body and realized that he was naked except for a black cloth, which covered his groin. He saw Diva lying by his foot on the left side of the bed. The cat leered at him with two hollow pits where the eyes should have been. She emitted a sharp, angry hiss, then yawned and licked her right paw. By his right foot were Abbott and Costello, huddled together. Their noses twitched between lifeless eyes, their long ears were ragged, and their two front teeth were large and yellow. To Nathan's immediate right, Thor sat on his haunches on the cold concrete floor. He stared at Nathan with eyes that oozed yellowish-green pus.

As Nathan peered at the robed men and women, he soon discerned that they were neighbors and passersby who had avoided his new home whenever they walked by. He also recognized his parents, Josslyn's parents, his children, and his children's friends. Maddie, however, lay on

the bed next to him.

“Where am I?” Nathan verbalized in his own voice, which echoed throughout the warm and muggy cellar.

“Deadwood Meadows,” a man with tattooed hands said in an eerie, hollow voice.

Josslyn stepped forward, cadaverous and expressionless. She walked to the side of the bed near Thor, leaned over and looked into Nathan’s eyes. Her eyes had black pupils, but outside of them, her irises were yellow-orange with thin, red isosceles-triangular slits that circumscribed the orbs of her eyes along the inside of her lids.

“I love you,” Josslyn verbalized in a masculine, demonic tone. She grinned and exposed long, razor-sharp teeth, an inch in length and stained in shades of gray.

Nathan’s throat bulged and throbbed, as if filled with frogs.

Josslyn raised her right arm high above her head. Clenched in her fist was a fancy knife with an artistic design and a six-inch sterling-silver blade. She thrust it downward, toward Maddie’s abdomen.

Nathan awoke with a gasp. Beads of sweat rolled down his face and dripped off his jaws and chin. He lay on his back and continued to gasp for air. His heart thudded in his chest. He turned over on his side, raised himself with the support of his arm, and eyed Josslyn for a few moments.

She slept peacefully.

The wonderful aromas of chicken, olive oil, garlic, rosemary, and thyme wafted through the house as dinner roasted in a slow cooker since 8:00 a.m. Side dishes of baked potatoes, green peas, baby carrots, dinner rolls, and a large bowl of homemade classic Cobb salad with fresh bleu cheese crumbles were laid out on the dining table.

The table sat twelve, replete with plates, silverware, crystal glasses, and folded napkins. The marvelous sight of the food appealed to the guests, and they were eager to eat.

“Let us say grace,” Josslyn signed. She bowed her head in prayer. Guests joined her.

“Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” the guests signed.

Josslyn prepared a small plate of mashed peas, carrots, and potatoes along with a few pieces of a roll for Maddie, who sat in her highchair nearby. Josslyn cut a small portion of a chicken into fine slivers for Maddie as well.

George dug into his plate and savored the baked potato with a dollop of sour cream garnished with chives.

Thor sat on his haunches at the table by Caden’s side. He looked at the guests and begged for portions of the meal. Caden and Trina gave pieces of chicken and carrots to the dog.

Diva pawed on Augusta’s leg to beg for some food.

“Can the cat have some chicken, peas, or carrots?” Augusta signed to Josslyn.

“Yes,” Josslyn signed, “but only in very small portions as we just fed her”—she glanced at Thor—“and the dog earlier. So, yes, she can have a little bit.”

“Oh, good. Glad I asked. I’d hate to say no to them.”

The dining table lurched to one side by about three and a half inches. Everything on the table slid a few inches in the opposite direction.

Everyone flinched in surprise, including Diva and Thor. Diva ran from the dining room and through the living room toward the back of the house. Thor barked, startled.

“What happened?” Josslyn signed.

Everyone looked under the table to see if a leg might have broken. All four table legs were intact.

Evan ducked his head from where he sat.

“What is it?” Caden signed. “Why did you duck like that?”

“I heard a very loud slam that came from the kitchen,” Evan said as he signed at the same time. “It sounded like a cupboard door or a cabinet door slammed really, really hard. Now I’m hearing another sound. I can’t quite make it out, but it’s coming from the kitchen as well.” He cocked his head to one side and strained to decipher the sound. “It’s some kind of rattling, as if

someone is shaking something very hard.”

“It might be the refrigerator,” Nathan signed as he rose from his chair and went into the kitchen.

Josslyn, Caden, and Trina followed.

Once in the kitchen, they saw that the door to the stove was trembling in a rough and violent manner, as if the stove door was stuck and someone—or something—was tugging hard at it, struggling to get it open.

“I’m going to get my tablet to get some pictures and video of this,” Trina signed. She ran upstairs to her room.

Jared, George, and Augusta came into the kitchen.

Evan saw the racket and turned to glance behind him. “It’s the stove door being pulled and shaken.”

Nathan approached the stove and placed a hand on the door. He could feel the intense shaking.

“No!” Josslyn signed. She held out her arms and waved her hands. “Don’t touch it! What if it’s an electrical thing? You could get electrocuted!”

Nathan pulled his hand away from the stove. “I didn’t feel any electricity coming out of it. Just a very intense vibration, that’s all.”

Trina returned with her tablet and took pictures, then switched the device to video mode and filmed the rattling stove door for about ten seconds. “This way, we have proof that something was happening with the stove.”

The vibrations stopped.

“Well, I have no idea what it could’ve been,” Nathan signed with a shrug.

“We can look at the stove later,” Josslyn signed, “and if it acts up again, we’ll call to have someone to come out and look at it. In the meantime, let’s get back to finishing our dinner.”

They returned to their seats at the table.

“As *jarring* as it was,” Evan said with an uneasy chuckle, “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Me, neither,” Caden signed as Trina nodded in agreement.

A moment passed while everyone resumed eating, although they were nervous. As timorous as Augusta was, she tried to resume conversation. “How is Diva doing with her pregnancy so far?” she signed to Josslyn. “When is she due?”

“Oh, she should be due in about one or two weeks. Which reminds me, I need to prepare a box for her with newspapers so she’ll have a place to birth her kittens.”

Conversations soon turned to various subjects, such as favorite TV shows, movies, fiction and nonfiction books of different genres, and telling jokes. The guests were engrossed in their

dialogue as they studied the person next to them or across from them speaking in sign language.

Without warning, the rectangular pendant chandelier with clear Swarovski crystals fell and crashed onto the top of the table. Particles of food splattered on the guests' faces and their clothes. Most of them gasped and jumped from their seats, startled. Thor ran from the dining room.

"That *scared* me!" Trina signed. She picked up her tablet with jittery hands and walked around the table as she snapped pictures, then videoed the light fixture, which lay askew on the table.

"Scared me, too," Augusta signed. "Look! My hands are shaking." She held up her hands for all to see. "And my heart's pounding." She put a hand to her bosom.

Nathan, Josslyn, Caden, Jared, and Evan rose from their seats to get a closer look at the fallen fixture. They also looked up at the ceiling where electrical wires stuck out like the gnarled fingers of an arthritic hand. George and Augusta remained seated, and while Maddie still sat in her highchair and cried from fright, Josslyn moved her away from the table as a precaution.

"Looks like the wiring or something up there came loose," Nathan signed, "and caused the chandelier to fall."

"But it recently passed the home inspection, remember?" Josslyn signed as she looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"Yeah, but . . . This should not have happened."

"Should we call the home inspector to have him come back and check this or should we call an electrician to have this checked out?"

"I don't know. I can't even think straight right now."

"Why not call an electrician first," Jared signed, "and go from there?"

"All right," Nathan signed to everyone, "let's get this cleared. The guys will help me move the chandelier and set it outside in the back on the side of the house by the trash bins until I figure out what needs to be done. Josslyn, please put Maddie in the living room for now. Mom, Dad, please go with Josslyn into the living room. That goes for you too, Trina."

The men hefted the chandelier and carried it away as food particles dripped from the fixture to the hardwood floors along the way.



"So sorry about dinner," Josslyn signed to her guests at the front door as they left. "I feel bad. I feel like it was a disaster."

"No, don't worry about it," Augusta signed. "It's okay."

“Someone could’ve gotten hurt,” George signed.

“I’m just glad everyone’s okay,” Nathan signed.

“Yeah, me too,” Jared signed.

“We’ll have other dinner gatherings,” Augusta signed to Josslyn. “So, please do not worry about it.”

“Well, we’re bailing,” Evan said. “Thanks for a wonderful dinner and, no, it wasn’t a disaster. Please don’t say it was.”

They all said goodbye, and the guests went home.

Trina and Caden cleaned up the dining table and rinsed the dishes.

Josslyn and Nathan stood in the dining room and gazed at the ceiling. They tried to figure out how a simple light fixture could have come loose and fallen down.

The next morning, Josslyn remembered to prepare a maternity box for Diva to birth her kittens.

Whenever Josslyn, Nathan, Caden, or Trina saw Diva, they would pick her up and put her in the maternity box or guide her to it so that she would get used to the box and recognize it as the place to birth her litter.

Josslyn kept the den closed off most of the time to keep Thor away, and if necessary, put the dog in the backyard until Diva had been put back in her maternity box with the door to the den closed.

Upon returning from the mall one afternoon, the Bryants were stunned as they entered the house to see several boxes of dried foods lined up in the center of the hall and along the stairs.

Canned items, a jar of mayo and a ceramic elephant had been stashed inside the microwave oven. Bottles of hand lotion, cans of hairspray, boxes of Kleenex, bottles of shampoo and conditioner, and rolls of toilet paper had been stacked and arranged in bizarre ways on the bathroom sink. Contents from the lotion, shampoo, and conditioner had been squirted on the mirror, the walls, the sliding shower door, and on the bathroom floor.

“Looks like we have a mischievous poltergeist here,” Trina signed. She scrutinized the mess on the mirror and wall as she tried to figure out how something like that could’ve been done.

“I think someone’s playing a joke on us,” Josslyn signed.

“Who?” Caden signed. “How would anyone get in?”

“Well, it’s possible the front door or one of the sliding glass doors in the back was left unlocked.”

Nathan shook his head. “I made sure the security system was turned on before we left. The Cernix Home Security Center would’ve been notified, and the police would’ve been here already.”

“I’m going to get my smartphone,” Caden signed, “to take pictures and video of these weird things we’re seeing.” He bounded up the stairs to his room to retrieve his smartphone and returned.

“Let’s just pick up the stuff and put it away,” Josslyn signed with an exasperated sigh and a shake of her head.

Knollwood Tavern was a small, nondescript bar on the edge of town that served beer, wine, and soda, along with sandwiches, fries, and onion rings.

Sean Ferguson, a heavysset, forty-eight-year-old insurance actuary by trade, sat on a stool at one end of the bar under a string of dim, clear mini-lights. He had thinning, dark-brown hair with a receding hairline, a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles that often slid down his oily-complexioned nose, a puffy red face with jowls, and pudgy red hands to match. He grimaced in discomfort as he adjusted his backside on the seat of the stool.

“Ulcer?” Lenny Zahn, the bartender, asked as he wiped a wine glass with a damp cloth.

Sean shook his head. “Acid reflux or indigestion or heartburn or whatever.”

“You should get that checked.”

“Yeah, yeah. Been to the doctor and keep going back. He just gives me something to ease the discomfort, then bills me. They all do the same thing. Give you a little something to make you feel a little better, then have you keep going back so they can make another buck every time.”

“Well, that bulging gut of yours is a telltale sign that something may be wrong.”

“It’s called ascites. It’s from drinking too much for too many years.”

“Still, you should get that checked.”

“And I should get my pancreas checked and my liver and my spleen and my kidneys and my gallbladder and my colon. I’ll live.”

“We’re closing up.”

Sean glanced at his wristwatch and saw that it was 1:45 a.m. He raised his brows. “No last call?”

“That was fifteen minutes ago.”

Reena, the bar back, went around the bar and picked up empty and half-filled glasses along with scrunched-up cocktail napkins. She dumped the napkins behind the bar in the waste bin and dunked the glasses into a sink filled with hot, soapy water.

“Okay,” Sean said as he peered around the semi-dark bar. He watched an older man in his sixties hold open the door to the exit as an older woman, also in her sixties, sauntered out the door to the parking lot. He followed her and let the door close behind him.

Sean placed a five-dollar bill on the counter and pushed it toward Lenny. “Your tip and whatnot,” he said with a tepid smile.

Lenny nodded in acknowledgment. “Thanks. Say ‘hi’ to the missus.”

“We’re not married, and you know it.”

“You should be. You’ve been together for almost ten years now.”

“Nah. It’s just a piece of paper. It might change everything, and I don’t want to change

anything.”

Lenny chuckled. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

“Yes. Whatever I say. Till next time.”

“Be careful . . . and get that thing checked.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Lenny laughed and shook his head.

Sean let the door squeak close behind him. He walked to his Buick Regal and plopped his hefty body onto the driver’s seat. “Get married,” he said to himself with a snort and shook his head. He drove out of the parking lot and made a turn onto Los Olivios Road.

Ten minutes later, he made a turn onto Sierra Linda Drive. He hummed to himself while he dwelled on the misery and discomfort of his heartburn, which burned as if a hot poker had been thrust down his throat and branded one side of his esophagus. He tried to swallow as much saliva as he could muster in order to soothe the lining of his gullet, which had been corroded by years of alcohol intake.

It could be the pylorus, Sean thought. Gosh, I hope not. I’ve got enough health issues as it is, especially since I’m pushing fifty.

He took his eyes off the road as well as one hand off the wheel for a second to reach forward and grab a bottle of water from the cup holder below the radio. His fingers grasped it as he held the water bottle in one hand and twisted off the cap with the other. With his eyes back on the road, he swallowed a few gulps, capped the bottled water, and placed it between his legs. He reached forward again to grab an opened, peeled-back roll of berry-flavored antacids that lay in another cup holder. He grabbed the antacids and looked out the windshield. He saw a solid, dark mass in the middle of the road with a pair of small, shiny white orbs that reflected back at him.

A medium-sized black dog sat on its haunches and gazed ahead as the car’s headlights reflected in its eyes. The dog was thirty-five feet away and the distance between the dog and the Buick Regal closed in pretty fast.

“*Whoa!*” Sean said in surprise.

He then blasted the horn and swerved to the left to avoid hitting the dog. He dropped the roll of antacids in the process, and it bounced off his meaty lap and landed on the floor by the gas pedal.

The dog still sat on its haunches in the middle of the road. It didn’t even flinch.

In haste, Sean righted the car and steered it back into the right lane of the road.

“Oh, man!” he said in a shaky voice and exhaled a tremulous sigh.

He glanced at the rearview mirror and saw the dog, stationary, in the middle of the road with its back to him, motionless and rooted to the asphalt.

“Man, oh, man, oh, man! Nearly killed that mangy mongrel! What the heck is a dog doing out

in the middle of the road this late at night?”

He drove on, shook his head in bewilderment, and took long, deep breaths to slow his palpitating heart.



Thor rose and stood on all fours, then turned and walked to the south side of Sierra Linda Drive. He bounded up the curb and padded across the sidewalk and down the path to the front door, which had been ajar. He nudged it open further with his snout and sauntered into the foyer, crossed the living room, and strode upstairs into Caden’s room, where he lay on the floor in the middle of the room and dozed off.

The front door closed by itself and the latch caught with a soft click. There was a single blip on the security panel next to the front door and a lone green light came on.

An angry, frustrated growl was articulated and Thor barked.

A few days went by without incident. Then one morning, Josslyn and Nathan noticed something amiss with the walls in the living room while on their way to get tea and coffee in the kitchen.

“What’s that?” Josslyn signed, curious and mystified.

A slice of whole-grain wheat bread had been tacked to the wall. Peanut butter was used as adhesive. It was as if someone had taken the bread and smeared the wall and left it there.

Josslyn went to the wall for closer scrutiny. “What the heck is that?” she signed. “I don’t think Caden or Trina would ever do something like this.” She jumped in horror and gasped as she patted Nathan’s arm to get his attention.

They looked at a strange formation of several blueberry mini-muffins tacked to the wall which had been arranged in a sinister, occult-type design with weird crosses and bizarre circles smeared with peanut butter as if done with a finger.

The blood drained from Nathan’s face as he gazed at the macabre configuration on the wall.

“What’s happening here?” Josslyn signed, almost hysterical. “Who’s doing this?”

On another wall were bashed-in jellied donuts. Raspberry jelly oozed and dripped down the wall. Along with the donuts were sliced halves of bagels tacked to the wall with cream cheese adhesive.

“I’m going to get Maddie,” Josslyn signed as she made her way to the stairs. “I’m not comfortable leaving her alone.”

When she returned with Maddie in her arms, she met another monstrosity in the kitchen which made her scream.

Food containers cluttered the tiled floor, the granite counters, the stainless-steel sink, and on the stove top. Items included opened boxes of dry cereal, sugar, coffee grounds, and a package of flour with all the contents strewn on the floor. A smeared handprint daubed in flour could be seen on the stainless-steel refrigerator door. Ketchup and BBQ sauce spattered the ceiling.

This is beyond my comprehension, she thought, as she shook her head in disbelief.

Nathan came into the kitchen and saw the mess.

“Oh, my . . .” he signed, incredulous.

Josslyn went to the microwave oven and opened the door. It was empty. She then went to the refrigerator and opened both doors. She stepped back in horror and disgust. Her mind reeled and her heart palpitated.

The refrigerator’s interior looked as if it had exploded from within. An opened, overturned carton of milk, an uncapped, overturned bottle of orange juice, and opened containers of cooked spaghetti noodles and marinara sauce were all splattered within. Broken eggs and condiments were smeared along the insides, and the light bulb was busted.

Nathan became angry as he went into the den and saw different colored paints streaked on the walls in an arc. He went to the maternity box to check on Diva and saw that the cat was in the box, resting on her side. Diva lifted her head and meowed once. This was a welcome relief for Nathan.

Josslyn entered the den. Cold terror pierced her like an ice pick when she saw splashes of paint doused on the walls.

“Diva is fine,” Nathan signed to Josslyn. “She’s just resting.”

Josslyn peered into the maternity box and Diva meowed once more.

“Thank goodness,” Josslyn signed. “Where’s Thor?”

“I don’t know,” Nathan signed, “but I’m sure he’s okay.”

“The mess here is just unbelievable,” Josslyn signed. She shook her head.

“I know,” Nathan signed. “It just makes me furious. I don’t like my family to feel threatened and scared like this.”

“I wish I knew who—or what—did this.”

“Me, too. I’d like to get my hands on—”

“Nathan, please don’t make threats. We don’t know anything yet until we can get this all sorted out.”

“I was thinking of calling the police.”

“I thought the same thing, too, but I don’t see what good it would do. So far as I can tell, I don’t think someone broke in during the middle of the night. Otherwise the security alarms would’ve gone off and alerted us to the break-in.”

“Unless the culprits were smart enough to turn off the security system without us knowing about it. Some people know that we are deaf, and this could be a hate crime! Someone could be prejudiced against us because we are deaf!”

“Calm down, Nathan! Just calm down. I understand you’re upset, but getting angry and blowing your top like that won’t help matters. Besides, we don’t have any proof of anyone hating us or being prejudiced against us. We personally haven’t seen anything to that effect. We have not received any threats from anyone. So far, since we moved here, no one has given us dirty looks or let us know in any way that we’re unwelcome or unwanted here, even though we’ve been seen many times.”

“What about the people who deliberately refuse to walk by the front of our house? They cross the street, walk two or three houses down, then cross back, and continue on.”

“I don’t know, but we can’t just assume someone is prejudiced against us and hates us because we’re deaf, then comes in here and makes a mess of this place.”

“All right. I’m going to check all the doors and windows, both downstairs and upstairs.”

“I’m going with you. I don’t want to be alone.”

Nathan and Josslyn went throughout the entire house, room by room, as Josslyn carried Maddie with her. They checked the front door, the sliding glass doors, and the windows on the ground floor and on the upper level.

When they opened Trina's bedroom door, they saw that she slept, but the rabbits in their crate were awake. The bedroom windows were closed. Josslyn then closed the door and they went down the hall to Caden's room where they saw that he slept as well. Thor lay on his side on the floor. They noted the windows in Caden's room were closed, also.

Josslyn closed the door and turned to look at Nathan. "If someone managed to break in and that's a big if, I don't know how they did it."

Nathan and Josslyn inspected all the doors, windows, sliding glass doors, and the garage door. None showed any signs of forced entry.

"I checked the breakers," Nathan signed to Josslyn, "and they don't look as if they'd been messed with."

"It's the same with the security panel, too. It doesn't appear as if it'd been tinkered with."

While Josslyn fixed some herbal tea, she offered a word of caution to both herself and Nathan to be careful while they maneuvered around the mess in the kitchen.

Soon, Caden and Trina came down.

“Oh, man!” Caden signed.

“What happened here?” Trina signed.

“Who did this?” Caden signed.

“We’re not sure,” Josslyn signed, “but I think we may have an idea.”

“A ghost?” Trina signed. “Or maybe a poltergeist?”

“A poltergeist is a noisy ghost,” Caden signed, a little exasperated. “Poltergeist is German for ‘noisy ghost,’ and they usually rap on walls, doors, windows, move furniture and objects around, and footsteps are heard, and maybe on occasion, they’ll throw something across the room, but not always.”

“Let me show you something.” Josslyn pointed to an area on the floor by the stove.

Caden and Trina stared at a single footprint in a mixture of ketchup and flour. The footprint appeared inhuman—fifty percent larger than a normal human foot, both in length and width. Not only were the five toes larger than human toes, but they were more round and spaced apart by a half-inch, whereas human toes were oval in shape and set closer together.

“What *is* that?” Trina signed. “Now that’s *really* freaky!” She felt goosebumps run down her spine.

“Glad I brought this down with me,” Caden signed. He pulled out his smartphone from his rear pants pocket and took a few snapshots and videoed the strange anomaly for ten seconds.

“We should get a Roman Catholic priest to come out here,” Nathan signed, “and check out the house and see what could be done.”

“But we’re not Catholic,” Josslyn signed.

“What about a demonologist? They’re like a type of exorcist.”

“I know. I was thinking of having Pastors Alex and William from our church come and give the house a blessing and say a prayer.”

Trina looked her mother in the eye. “So, now you’re beginning to believe this house is haunted?”

“Yes,” Josslyn signed.

Nathan and Josslyn switched the TV to video mode, turned on the VP, and spoke with Pastor Alex via the relay operator, also known as a sign-language interpreter, who appeared on the monitor. Nathan and Josslyn explained the situation in detail.

“William and I can come out this afternoon about 1:30,” the relay operator interpreted.

“Perfect,” Josslyn signed. “We’ll be here. We’re looking forward to seeing you then. Thanks.”

Next, they called Evan to ask if he would be available to interpret for them. He said yes.



The Bryants waved hello to Pastors Alex and William as they drove up in their two-door Chrysler sedan.

“Good afternoon,” Alex said with an outstretched arm.

Evan interpreted the greeting to the Bryants. “Hi, I’m Evan, a close friend of the family, and I will be interpreting for them.”

“Great,” Alex said.

Josslyn and Nathan shook the pastors’ hands.

“Thank you for coming,” Josslyn signed as Evan translated for Alex and William. “Please come in.”

They walked through the clean living room and dining room into the kitchen.

“Please forgive the mess,” Josslyn signed. “It must have known you were coming after Nathan and I called you, so it did this. We’re still cleaning up in here.”

“I took some pictures that I would like to show you,” Caden signed. He pulled out his smartphone from his rear pants pocket and showed Alex and William pictures and video of the inhuman footprint.

Next, Alex and William saw the various colors of paint splattered on the walls. They took in the intricate details of paint in arcs with elongated teeth-like spatter that extended from them.

“What I’m seeing here is a case of spiritual warfare,” Alex said. “There is a spiritual conflict going on in this world, between the Lord and the devil, and we’re right in the middle of it.”

William opened the Bible and turned to Psalm 23. “We’re going to read Scripture, then say the Lord’s prayer afterward. ‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my

life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

“In Jesus’s mighty name, amen,” Alex said.

“Amen,” the Bryants signed.

“Now, let us pray,” William said. “Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”

“Amen,” the Bryants signed.

“God be with you,” Alex said as he walked toward the front door with William by his side, “and God bless you.”

“Thank you for having us here,” William said.

“Is that all?” Josslyn signed, befuddled. “Is there anything else you can do?”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said as he shook his head. “There’s nothing more we can do for you.”

Josslyn, Nathan, Caden, Trina, and even Evan were stunned and aghast with disbelief.

“But . . . you’re Christians,” Nathan signed. “You have the power of Christ with you.”

“We’re also prayer warriors,” Alex said as he stepped out the front door onto the porch. “I think you’re going to need a lot more than two prayer warriors. I’m very sorry. We must go now. Have a good day.”

“Goodbye,” William said.

They walked down the path to their car, where they got in and drove off.

“I can’t believe this,” Josslyn signed, still stunned. “They left us out to dry!”

“I’m just as shocked as you are,” Evan said.

“They’re Christians,” Nathan signed, confused and frustrated. He fumed with anger as well.

“They have the power of Christ with them! Even one Roman Catholic exorcist can get rid of evil spirits, yet these two pastors—*prayer warriors*—can’t do anything? How many more prayer warriors do we need to get rid of this thing?”

“I noticed the look of fear in their eyes,” Trina signed.

“I second that,” Caden signed with a nod. “They did seem pretty nervous after seeing all that in the kitchen and the den.”

“Cowards!” Josslyn signed. “Unbelievable, gutless, spineless, yellow-bellied, chicken-hearted wimps! Oh, Lord, forgive me. I know I shouldn’t be passing judgment, especially on those two pastors. I’m just so . . . upset and confused.” She wiped tears from her cheeks and sniffled a couple of times.

Nathan pulled Josslyn toward him, embraced her, and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“What do we do now?” More tears welled up in Josslyn’s eyes. “How do we deal with this

thing? I get so scared, sometimes.”

“Same here, Mom,” Trina signed as she heaved a sob.

“It does have a rather unfair advantage over us,” Caden signed, angry and frustrated. “We can’t see it and we can’t hear it.”

“I think that’s what makes this whole experience all the more frightening,” Evan said.

“That makes me fear for our pets, too,” Trina signed.

“Now we know why the neighbors and people strolling by avoid walking in front of our house,” Nathan signed. “They know this house is haunted by an evil spirit.”

The thought of something bad happening to Maddie struck a chord in Josslyn’s heart. She could feel the icy tentacles of fear spread outward from the middle of her chest.

“I’m afraid it’s only going to get worse,” Josslyn signed, “now that we let in a couple of pastors. It will provoke this evil spirit.”

Nathan stroked the back of Josslyn’s head and held her. “Sshhhh. Don’t talk like that. Don’t say anything. It would only encourage it to do more harm and damage. We’ll just have to pray and place our faith and trust in the Lord.”

Josslyn nodded in agreement. Although, in her mind, she thought it would be a difficult challenge to do just that while they tried to battle wits with an invisible and malicious enemy.

Less than a week later, Diva gave birth to a litter of five kittens.

The birthing process went better than the Bryants had anticipated. For the first time in a while, they were happy and excited, and everything felt right.

For the next six weeks, Diva would nurture her kittens with the family's help.

Josslyn entered the master bedroom and approached Maddie's crib while the baby gurgled and cooed. Her arms and legs wriggled about.

"I see you're awake," Josslyn signed. "Did you have a nice nap? Are you hungry, sweetie? Want some lunch? What do you feel like having?" She picked up the baby and planted a kiss on Maddie's cheek. "Mommy loves you. Yes, Mommy loves you." She held the baby close.

As Josslyn turned to leave the bedroom, she glanced above the door and noticed the cross was not there. She knew she had hung it up there more than a month and a half ago.

Oh, great, she thought. I'll just have to look for them. If I don't find them, I can always buy more. After all, they're not that expensive. It'd even be cheaper to go to an arts and crafts store, get some pieces, put them together, and paint them myself.

As she took a step toward the threshold between the bedroom and the hall, the door closed by itself. She drew back with a start, her nerves jittery as she took a few slow, deep breaths to calm herself.

No sense freaking out and scaring the baby, she thought.

She stood there and gazed at the door for a moment. With determination, she took a few steps toward the door and pulled it open without a hitch.

She went downstairs to the living room. Sure enough, the cross was not on the wall where she had hung it. She went into the dining room, kitchen, and den. No crosses there, either. She decided she wasn't going to make an effort to search the whole house for the crosses. She figured either they'd show up some time or not at all. If she couldn't find them, no big deal.

Let the demon—or whatever it is—play games and have its fun, she thought.

Thor sniffled in the backyard beyond the pool, then lay on the grass in the warm sun.

Trina sat on a stool at the island in the kitchen and read an e-book on her tablet.

Josslyn came in with Maddie in her arms. “Your father and your brother are going with me to the market to get some groceries for tonight and the rest of the week,” she signed. “They’re waiting for me in the car. Would you like to come with us?”

“Naw,” Trina signed. “I’m going to make a late lunch and continue reading this e-book.”

“Okay. Thor is out back, just to let you know. Will you be all right by yourself?”

“Yes. I’ll keep an eye on Diva and the kittens, and check on the rabbits, too.”

“Good. Would you like me to get anything for you?”

Trina thought for a moment. “No. I can’t think of anything at the moment, but if I do, I’ll text you.”

“All right. We’ll be back soon.” Josslyn patted her daughter on the shoulder, then left the kitchen.

Trina went to the fridge and withdrew several items to make her personal favorite—an Italian sub sandwich. She placed the mayo, mustard, salami, and lettuce on the island and made the sandwich, then sat down to read the e-book.

Behind her, off to one side, was a small breakfast nook with a wooden table and matching chairs, which the family seldom used. One of the wooden chairs moved from one side of the nook to the other. The chair legs’ bottoms scraped along the tiled floor, and Trina felt the vibrations on the soles of her feet. She lifted her head and gave a cursory look before her, glancing to her right and left. Then, noticing nothing out of order, she continued to read as she took a bite of her sandwich and savored it.

Behind her, a pair of cupboard doors above the kitchen counter opened. One drinking glass slid forward along the shelf. Then it tipped over the edge and fell on the counter with a crash. It shattered to pieces and fragments fell onto the floor and scattered about. Another glass slid out, fell and shattered, its shards added to the others on the floor.

Trina turned her head and noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. She saw a glass slide out and fall, and then another glass slide out and fall. She turned in time to see the refrigerator door open. Wary, she rose from the stool and backed away from the island with her eyes focused on the refrigerator door. She grasped the tablet and her knuckles turned white. She forgot about the sandwich and continued to back away toward the den. Fear gripped her.

She glanced at the maternity box. Five kittens moved about, but Diva was not in the box or anywhere in the den either. Trina continued to back away with her eye on the refrigerator door. She stared at the contents on the shelves within the refrigerator as she scanned the kitchen. She ended up in the laundry room and backed into the stacked washer-dryer unit. She whirled around to see what she’d bumped into and emitted a short, quick sigh of relief. She turned

around to peer into the kitchen to the den.

She saw the laundry room door bang shut. Her lower lip quivered, and she trembled with fear. She went to the door, placed her hand on the knob, and tried to turn it. It wouldn't budge, although the doorknob did not have a lock. She twisted and jiggled the doorknob, pushed and pulled on it, while she hoped the door would open. She went to the single-hung vertical sliding window and pushed up on the lower panel, which wouldn't budge, either. She exerted all her strength, pushing the lower panel but to no avail.

Trina grabbed her tablet and texted:

Help! Get Mom and Dad to come—

The tablet flew out of her hands, soared through the air, and smashed against the wall with incredible force. It landed on the tiled floor and cracked.

Trina ran to the tablet and pressed the power button several times. The device would not come on. She screamed in fear and frustration and thought of what she could do to get out of this room. She banged on the door with both fists and kicked it hard. She screamed again.

Thor heard the commotion from the backyard and got up on all fours, his ears perked. He ran around the side of the pool, toward the double sliding glass doors, which closed by themselves. Thor barked and stood on his hind legs and pawed at the glass.



The fresh vegetables in the produce section looked appetizing as Josslyn wheeled the shopping cart with Nathan by her side. Caden assessed some produce in the fruit section nearby. Maddie lay in the baby basket carrier wedged in the child's seat of the cart. She cooed and gurgled, and her arms flapped about on occasion.

"Those look really good," Josslyn signed to Nathan. "I'm going to get some of these." She picked up a bunch of fresh broccoli and bagged it, then some corn-on-the-cob and a head of Romaine lettuce. "We'll have some of these to go with dinner tonight." She turned to look for Caden and wheeled the cart toward him. "We're about done here," she signed. "Please text Trina and ask if she's absolutely sure there is nothing I can get her."

"Okay," Caden signed. He swiped the face of the device with his finger and texted:

Mom is done w/ shopping, wants 2 know if U want anything from store B4 we leave.

"Sent," Caden signed.

"We'll give her a few minutes to reply," Josslyn signed.

She and Nathan observed other shoppers while they waited for Trina to reply.

"No reply," Caden signed after a few moments.

"All right," Josslyn signed. "We'll just go to the checkout counter, then head on home."



Trina continued to bang and kick on the door as Nathan, Josslyn, Caden, and Maddie entered the house.

Nathan and Caden carried grocery bags while Josslyn hefted the baby basket carrier by the handles.

Beyond the living room, toward the back, they noticed Thor barking nonstop and pawing at the sliding glass partition.

"I'll go let the dog in," Caden signed, then put the bags on the kitchen counter. "I hear what sounds like banging, but I'm not sure where it's coming from."

Josslyn and Nathan went into the kitchen. She set the baby basket carrier on the island among the condiments Trina had left on the counter. She noticed an unfinished sandwich on Trina's plate and wondered where Trina could be.

"Oh, no!" Nathan signed to Josslyn. "There's broken glass all over the counter and on the floor." He looked up at where the glasses had fallen off and smashed on the counter and the floor. The cupboard doors were closed.

Josslyn went around the island. She pursed her lips in anger. "I can only imagine what happened," she signed, pensive.

"I'll clean this up right away," Nathan signed. He went to the small utility closet next to the pantry and pulled out a broom and dustpan.

Caden opened one sliding glass partition and Thor bolted through the den. He barked and pawed at the closed laundry room door while Trina banged, kicked, and screamed from within.

Caden placed his hand on the doorknob. He felt the strong vibrations of the door as it was pounded and kicked. He opened the door and found Trina upset, her face beet-red and tear-streaked.

"What happened?" he signed.

Trina ran to Josslyn and Nathan. She almost knocked over Josslyn as she collided into her. She hugged her mother in a tight embrace as she shuddered with fear and sobbed with relief.

"What is it, Trina?" Josslyn signed. "What happened?"

Trina tried to catch her breath and calm down. "I was sitting here, eating my lunch and reading an e-book, when I noticed the refrigerator door opened by itself. It scared me, so I got up and backed away from it. When I got into the laundry room, the door slammed shut. I tried to open it, but it was locked!"

"There's no lock on that door," Josslyn signed.

"I know! But it wouldn't open! I couldn't get the window to open either! I started to text you on

my tablet, but it flew right out of my hands and smashed against the wall. The front of it is all cracked, and the power won't come on." She cried some more and put her head on Josslyn's shoulders.

"We'll get you another tablet," Josslyn signed. She turned to Nathan. "I'm so ticked off at that cursed spirit!"

A few days later, when Nathan and Josslyn returned from a visit to his parents' place, they found Caden, Trina, and Maddie in the backyard by the pool with Thor by their side. Trina was upset and Maddie was crying.

Nathan closed the front door. He and Josslyn went to the back of the house. Josslyn opened the sliding glass partition and stepped out onto the back patio.

"What's wrong?" she signed. "What happened?"

"We saw the doors in different parts of the house slam open and bang shut repeatedly," Trina signed. She wiped tears from her eyes with shaky hands.

"Yeah," Caden signed with a nod. "I could even feel a whoosh of air going through parts of the house."

"How long was this going on?" Nathan signed.

"On and off since you left," Caden signed, "and it stopped about five minutes before you came back."

Nathan walked into the house from the patio and stood in the back of the house. He gazed about in anger, his brows furrowed and his lips pursed. "Stop it!" he signed to the air about him. "Stop it! You stop this right now!"

Josslyn stepped inside and went to him. "Oh, Nathan, it's not going to obey you. It's doing this to scare us and to get us to leave."

"We can beat this thing, right?"

"Yes, with God's help and with constant prayer, I believe we can."

"Does it know what we're saying, even in sign language?"

"Yes, it knows what we're saying. It knows all the languages in the world, except one."

"Which is?"

"That which is spoken in tongues. It's a gift God gives to some people, the language only the person and the Lord know, and it's the only language in the universe that the devil and his minions don't know. The Bible teaches us these things. All one has to do is ask for spiritual discernment from the Lord."

"You're one smart woman. I'm glad I married you."

"Thanks, and I'm glad I married you, too."

They kissed and embraced.



Later that evening, Josslyn took the Bible from the night table on her side of the bed and held it close to her chest as she knelt in prayer.

Nathan also knelt on his side of the bed.

“O, my Lord,” Josslyn prayed and signed with her eyes closed. “Thank You for this day, which You have made. Thank You for helping us this day, and thank You for blessing us with another day of life. You hold the breath of life in Your hand. Let us rejoice in You, always. May You continue to bless us with Your loving protection. We plead the blood of the Lamb over us. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we humbly pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” Nathan signed.

They got into bed, kissed each other good night, and turned off the night lamps.



After Josslyn and Nathan woke up the following morning, they noticed pages of the Bible had been torn out and strewn along the hall to the top of the stairs, as well as on the stairs, the living room floor, the couch, and the coffee table.

"I have an idea," Josslyn signed to Nathan one day. "Let's introduce ourselves to some of the neighbors in hopes of becoming acquainted with them. We could have Evan come with us to interpret for us."

"That's a great idea," Nathan signed.

"Maybe we can try to get some information from the neighbors and see what they know about the history or the background of the house. Someone has to know something."



The day was sunny, clear, and ninety-two degrees. A few neighbors, passersbys, and pedestrians strolled to and fro. A car or two cruised by on occasion.

Nathan, Josslyn, and Evan went to one house next door and knocked on the door. After a moment, Nathan knocked again. No answer. Nathan and Josslyn figured no one was home.

"Let's try the house on the other side of our house," Josslyn signed.

They turned around and went in the opposite direction. They knocked on the door. A white sheer curtain was pulled aside and a face peeked out, then disappeared. The curtain dropped back in its place. Nathan, Josslyn, and Evan expected the door to open, but it did not. They figured that this neighbor had given them the brush-off and didn't want to be bothered. So they shrugged and went to the adjacent house and knocked on that door.

The door to that house opened, and they were greeted by a man who looked to be fifty-five years old. He looked at them with a scowl, which left them feeling alienated.

"Yeah?" the man said in a gruff voice.

"Hello," Nathan signed. "I'm Nathan and this is my wife, Josslyn, and our baby daughter, and our friend, Evan, who is our sign-language interpreter. We're deaf, and we moved into the new house two doors down."

"I don't have time for this crap," the man said. He went back inside and closed the door.

"Jerk," Nathan signed.

"Let's just go on to the next house and go from there," Josslyn signed.

They went from house to house. Some of the residents either weren't home or they didn't want to be pestered by deaf people. Some of them just didn't have the time, patience, or inclination to be bothered.

"Let's go across the street and try those houses along that side," Josslyn signed.

After knocking on the doors of six houses, they stopped at a seventh house and knocked on the door.

A genial, elderly woman with light blonde hair, blue eyes, and clad in a lemon-yellow summer dress opened the door with a benevolent grin. “Yes?” she said.

“Hello,” Evan said while Nathan signed. Evan kept his eyes on Nathan to indicate that Evan was interpreting whatever Nathan signed. “I’m Nathan and this is my wife, Josslyn, and our baby daughter, and our friend, Evan, who is our sign-language interpreter. We’re deaf and we moved in to the new house a few houses down on the other side of the street.”

“Oh, nice to meet you,” the woman said as Evan interpreted. “You mean the new, boxy-style house with all those windows and lots of concrete?”

Nathan and Josslyn nodded.

“Yes,” Evan said as he nodded also.

“That house is spooky,” the woman said. “I wouldn’t set foot in it. I apologize if I seem rude. I’ll admit it’s a nice-looking house, but it’s way too contemporary for me. I like the older Spanish style, sort of like mine. Anyway, would you like to come inside for a bit and have some lemonade or perhaps some nice cold water? It’d be rude of me to let you stand out here, especially in this heat.” She opened the door wider and stepped aside. “Please, come in.” She beckoned them with her arm.

Josslyn pushed the stroller over the threshold as Nathan and Evan followed behind. They nodded their thanks with a smile.

“Thank you,” Evan said.

“Oh, you’re welcome,” the woman said. “It’s no trouble at all. Always a pleasure to have company and meet new people and make new friends. This way, please.” She closed the door and led them through the living room to the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out two pitchers, then closed it with a gentle push of her arm and turned to face them.

“Fresh-squeezed lemonade,” she said as she pointed to the pitcher of lemonade. “I just made it earlier this morning and this—” she pointed to another pitcher “—is filtered water, which is better than tap water or so they say.” She pulled out three tall drinking glasses from the cupboard and set them on the counter. “Would you like some ice to go with the lemonade or water?”

“Please,” Evan said, as they all nodded.

“I apologize that I don’t have a sippy cup for the baby,” the woman said. By the way, my name is Norma. I should’ve thought to introduce myself to you at the door. Silly ol’ me.” She chuckled. “Well, anyway, please feel free to help yourself to whichever you want and I’ll see if I can find a small cup for that adorable baby of yours. I also have some lemon bars in the fridge, plus homemade lemon meringue pie, lemon pudding and lemon jello. I love lemon! I bought some lemon crème cookies. Although I prefer homemade, I just didn’t have the recipe to make the lemon sugar cookies and I’m not very computer-literate, so I didn’t bother to go online and search for a recipe and print it. Nah. I’m okay with it, though. Most of my recipes were handed down from my mother and grandmother, and I have several cookbooks from way back when, too.”

She searched another cupboard for a smaller cup and found one. “I’ll just pour some nice cold

water for the baby, since I don't think the sugar and the acid from the lemonade really would be good for the baby, especially at her age."

Nathan and Josslyn nodded. Nathan poured himself a glass of lemonade, as did Evan, while Josslyn opted for iced water.

Norma handed the small cup of iced water to Josslyn, who put it to Maddie's mouth. Norma opened the fridge and pulled out a plate of lemon bars. "These are my personal favorite, of course," she said as she set the plate on the counter.

"Thank you," Nathan and Josslyn mouthed to Norma as they signed at the same time.

"Thank you," Evan said.

Each took a lemon bar from the plate and bit into it.

Nathan nodded and rubbed his stomach as if to say, "Mmm, good! Delicious!"

"Oh, good," Norma said. "There's more. Just help yourself. As I said, I'm a nut for lemons. I even have lemon-flavored frozen yogurt and all-natural frozen lemon bars, and there's a lemon tree out back, too. Anyway, here I am, a typical eighty-two-year-old lady, prattling on. Let's go sit in the living room."

She led them into the living room and sat in a rocking recliner while Nathan and Josslyn sat on a loveseat with the baby stroller nearby.

Evan sat in an easy chair.

"How do you like the neighborhood so far?" Norma asked.

"It's very nice here," Nathan signed.

"I quite agree," Norma said. "It is very nice here. I've lived here for fifty years now. My husband passed away two years ago, bless his heart. But I'm doing well and I'm still in good health, too. That's important. So, how are you liking the new house so far?"

Nathan and Josslyn's faces fell as they shook their heads.

"It's a very beautiful house, but it has some problems," Nathan signed.

Norma nodded, not the least bit surprised at all. "I've heard about that house," she said with some trepidation, "and some of the stories pertaining to it. What's been happening in the house since you moved in?"

"Weird things," Nathan signed. "Strange goings-on."

"Like what?"

"A big mess in the kitchen, food tacked to the walls, pounding and banging on the doors, and so forth."

"Oh, my! You poor dears. I can't imagine what that must be like. That would spook me very much, too."

"What do you know about the house?" Josslyn signed. "Can you tell us anything? Other

neighbors won't talk."

"I can see why. They're obviously afraid, and I can understand that, what with the house being in close proximity to theirs. Well, I can tell you that there have been some really unusual occurrences going on, like a man getting jabbed in the thumb with a knife while whittling on a piece of wood one day, a woman seeing a dark form standing at the foot of the bed one night, and other people hearing noises and voices and seeing things move around on their own. Other people moved in, only to move out after a few months. The house would be put back on the market, then taken off each time someone moved in. How long before you'll move out remains to be seen."

"If it could do that to these people," Josslyn signed, "what else could it do? No wonder those people left quickly."

"Well, as Norma just said," Nathan signed, "they weren't going to take chances letting this thing hurt them, especially the wife and the baby."

"I'm fearful enough, too, yet I don't want to have to move."

"We're *not* going to move. We can't—and won't—let this thing beat us. We're stronger than that." Nathan turned to Norma. "Thank you for sharing with us what you know."

"Oh, you're most welcome, and thank you for coming by to introduce yourselves." She gave them all a hug and tapped Maddie's cheeks with her finger. "Aren't you just the most precious thing?"

"We'd love to have you over for dinner," Josslyn signed, "but we understand the house is too spooky for you, so we'll come visit you again soon."

"Yes, please do," Norma said with a vigorous nod. "Know that you're always welcome to stop by any time. If you need anything for whatever reason, please don't hesitate to come by. I'm usually here most of the time unless I'm at the market or at a doctor's appointment."

Nathan put his forefinger and thumb together to form the "okay" hand gesture.

Norma copied the same hand gesture for "okay." Her grin was refreshing and brightened Nathan and Josslyn's spirits.

The next evening, Caden and Trina sat on the couch in the living room and chatted with Evan and Jared via VP.

"It's a well-known fact that most deaf people tend to marry other deaf people," Caden signed, "thus creating 'deaf dynasties,' as they're called."

Trina nodded in agreement. "And, as a result, deaf children who grow up in deaf families gain a better understanding of what it means to be deaf and that's to their advantage."

The TV monitor now showed colors in all the wrong places with Jared and Evan's faces a bright green with a yellowish tint and the background a dark red.

Trina waved her arms to get Evan and Jared's attention. "We can't see you too well," she signed. "The video quality is blurry with some squiggly lines."

"Can you see us?" Caden signed to Jared and Evan as he waved his arms.

"Yes, we can see you just fine," Jared signed.

"Yes," Evan signed with a nod.

"Anyway, as we were saying," Caden signed, "I don't think it's cool when hearing children of deaf adults think they're superior to their own parents just because they can hear and their parents can't."

All the lights in the house and outside went out.

Diva yowled and hissed, her kittens mewled, Thor barked, and Abbott and Costello thumped their hind legs and bounded about their crate.

Trina rose from the couch and eased her way to the nearest end table, where she turned the switch on the lamp. It did not come on.

Power outage, Josslyn thought to herself. She fetched a six-inch-tall battery-operated electric candle from a dresser drawer and came down the stairs with Nathan behind her. They went into the living room. Josslyn felt along the wall for the switch plate and flipped the switches. Nothing happened.

Nathan went outside to the back of the house and felt along the wall for the switch plate. He flipped switches without effect, as well. *I should've thought to get emergency lights*, he thought, *along with the security system when we had it installed*.

The strobes from the door knock signaler, the smoke alarm, the VP, and the baby monitor all flashed in sync.

Maddie started to cry.



A security specialist at the Cernix Home Security Center was alerted to a possible break-in at the Bryants' residence at 5311 Sierra Linda Drive in Knollwood Meadows.

He placed a call to the home. No one answered. He tried the number again and still did not get an answer. Then, he dispatched a patrolman to the address, to check to see what the problem might be.



The strobes ceased flashing.

Caden held his smartphone in his hand and pressed the icon for the flashlight app. The bright LED light came on and washed over part of the living room. The light then went off after fifteen seconds. Caden reactivated the app, but the light would not come on. So, he pulled up the camera app and pressed the digital shutter button again and again in rapid succession. He explained it was not to take pictures, but to light up the room.

"Great idea," Josslyn signed. She went to the study and grabbed her digital camera. She returned and snapped the shutter many times, which emitted bright flashes of light.

"We were talking to friends," Trina signed to Josslyn and Nathan, "when the VP and TV started acting up, then the lights went out. My tablet's upstairs, but I'm not going up there alone to get it."

"I'll go with you," Nathan signed.

As Nathan and Trina headed for the stairs, they saw yellow flashing lights filter through the living room window, the sidelights adjacent to the front door and the window in the study. Curious, they all went to the living room window. A security patrol car from Cernix Home Security Center was parked at the curb.

The patrolman sat in the car for a moment as he observed the houses on both sides of the street. The lights in the other houses were on.

Nathan opened the front door as the patrolman approached.

"Good evening, sir," the patrolman said. He trained the light on Nathan's face.

Nathan shielded his eyes from the bright light with a raised hand. "I'm deaf," he signed, then pointed to his ears and mouth.

"Okay. Let me see if I have something to write on."

Nathan beckoned Caden to come over. "Bring your smartphone with you," he signed to Caden.

Caden gave the smartphone to Nathan, who typed:

We're deaf. Lights went out, cause unknown.

The patrolman took the smartphone from Nathan and typed:

Received alert and called house. No answer. Need security password.

Nathan typed:

Deaf.

The patrolman typed:

Ok. May I check breakers and the wiring?

Nathan nodded and stepped aside to let the patrolman in.

As soon as the patrolman stepped inside, all the lights on the property came back on, both indoors and outdoors.

“Hmph,” the patrolman said.

“I believe the spirit did this,” Josslyn signed faster than usual to Nathan.

“*Not now*,” Nathan signed with emphasis and a discreet wave of his hand, irritated.

The patrolman typed:

Where are the breakers?

Nathan led him to the back of the house and through the double sliding glass doors.

The patrolman trained his flashlight along the siding and located a small door. He flipped switches, and the lights in different rooms of the house went off, then back on. He also made a quick check through the rooms upstairs on the second floor. He came back downstairs and typed:

Everything checks out. Check with utility company and get electrician to check wiring.

Nathan typed:

Okay. Thank you.

Nathan closed the door.

“It was that damn spirit!” Josslyn signed. “Pardon my language. Something’s gotta be done to get rid of it, once and for all!”

“All right, calm down,” Nathan signed. “I know you’re upset.”

Caden waved a hand to get his parents’ attention. “Look . . .”

Trina moved to Josslyn’s side to see what was on Caden’s smartphone.

He lifted the smartphone to show them a series of pictures taken when he’d pressed the digital shutter many times to give the dark living room some light. What Trina saw made her cringe.

The pictures showed strange anomalies with orbs of various sizes and opacity, light energies in the form of vaporous blobs, and other indescribable, peculiar formations. One weird protoplasm in particular resembled a cylindrical tube of bright orange-yellow light that looked like snake skin coated with a glittery substance.

Another group of pictures showed a bright white luminescent cylinder of protoplasm with porcupine-type quills that protruded from it.

Yet another group of snapshots featured a blurred image, as if they had been taken while the object was in motion. One, at first glance, looked like yellowish-white flame, as though it had belched out of the nozzle of a flame-thrower, yet upon closer inspection, it appeared almost as if it had been an arrangement of capiz shells on a string.

Josslyn shook her head in wonderment. "This is too much for the human mind to absorb."

"What in the world are those things?" Trina signed.

"They're some type of spirits," Caden signed.

"Let me see the pictures again," Nathan signed.

After they looked at the pictures, asked questions, and formed their own conclusions, Josslyn lifted her digital camera, turned it on, and pressed a button to pull up the series of snapshots.

"Let's see what photos my digital camera came up with."

They were similar photos to those shown in Caden's smartphone, but taken from different angles.

"Demons don't look like that," Trina signed.

"Demons are deceptive," Josslyn signed. "The Bible teaches us that they're not just liars but pathological liars. They'll give you what *they* want you to see and hear, not what *you* want to see and hear. I had to learn to read between the lines from a *spiritual* perspective."

Trina craned her neck one way, then the other as she continued to gawk at the snapshots. She took the camera out of her mother's hand and turned it around. "I'm thinking maybe the quality of the pictures is due to the refraction of the light when the flashes went off. That's just how it is with electronic equipment."

"All right, smarty-pants, time for bed," Josslyn signed. "It's late enough as it is."

"I don't wanna go to bed," Trina signed, crestfallen. "I'm so scared."

"I know, honey." Josslyn pulled Trina toward her and embraced her for comfort. "Sometimes I get scared, too. We need to bear in mind that fear is a spirit and that God has given us not the spirit of fear, but of love, and of power, and of a sound mind. Pray and ask for God's guidance and protection. Trust in Him and plead the precious blood of the Lamb over us and on this house."

Nathan went up to Josslyn and Trina and put an arm around each. "Starting tonight, I'm going to have everybody sleep in the living room for the next few nights or few weeks or for however long. I'd like us to be by the front door so we can make a quick exit, if need be, should anything happen."

A full bladder forced Trina awake at 2:38 a.m. She kicked off the blanket and crossed the living room to the hall.

When she stepped into the hall, she observed through bleary eyes a shadow move down the hall. She blinked several times, more cognizant now than before.

The dark mass had no distinct form. The shapeless entity glided down the hall away from her.

Trina scampered back to the living room. She shook with fear and her heart palpitated. She waited a few minutes, all the while with her eyes on the hall.

The dark mass was not seen again.

She tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom. With self-consciousness and trepidation, she pulled down her pajama bottoms and sat on the toilet.

Please don't come in here and stare at me, she thought, or watch me. Just don't come in here at all.

She bit her lower lip and gazed around the bathroom. Her eyes darted about and then she stared at the shower curtain.

Oh, please don't be standing there, she thought, hiding behind the curtain and watching me, and don't all of a sudden jump out at me, either.

She eyed the curtain as it moved. Yet, the air in the bathroom was still. She knew the air conditioner was off since it was chilly at this time of night.

The curtain moved again.

The ice-cold hand of fear swelled in the middle of her chest and radiated outward in waves. She drew in a sharp intake of breath.

It crossed her mind that when someone opened or closed a door, curtains or drapes fluttered due to the movement of the air. Then she realized it was the way she was breathing that caused the shower curtain to move because of the terror that gripped her.

When done, Trina washed and dried her hands in a hurry, too scared to look back, let alone peek behind the curtain. She ran back to the couch in the living room and pulled the covers over her head.

The top of Josslyn's satin nightgown was pulled aside by a finger, which exposed her left breast as she slept. The tip of the finger circled part of her breast. A hand cupped her breast and applied some pressure on it for a moment.

Josslyn squirmed and writhed in her sleep. She lay on her back with a contented smile. If she could have purred, she would have.

The tip of the finger brushed across her lips, then pulled away as Josslyn let out her tongue and slid it across her upper lip. She arched her back as hands caressed her breasts. *Mmmm, yes, Josslyn thought with a contented sigh. Oh, Nathan . . .* The finger pressed the inner thigh above the knee and trailed upwards. It inched closer and closer toward her womanhood. *Oh, yes. That's right . . . Oh, Nathan . . . More . . . Yes . . .* The finger crept up a little more. *Oh, Nathan, my love.* Josslyn puckered her lips and desired a kiss.

Lips brushed across hers. Then a sudden exhale of malodorous breath emitted a visible plume of incandescent yellowish-green vapor.

The potent stench forced Josslyn awake with an abrupt, spasmodic jerk. Her heart pounded in her chest.

She sensed someone climb on top of her and weigh her down. Her hands and legs were unable to move, and she felt as if she were being smothered, her lungs emptying of air and her lips unable to part so she could gasp for air. She realized she had sleep paralysis, then forced herself to relax. She took long, deep, slow breaths and told her arms and legs to relax . . . relax . . . relax . . .

After a few moments, she looked down and saw that the top of her nightgown covered her breasts. She shifted her head to the left and saw Nathan asleep with his back to her. She raised her hand and touched one side of her face. Her flesh felt cold, damp, and clammy. She touched her forehead and felt beads of sweat. She turned to glance at the clock on the nightstand on her side of the bed.

The red digits on the face of the alarm clock with the built-in flasher showed the time was 3:00 a.m. "Dead time," as paranormal researchers and investigators called it—the time when spirits and ghosts are most active and when people get Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVPs) or actual sightings of apparitions.

The Lord rebuke that wicked dream! Josslyn prayed in her mind. In the name of Jesus, I rebuke that wicked dream! I bind it and lift it up into the hand of the Lord and I loose the power of the Holy Spirit to convict the author of this sacrilegious dream of its guilt and turn its reproach upon its own head! I plead the precious blood of Jesus over me and my family and our house. In the perfect, holy name and spirit of Jesus Christ, amen!

Several moments later, Josslyn fell asleep without further eerie dreams.

Josslyn woke up at 6:30 a.m.

She felt a mild burning sensation on her upper left arm. She lifted the sleeve of her nightgown to see what it was, but it was too dark. She turned on the night lamp beside her bed and looked at the abrasion on her arm but couldn't see it too well from that angle. She went into the en suite bathroom, flipped the switch, and looked in the mirror.

The red welts on her left arm stupefied her. From the shoulder down to the crook of her arm were thin lines of coagulated blood with reddened flesh that spread out from what looked like a three-pronged scratch mark.

Josslyn stared in the mirror for a while. To some extent, she recalled an eerie dream she had where she'd thought it was Nathan giving her some foreplay until that putrid, fetid stench and luminous yellowish-green vapor had woken her. She remembered not seeing a face in the dream, not even Nathan's face, but a sensation as if someone touched her and caressed her with a finger. She pondered for several minutes about how she didn't feel anything when something scratched her while she slept. Anger rose in her as she realized the evil spirit did this.

She turned on her heel and strode from the bathroom. She went to Nathan's side of the bed and gently shook him awake. "I'm sorry, honey," she signed, "but I wanted to show you something." She lifted the sleeve of her nightgown and showed him the marks on her arm.

Nathan stood up too fast, almost dizzying himself by doing so. "What is that?" He scrutinized her arm.

"I believe they're marks left by that demon. I had a weird dream last night, thinking it was you initiating foreplay with me until I smelled a foul odor and saw yellowish-green smoke coming out of a mouth, which woke me. When I looked over at you, you were sound asleep."

"We need to get some kind of help somehow —and soon."

Josslyn looked up and saw Caden standing by the bedroom door. He waved his hand for attention. "Sorry," he signed. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's all right," Josslyn signed. "What is it?"

"I want to show you something on my phone."

Caden entered the master bedroom and went to where Josslyn and Nathan stood. He pressed the Home button and lifted the smartphone which showed "666."

Nathan and Josslyn eyed the number that represented the mark of the beast as chills shivered down their backs.

Josslyn composed herself after a moment. "It's reaffirming its presence," she signed, "and letting us know it's not finished with us. This is getting to be very scary."

"As soon as I woke up," Caden signed, "I noticed the light on the face of the smartphone come on. At first, I thought it was an incoming text. Notice that there is no name or number to let me know who it came from. It's blank."

Nathan looked at the smartphone. "We're strong, and we're not going to let this thing get to us."

"Pray that God graces us with His protection," Josslyn signed.

Now that they knew there was a demonic presence in their home, it became a cause for strain on the family. There were times when Caden and Trina had a loss of concentration during their studies in summer school or when they did their homework in their rooms.

Even Nathan and Josslyn were not immune to having their difficulties due to such high levels of stress, as they tried to focus on their work-at-home operations. Nathan lost several thousand dollars on some trades, and Josslyn bungled a few customers' online orders.

"We need to take some action and get this thing out of our house," Josslyn signed to Nathan.

Nathan nodded, pensive. "We're going to have to look up some paranormal organizations online. The sooner we do it, the better."

The hot spray from the showerhead relaxed the tension in Nathan's body as he stood under the water for several minutes. He savored the stream of hot water as it pelted his tense neck and shoulders.

Josslyn made crepes garnished with strawberries and blueberries. She set aside a bowl of grapes and a plate of bran muffins with a tub of vegetable spread.

While the crepes were grilling, she halved the cantaloupe and the honeydew melon, scooped out the seeds, then diced them into cubes. She put them into a large ceramic fruit bowl.

After Nathan stepped out of the shower, he peered into the mirror below three recessed lights that illuminated his face.

An unnatural, bright white light flashed with a weird brilliance for a second. It washed over the entire bathroom. Everything seemed to take on an indefinable appearance.

When Nathan gazed around the bathroom and into the mirror, everything was the same, yet different. It was akin to being high on a mind-altering substance. His facial features morphed to make him appear several years older than his age. It was as if another man had stepped inside and meshed with Nathan's body, which changed his appearance, but not so drastic that he'd be unrecognizable.

Nathan stared at his own reflection, transfixed. He felt dissociated from his inner being within its carnal flesh-and-blood container. It was almost as if he didn't know who he was. At the same time, he questioned who the other person—or being—was.

Josslyn checked the crepes and noticed movement on the griddle. She waved away the steam that wafted up to her face. She screamed in horror and shoved the griddle away from her. It clattered across the island. She looked in the fruit bowls, at the bran muffins, and the vegetable spread and was filled with revulsion to the point of nausea.

Maggots writhed and squirmed about and wiggled their way in and out of the food.

Nathan tilted his head to one side and craned his neck, then raised his brows. He continued to look at his own reflection in the mirror, still transfixed.

The same bright white light flashed again, illuminating the entire bathroom for a second.

Nathan snapped out of his trance. He shook his head to clear the fog in his mind and eyed himself in wonderment. He was himself again.

Nathan came into the kitchen while he buttoned his shirt, looking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He noticed an angry and frustrated Josslyn scraping the contents of the griddle into the waste bin with a rubber spatula. "What happened?" he signed.

"Oh, you're not gonna believe this," Josslyn signed. She put the griddle in the kitchen sink and turned on the hot water. She then went to the island and picked up the package of bran muffins with a thumb and forefinger and tossed it into the bin. "The crepes, bran muffins, and fruits were full of maggots." She picked up two ceramic bowls from the island and showed them to Nathan, who looked with curiosity and disgust when he saw the little creatures wiggling about. Josslyn then proceeded to dump them in the bin and placed the bowls in the

sink. She turned on the hot water and swished the maggots down the garbage disposal.

“And, we *know* who is responsible for this.” She let out an exasperated sigh, then handed Nathan the trash bag to take outside. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, then pulled out a new liner and put it into the tall kitchen trash bin. “I’ll just make another batch and hope there won’t be a repeat scenario.”

“Tell you what,” Nathan signed as he set down the bag and drew himself closer to Josslyn. “How about we go out to eat instead? It would be good for us and the kids to get out of the house for a couple hours and maybe go to a movie afterward.” He kissed her, then left the kitchen to put out the trash bag.

Josslyn rinsed the dishes and the griddle. A spoon slipped through her fingers and fell into the garbage disposal. She had misgivings about retrieving the spoon. With trepidation, she put her hand through the mouth of the garbage disposal and felt around within the dark confines to get the spoon, all the while keeping an eye on the wall switch.

The switch for the garbage disposal was down, which indicated that it was OFF. It then moved in an upward direction by a few millimeters, as if it were in the process of being flipped to the ON position.

Josslyn yanked her hand from the mouth of the garbage disposal. With her other hand, she placed it on the wall switch to ensure it stayed in the OFF position. She then put her hand in the garbage disposal, felt the handle of the spoon, grabbed it, and retrieved it. She rinsed it under a stream of hot water and put it into the dishwasher. Other utensils and kitchenware were rinsed and loaded into the dishwasher while the remainder were still in the sink. She filled the dishwasher’s soap tray with detergent, then went to get the rest of the utensils and kitchenware when she noticed they were not in the sink.

Where did they go? she thought. If they went in the garbage disposal, I'm not putting my hand down there again.

She leaned over to peer within the darkness.

The switch flipped ON.

Forks and steak knives ejected out of the mouth of the garbage disposal. Some flew straight up and others went to the right, to the left, and even over her head. They missed the skin of her face by an inch.

Josslyn reeled backward from the sink and looked at the ceiling. Forks, steak knives and other sharp utensils were embedded in the ceiling.

One afternoon, Nathan and Josslyn sat on the couch and watched TV with Caden and Trina.

Diva skulked from the den into the living room and plopped onto Josslyn's lap.

"I notice Diva looks thinner," Josslyn signed to Nathan, "and has lost some hair. Look at her."

They all saw blotches of skin in sporadic areas where hair had been lost.

"I'm worried about the kittens," Trina signed. "I'm going to check on them. Be back in a moment."

She went to the den and knelt before the cat bed, which had replaced the maternity box. Trina's demeanor became melancholic when she saw how infirm and weak the kittens looked. One of them appeared to be asleep. Trina stroked its back, then picked up the kitten. She cried when she realized the kitten was dead. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand as she told the rest of the family. "The others don't look so good, either. That thing is scaring them to death!"

Josslyn's heart sank. "We're going to have to take Diva and the kittens to the vet. Right now, let's see if we can find a shoebox and bury the dead kitten in the backyard."

Nathan left the den and went upstairs to the master bedroom to look for an empty shoebox in the walk-in closet.



Thor walked beside Nathan as he and Josslyn went up the short path to the front door of his parents' house.

Nathan carried the pet cargo cage with Diva and the kittens in it. He pressed the doorbell and the signaler lights flashed within.

George opened the door. "What did the vet say?" He stepped aside to let them enter, then closed the door.

Nathan set the cage on the floor. "He said it could be stress from anxiety or nervous tension because of all that's been happening at our house. We really appreciate you taking care of the pets for us for now."

Augusta joined them in the foyer. She took the bag of pet food from Josslyn and went to the kitchen. Thor followed from behind.

"I'm gonna get the litter box and some toys for the pets," Josslyn signed to George. "Be right back." She stepped out and went to the car.

George picked up the cage and looked into it. "They'll keep us company for a while," he signed after Josslyn returned. "After all, they are part of the family."

On the way home from Nathan's parents', Josslyn sat in thought, pensive. She pondered how

the evil spirit had the ability to make Diva and her litter ill, which caused one of them to die. *It has some kind of supernatural power or ability that humans can't comprehend*, she thought. Then the full realization came to her that the demon had meant to kill the cat and the kittens. This miffed her as well as terrified her. *If it can present this kind of danger and do harm to my pets, I shudder to think what it could do to me, my husband, and the kids.* Josslyn turned to Nathan. "We need to move out of the house and move out *now*."

"What? Where would we go?"

"We could stay with your parents'."

Nathan shook his head. "No. I don't want us to be a burden to them. We just unloaded our pets on them. It wouldn't be fair."

"Then what do you suggest we do? Stay at a motel?"

"We're already paying mortgage on the house, and I'm not paying for a motel, even if our jobs afford us such a luxury, if you could call it a luxury."

"Well, I'm not staying in the house. I think it's getting to be too dangerous."

"We *can't* move! Not now! We just moved here. Even if we moved and were able to afford a new house, this thing would just follow us to that new home. It's not worth it."

"Now that's a scary thought. You're right when you say it could very well follow us—even to your parents' house. What about—"

Nathan raised his arm, ready to give Josslyn a backhanded slap. "Damn it, woman! I'm gonna smack you if don't stop ragging on me while I'm trying to drive and figure out something!"

The change in Nathan's attitude and demeanor shocked Josslyn into silence. He had never threatened her with physical violence before. She sat there, stunned, as he drove home.

Josslyn walked out of the den and stopped in mid-stride. Her eyes focused on the spot above the door between the den and the kitchen.

The wooden cross, which she had replaced, had been turned upside down. It was as if the demon had read her mind and played games with her.

Wonder if the other crosses are upside down? Josslyn thought. She checked the kitchen, living room, dining room, and bedroom, and righted all the crosses that had been replaced. *I'm so over it. This crap ends now!*

Josslyn came back downstairs and noticed Caden and Nathan moving the oversized couch while Trina pushed the coffee table.

“Are you rearranging the furniture?” she signed to Nathan.

“Putting the couch back in its proper place,” he signed. “It was turned around the other way with its back facing the TV.”

“Yeah,” Trina signed and then pushed the coffee table to its rightful place before the couch. “The coffee table was on this side of the room, the loveseat was on the other side of the room, and the sitting chairs were right below the big-screen TV.”

“Oh, nice going,” Josslyn signed to the spirit. On her way to the kitchen, Josslyn glanced into the dining room and saw that all the chairs were stacked pyramid-style, on the top of the table. Moments earlier, the chairs had been in their rightful places.

I've seen that sort of thing before, in movies and on some paranormal reality shows on TV, she thought. She shook her head in disgust then went into the kitchen.

All the cupboards, cabinet doors, and drawers were opened. Four kitchen chairs were on the table with the seats on the table and the legs sticking up.

Next, she walked through the den to the laundry room. It displeased and perturbed her to see the stacked washer-dryer pulled away from one wall and placed in the center of the room with the wires and hoses detached but undamaged from the wall.

Afterward, she went back to the living room. “Nothing surprises me anymore,” she signed to Nathan. “We’re contacting a paranormal organization to find out exactly what’s going on and see about getting rid of this spirit. By the way, I found that all the crosses had been turned upside down.”

“It’s almost as if the demon is mocking us,” Nathan signed.

“The demon *is* mocking us and mocking Christ, too. I’m ready to go online and look up listings for paranormal organizations.”

Nathan and Josslyn sat at his computer desk in the study and compiled a list of links. They learned the paranormal research institutes were free. Donations and grants were contributed to them from other sources.

They went into the living room, switched the TV to VP mode, and called the first number for a paranormal research institute. As soon as the video came up on the monitor, the images went haywire with the colors skewed.

Josslyn once again shook her head in disgust and contempt.

“How about e-mailing them?” Nathan signed.

“Okay. Let's do that. You know, when I think about it, it's too bad that we didn't consider contacting someone from a paranormal organization a while back. But with everything going on . . .”

“Well, for now, let's just read through some of their profiles, find out where they're located, and give each organization all the necessary information, including copies of the photos and videos we have.”

“All right. After that, when we have some time, I'd like to try to pay Norma a visit and ask her what she knows about the history and background of this property.”



Nathan and Josslyn pored over several paranormal research institute websites and settled for the top three that appealed to them. They weren't too far away, even though they were beyond the vicinity of Knollwood Meadows.

Nathan and Josslyn completed online forms for all three institutes and e-mailed them with attachments of several photos and a few short videos.

Now, all they had to do was be patient and wait to hear back from any (or all) of the institutes.

“I don't think we have time to go to Norma's,” Nathan signed as he glanced at his wristwatch. “You have to make dinner soon and by the time we're finished with dinner, it'll be too late. Let's try to go see her tomorrow.”

The next afternoon, Josslyn greeted Evan at the door with a wide grin. "Come right on in, Evan," Josslyn signed with a beckon of her arm.

"Smells great in here. What'cha been baking?"

Josslyn led him into the kitchen.

Nathan was placing some lemon-flavored goodies into a large, light-brown wicker gourmet food basket as Josslyn and Evan stepped into the kitchen.

"Oh, wow! Those look really good!" Evan signed. "Are those for me?" He grinned while Josslyn gave him the eye. They both laughed.

"These are for Norma," Josslyn signed.

"Oh, they're perfect for her, especially since she's a fan of all things lemon."

"Right." Josslyn turned to Nathan. "Ready?"

"Ready," Nathan signed. He picked up the basket while Josslyn pushed the stroller with Maddie in it.

"Caden and Trina are out in the backyard by the pool with Thor," Josslyn signed to Evan, "doing their thing on their gizmos. They already know that we're going out and that we'll be back in a bit."

They walked the short distance to Norma's house.

"Oh! How nice to see you again!" Norma said with enthusiasm. She opened the door wider and stepped aside to let them in. "I was just thinking about you the other day. Please come in."

"These are for you," Nathan signed.

"We brought some delicious goodies just for you," Josslyn signed. "Because you're so special."

"Oh, my!" Norma said. "Awww, you didn't have to. Nonetheless, I appreciate it very much." She peeked inside to view the contents. "Oh, dearie me! How scrumptious they look, and they smell so good!"

"I brought lemon tarts from the local bakery," Josslyn signed as she pointed to each content in the basket, "a bag of sugar-free, lemon-flavored hard candy, and the pièce de résistance is the no-bake pink-lemonade frozen bars, which yours truly made from scratch."

"Oh, how lovely! I'd never heard of them before. I absolutely have to try at least one. And, of course, you're more than welcome to dig in, as I'm going to share all of this with you, too."

Norma withdrew a frozen bar while Nathan pulled out a lemon tart, which he shared with Josslyn, and Evan picked up a wrapped lemon-flavored hard candy to suck on.

Norma bit into the frozen bar and her eyes rolled back. "Oh, my! How delicious and scrumptious this is!" She poured the hard candy from the bag into the clear lead-crystal candy dish, then went into the kitchen to put the frozen bars in the freezer, and the tarts in the

refrigerator. She returned with the empty basket and handed it to Nathan. "Let's go into the living room."

They went into the living room and sat down.

"So, what brings you here on this wonderful day?" Norma asked.

"We're curious to know about the background and history of the property that our house sits on," Nathan signed, "and we assume you may know a few things about it. We also thought about maybe checking with a local historian when we have time."

"Ah," Norma said. She finished the last bit of the frozen bar and licked her finger and thumb, then leaned forward to pull out a tissue from the box on the coffee table. She blotted her lips and wiped her fingers. "I'll do my best, since memory can be rusty and not all that trusty. What would you like to know? Where would you like me to start?"

"As far back as you can remember," Josslyn signed. "All the way to the very beginning, if possible."

"Okay," Norma said with a pensive nod. "Please bear in mind that I wasn't always a very outgoing person. I was more of a homebody, especially having been a full-time housewife, and later on, a full-time mother with two children, who are now grown, of course. Now I have five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

"As I mentioned when you first came to meet me," Norma continued, "people moved in and out over the years. They never stayed put for long. New folks moved in, then moved out after a short while. Anyway, after the last people moved out, the house sat vacant for months until you moved in."

Norma stopped to catch her breath. "I'm thirsty. Would you like some lemonade or a nice cold glass of water? I should've thought to ask you earlier."

"We're good," Evan said. "Thanks for asking."

"I'm just going to help myself to a little glass of lemonade. I'll be right back."

Norma returned from the kitchen a few minutes later. "Thank you for waiting." She set her glass of lemonade on the coffee table. "Now, going back to the very beginning . . .

"The original house, an old Spanish-style house, had been built back in the 1940s. The first owners were a young married couple in their early twenties, Charles Watlington, an insurance salesman and his wife, Victoria, a full-time homemaker and mother. They had an only child, a son named Aaron, who was born sometime in the early 1940s. They were rather quiet folks who kept to themselves most of the time. Neighbors didn't see them very often over the years.

"As the decades passed and the husband advanced into his older years, he outlived both his wife and child; she died in the 1980s after a lengthy illness somewhere in her sixties and the grown-up child also died from an undetected heart condition in the early 1990s somewhere in his fifties. Then, in 1999 or 2000, the owner died from old age in his late seventies without a will and no surviving relatives. The property had escheated to the State of California where the state tried to sell the property at auction. The house had been old and in bad shape, dilapidated and in disrepair."

Nathan uncrossed his legs and sat forward, his hands clasped on his knees, interested to hear more about the people.

Norma sipped some lemonade, then continued. "The auction was eventually won for an unusually low price by a developer, who did nothing with the property for about two years.

"Then someone else with interest in that parcel of land bought it in 2003. In the early part of 2004, the house was torn down and the land cleared to make way for a new house to be built, but the property became a vacant lot from 2004 through most of 2007."

Evan adjusted his position on the chair to make himself more comfortable and sat up straighter as he continued to interpret. He glanced at Josslyn, who rolled the stroller back and forth as Maddie napped. She'd sneak a peek at the baby now and then while Norma spoke.

"Construction of the new house began in December of 2007 around the holidays and was completed by Halloween 2008.

"Between 2008 and 2010, there had been some trouble with the house from time to time while the house had been on the market, but nothing major. There had been trivial incidents, like kids and teenagers who had trespassed upon the property, and squatters who sneaked in through the sides of the house, or homeless folks who had broken in, busted a window, or breached an unlocked sliding glass door in the back of the house, only to be removed forcibly from the property. Attentive and suspicious neighbors had called and lodged complaints to the police. Then, March 2010 came and you know the rest."



As Nathan, Josslyn and Evan walked back to the Bryants' residence, they pondered on what Norma had told them.

"She didn't give us any insight," Josslyn signed, "as to how the demon got into the house or where it came from."

"She probably doesn't know," Evan signed.

"An evil spirit doesn't just walk into a house and possess it after a house has been newly built," Nathan signed. "That wouldn't make sense."

Josslyn nodded in agreement. "Evil spirits are *invited* into a home by a person, whether wittingly or unwittingly, and evil spirits have sneaky ways of getting people to invite them into their homes."

"The use of Ouija boards is one of them," Nathan signed. "It's a doorway, a portal, from their place in Hell to the Earth plane. Others call that doorway a vortex."

Evan thought for a moment, speculative. "Is it possible that a previous owner could have invited the spirit into the house?"

Nathan picked up a spatula, lifted the first grilled cheese sandwich from the griddle, and placed it onto a plate, then did the same for the second. He set them on the island.

“You know, after several weeks of sleeping in the living room,” Nathan signed to Josslyn as he sat down on a stool, “I think it’s time we went back to sleeping in our own room.”

Josslyn picked up one half of the sandwich and bit into it. “I’ve thought about that but I’m not sure just yet.”

“It has been a while, and I do miss our private moments.” Nathan raised and lowered his brows a few times and winked with a knowing smile.

Josslyn nodded. “Okay. But if anything should happen, it’s back to the living room, and if worse comes to worst, we’re out of here.”



Searing three-digit temperatures caused heat to bounce off the ground and rise into the air. During the day, moisture and cumulus thunderclouds from the Gulf of California rolled north toward Southern California and Arizona. Sometime after midnight, a thunderstorm raged for a few hours.

A flash of lightning startled Trina awake. She pulled off the bedsheet and went to the bathroom down the hall. The mere thought of the demon in there with her made her shiver. When she returned to her bedroom, she closed the door and turned around to head back to bed.

A brilliant silver-white light illuminated the room for two seconds and revealed silhouettes of three hooded figures clad in ankle-length cloaks.

Trina’s heart beat fast. A minute later, another burst of lightning washed the walls which revealed nothing. No dark hooded figures were seen anywhere in her room.

With trepidation, she went to the window and looked out. A lightning bolt burst across the sky, and she noticed a lone hooded figure in the middle of the front yard. It didn’t look at anyone or anything in particular. It stood there, motionless.

Trina backed away from the window, her heart still pounding in her chest. She went to the living room and stood at the front door. She stared at it for a moment and noticed the green LED lights from the security panel next to it.

Should I open the door? she thought.

She raised her right arm, hesitant. Her fingertips brushed the door and glided down it until her arm dropped back to her side. With fear and nervousness, she turned and headed toward the back of the house. She stood by the sliding glass doors and looked out at the backyard. Lightning flashed once again, and she saw two hooded figures with cloaks at the other side of the pool. Trina backed away from the sliding glass doors and ran upstairs.

Nathan and Josslyn slept despite the storm. Even Maddie was sound asleep in her crib nearby.

Trina thrust open the bedroom door and turned on the bedroom light as she entered the master bedroom. She ran to her parents' bed and shook her mother's shoulder.

Nathan squinted his eyes due to the light, then rubbed the sleep out of them.

"Sorry to wake you," Trina signed, "but I saw people with robes and hoods in my room and in the front and backyard."

Josslyn bolted upright in bed, alarmed.

Nathan jumped out of bed. "Stay here," he signed to Trina, then left the bedroom.

"I'll be right back," Josslyn signed as she put on her robe in a hurry. "Keep your eye on Maddie." She left the bedroom and met Nathan in Trina's room. The light had been switched on.

Nathan scanned the room. "I don't see anyone here," he signed.

They went to the door of Caden's room and opened it. Caden was sound asleep in his bed. They closed the door and went downstairs, looked out the windows to the front yard, then went to the back of the house and looked through the sliding glass doors. They did not see anything out of the ordinary except rain, trees that swayed in the wind, and a streak of lightning that flashed in the distance as the storm moved away.

"Let's go back upstairs," Nathan said.

"We didn't see anyone," Josslyn signed to Trina when she and Nathan entered the master bedroom.

"I know I saw them," Trina signed, exasperated. "They were there for a second, then gone. Maybe they're remnants from a residual haunting."

Josslyn shook her head in exasperation and raised her hands as if to say, "I give up!" Instead, she signed, "All I know is I can't wait for the paranormal organization to contact us and get this thing out of our house once and for all!"

The following morning, the storm had blown over.

Josslyn stirred in her bed in between sleep and consciousness. She turned to look at Maddie's crib, and her hand flew to her mouth. She felt blood drain from her face and her heart beat faster. Frantic, she shook Nathan awake and pointed to the wall above Maddie's crib.

Is the baby asleep?

The words had been engraved in repeated strokes as if with the tip of a screwdriver or scratched with sharp fingernails, then infused with black paint.

Josslyn and Nathan bolted from the bed and dashed to Maddie's crib.

The baby smiled when she saw her parents.

Josslyn shuddered and took a few deep breaths. She lifted Maddie from the crib and hugged her.



Sunlight streamed through the pastel peach curtains and brightened Trina's room.

She stretched and yawned, then lay back for several moments. She turned to look at the crate and sat up.

Abbott and Costello were not in the crate and the door was closed.

Trina looked around her room. The rabbits were nowhere to be found. She stepped into the hall and noticed her parents' bedroom door was open. A bright light flashed from within. At first, Trina thought it might have been lightning, but the storm had passed and the sun was out. Curious, she went down the hall and stood at the opened door to her parents' bedroom.

Josslyn was taking photos with her digital camera. The flash went off again as she pressed the shutter button.

Nathan stood next to Josslyn with Maddie cradled in his arms.

Trina looked in the direction where Josslyn aimed her camera and paled when she saw the scrawled inscription on the wall. Her heart rate went up. "Did the demon do that?" she signed.

Josslyn and Nathan nodded, their countenances an expression of extreme displeasure and deep concern.

"Just want to let you know that your father and I have contacted three paranormal organizations online," Josslyn signed. "As soon as one replies, we will let you and Caden know."

"Good, because Abbott and Costello are not in their crate, yet the door is closed. I doubt if they got out on their own."

“That thing most likely let them out,” Nathan signed. “The rabbits are probably roaming around somewhere in the house. We’ll just have to make sure the doors and windows are closed so that they don’t get outside.”

They all searched for Abbott and Costello; they went through every room of the house, both upstairs and downstairs, and they checked to see if all the doors and windows had been secured.

“It’s possible the evil spirit may have let the rabbits out of the house,” Caden signed.

“Oh, please,” Trina signed, “don’t say that.” She bit her lower lip with worry.

“We’ll find them,” Nathan signed. “We just have to have faith and think positive.”

“Yes,” Josslyn signed. “They have to be somewhere in the house.”

“It just saddens me so much,” Trina signed. “It scares me, too How do you fight something you can’t see?”

“We fight through prayer and faith. That’s all we can do. As humans, we are limited to a certain extent. God imposes limitations on us for His purposes. We have limited minds, power, and abilities to do certain things. Obedience and faith please Him more than anything else, more than just doing good. That and being honest and kind to others. He gave us the right to communicate with Him through prayer, and He teaches us about faith through His Word. Those are our weapons against this evil. That’s what we need to keep in mind.”

A tear trailed down Trina’s cheek as she laid her head on her mother’s shoulder.

Nathan and Josslyn read their e-mails.

“I like the Skylar and Associates Paranormal Research Institute the best,” Nathan signed. “This one has a psychic medium, a historian and a demonologist. This group offers more than the others we looked at. They want to know the severity of the case—the more severe, the more urgent, especially in cases with babies and children, which would make ours a top priority for them.”

“Okay, then,” signed Josslyn, “let's e-mail them back.”



The rabbits hadn't been found yet, so first thing the following morning, Josslyn did not check the back office of her online boutique. Instead, she went straight to her inbox, but no e-mail from the paranormal institute was there.

Oh, c'mon, guys, she thought. Let me hear from you soon!

She then sent an e-mail to her parents-in-law with an update.

Hello, Mom and Dad,

Letting you know that paranormal activity is continuing and hasn't let up. Nathan and I looked online for paranormal organizations. I'm anxiously waiting to hear back from them, hoping that our case will be approved so they can come out asap and investigate our home and help to resolve issues regarding this case.

As soon as I hear from a paranormal organization, I'll let you know and provide you with any other updates.

Love always,

~Josslyn

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When Trina arrived home from school one afternoon, she entered the house and found Abbott in the living room.

She picked him up and went upstairs. She waved at Josslyn down the hall and pointed to Abbott. “I found him and now I'm going to look for Costello,” she signed. As Trina made her way to her room, Costello bounded into the hall from the guest room, unseen. She tripped over Costello and dropped Abbott, lost her balance, and fell over the railing.

Josslyn looked on, helpless. Instead of signing, she screamed in a shrill voice.
“Trinaaaaaaaaaa—!”

Josslyn awoke with a jerk. Beads of sweat dripped down her face as she panted and placed a hand to her thudding chest. She turned to see Nathan asleep next to her and tried to calm herself.

Caden could smell the aromas of beer-battered tilapia fish sticks and tater tots throughout the house while they baked in the oven.

He lay on his bed as he checked out a new app on his smartphone. When it was time for dinner, he left his room to head downstairs.

On his way, he took a cursory glance into the bathroom as he walked past it. He saw Trina standing before the mirror, her back to him, as she brushed her hair with calculated strokes.

When he entered the kitchen, he signed and mouthed, "What the hell—"

"Uh-uh-uh," Josslyn signed, indignant. "Watch your language, young man. That kind of talk is not permitted in this house at any time, under any circumstances."

"You know we taught you better than that," Nathan signed.

Caden gazed at Trina, then turned to Josslyn. "How . . . how did she get down here?" he signed.

"What do you mean?" Josslyn signed. "What an odd question."

"I was just upstairs, and she was in the bathroom, brushing her hair. When I left her to come downstairs, she was still in the bathroom!"

"No, I wasn't," Trina signed.

"Then how did you get by me on the stairs?"

Josslyn looked Caden in the eye. "She has been here with me in the kitchen."

They all realized at the same time what had happened.

"Apparently, it was that spirit," Josslyn signed. "It has shape-shifting abilities. It can make itself appear to be whatever or whoever it wants. It's part of its deceptive nature. Remember, the devil is a liar and the father of lies and he never stands in the spirit of truth. Ignore it, rebuke it, and bind it in the name of Jesus. Lift it up into the hand of the Lord through the name, spirit, and precious Blood of the Lamb."

"Amen," Nathan signed, as did Caden, Trina, and Josslyn.

"I know I've said it before," Josslyn signed, "and I'll say it again, I just can't wait till someone from one of the paranormal organizations gets here and does an investigation. However, we need to bear in mind that they said on their website that e-mails would be answered within forty-eight to seventy-two hours as they have other cases, also."

Nathan shook his head in frustration. "Well, the sooner their asses get here, the better."

Josslyn's jaw dropped. She noticed the angry look etched on his face and that his eyes were cold. She shook her head and blinked a few times. "What did you say?"

"I said, the sooner they get here, the better."

Josslyn shook her head. "No. You said something that was rather un-Christian. You never

spoke like that before.”

“What did I say then?”

“I’m not repeating what you said, but I’ll tell you it wasn’t very nice. Just go fix your plate and eat your dinner.”

Nathan tossed and turned in his sleep, then lay flat on his back.

His throat swelled up as if a medical balloon with tubing had expanded inside it, which caused him to emit a few grunts. His back arched for a moment, and he uttered a low, guttural growl. His face morphed as if it merged with another face. He arched his back once again and moaned, then fell into a fitful slumber.



A violent lurch of Caden's bed forced him awake. He sat up and peered around his room within the dark.

The phosphorescent light filtering through the window from the street lamp didn't help much to brighten the room.

He got up and turned on the desk lamp next to his computer and glanced around the room. He went back to his bed and crouched on all fours to check the legs of the bed to see if maybe one of them might have weakened and broken. He stood up and concluded the evil spirit had kicked the bed for the fun of it. In response, he shook his fist in the air.

Invisible hands shoved him back with incredible force.

Caden's back slammed against the wall which left him dazed, and his body slumped on the bed.



Trina was also jolted awake by a shake of her bed, which thudded against the wall. She sat up and noticed light through the underside of the bedroom door from the hall.

A bright, orange-yellow glow waxed and waned with a languid flow in a fluid, irregular back-and-forth motion.

Trina approached the bedroom door with uneasiness, opened it a crack, and peeked out with one eye and gasped.

In the hall stood a dark hooded figure surrounded by and covered with flames, which shot up to the ceiling. The flames did not burn, scorch, or sear anything, but gave off their own luminescence without smoke. Heat did not come off the fire and there was no burning smell.

Trina screamed aloud and shut the bedroom door. Her heart thudded in her chest as she took short, quick breaths. She realized the smoke alarms had not gone off, as there were no flashing strobes. She backed away from the door as she eyed the underside of the door.

"I plead the precious Blood of Christ over me and my family and this house!" Trina signed. "In

the holy name of Jesus, amen!”

She whirled around and flipped on the light from her desk lamp. When she looked back to glance at the underside of the door, the glow no longer emanated from the other side. She opened the bedroom door. All was dark and quiet. She closed the door and went to her vanity table, where she picked up a drinking glass to sip some water, but realized it was empty. She turned to look at the bedroom door, nervous.

I really don't wanna go to the kitchen just to get a fresh glass of water, she thought. The thought of going down there in the dark scares me. Just remember that God is always with you at all times. Pray when you need to.

Trina worked up some courage and went out the bedroom door. Her grip on the glass was a little too much as she carried the glass with her. Her eyes scanned the corners of the dark living room as she went down the stairs. Once she reached the bottom of the stairs, she scampered to the kitchen and turned on the light. She went to the refrigerator, poured some water into the glass, and savored the refreshing ice-cold feel in her mouth and down her throat.

She almost dropped her glass when she noticed a shiny gleam for a second in the back of the laundry room. Then another glint flashed. With morbid curiosity and taut nerves, she made her way from the kitchen to the laundry room. She flipped on the light and saw movement out of the corner of her eye.

Abbott and Costello peeked out from behind the stacked washer and dryer unit. That was the one place no one had thought to look before. They looked demonic in appearance; their eyes reflected light where there was no source of light; their teeth were a little larger than normal and yellowed and stained; their fur was somewhat frizzed as if full of static electricity. They looked like creepy, caricature-like representations of mutant rabbits, the kind seen in horror films. They had a zombie-like stance about them, and they moved slower than normal. Their eyes darted about and blinked. The rabbits' strange appearance gave Trina a *Twilight Zone* feeling as she watched Abbott and Costello come out from behind the washer-dryer unit. They sauntered into the middle of the laundry room, then went through the den into the kitchen and out the kitty door.

Trina looked through the kitchen window and saw that the rabbits' outward appearance returned to normal. She noticed their stance went back to their natural form as they bounded past the swimming pool toward the rear of the backyard and disappeared into the thick brush.

Trina dropped her glass of water, backed away from the laundry room, and ran to her room. She closed the door and lay awake in bed with the light on.

Josslyn checked her inbox the next morning. She was disappointed when she did not receive an e-mail from the Skylar & Associates Paranormal Research Institute.

She worked on the Princess Daboola website for a few hours, then checked her inbox again. There was an e-mail from Skylar and Associates Paranormal Research Institute. She laughed and clapped her hands, jumping up and down in her seat.

Eric Skylar, founder and lead investigator of the Skylar and Associates Paranormal Research Institute, had set an appointment to meet the Bryants in two days and explained that their current caseload had been busy.

A sense of relief came over Josslyn and she was overjoyed.

"I have an idea," she signed to Nathan later that morning. "Since Evan goes to school and the investigation takes place at night and may take several hours, why don't we get David to interpret for us? I'm sure he'd love to help us."

"Which David?" Nathan signed.

"David Osborn."

"What's wrong with David Franzblau?"

"He smokes. That's why I didn't invite him to the dinner party a few months back."



Josslyn called David Osborn on VP. "Would you be available to provide sign-language interpreting services in two days and maybe the day after, if needed?"

"Oh, absolutely," David signed.

"A paranormal research institute is coming here to conduct an investigation of our house."

"Very cool! You know, I've always been intrigued by paranormal research firms and have always been very interested in all the ghost hunting they do. I appreciate you considering me, and I'd be happy to come over. What time?"

"How about six or seven in the evening?"

"See you then!"

Moments later, Trina entered the study with a despondent look on her face. "I found Abbott and Costello very late last night," she signed to Josslyn. "They were behind the washer-dryer unit. I was too scared to go near them. They looked evil."

"Evil?"

"Yeah. Their appearance had changed. They didn't look normal."

Josslyn's brief joy turned to an unsettling, disquieting feeling, and her face reflected fear. "This is freaking me out. Where are they now?"

"They went out the kitty door into the backyard. I haven't seen them since."

"Maybe they're still outside somewhere. We can look for them."

Trina shook her head.

"Why not?" Josslyn signed.

"The rabbits may not be in the backyard," Trina signed. A tear fell down her cheek.

"How come you didn't wake me or your father?"

"I didn't think to wake you or Dad, and if I did, I didn't want to wake you guys up in the middle of the night. Dad would've said that it was too dark out and that the rabbits may have disappeared into the bushes and gone beyond the perimeter of the premises."

"I'm sorry, honey. Come here." Josslyn hugged her daughter. "In spite of all that's been going on, I have some good news. The investigators from the paranormal research institute will be here in two days."

Trina's spirits lifted a little, and she felt hopeful, more optimistic. "That is good news. At least, it gives us something to look forward to."

Josslyn nodded and hugged her daughter again.

At 2:10 a.m., the front door opened of its own volition and Thor stepped out. He walked down the little path, as if in a trance, to the middle of the street and sat on his haunches. He gazed to the east.

Several moments later, a pair of headlight beams from a car appeared over the rise to the east. Soon the car came into Thor's line of vision, but the dog did not see it.

Fast approaching the dog, the Buick made a hard left, jumped the curb on the opposite side of the street, and slammed head-on into a large, thick-trunked Alligator Juniper tree. The driver's-side air bag inflated upon impact. Steam billowed from the car's hood.

Thor flinched at the moment of impact and snapped out of the trance he'd been in. He turned to glance across the street where the car had smashed into a tree.

Sean rubbed his neck with the palm of his hand. He looked in his rearview mirror and saw a black medium-sized dog get off its haunches and stand on all fours.

"That mangy mongrel again," Sean said, then shouted, "What are you trying to do? Get yourself or someone else killed?"

Thor sprinted across the road and up the little walk to his front door, which had been left ajar. He nudged the door open wider with his snout and sauntered into the house.

"Damn dog," Sean said.

He eased himself out of the car. He let out a tired, exasperated sigh and wiped his forehead with his palm. He took a deep breath, then exhaled. He pulled out a cell phone from inside his shirt pocket and thought about calling Triple-A first. But then he thought better of it and dialed 911.

"What is your emergency?" the 911 operator said.

"Uh, my car crashed into a tree," Sean said. "I was traveling west on Sierra Linda Drive in Knollwood Meadows and there was a medium-sized black dog sitting in the middle of the road. So, I swerved to avoid hitting the dog and my car jumped a curb and hit a tree."

"Did you sustain any injuries, sir?"

"No, I'm fine. No injuries or anything like that. Just shaken up. There's no need for an ambulance, thanks."

"Is there anyone else with you, sir?"

"No. Just me."

"All right, I'm going to dispatch an officer to meet with you so you can file a police report."

"Okay. Thanks."

Sean hung up and walked to the back of his car and looked at the Bryants' house. He noticed the porch light was off as well as all of the lights within the house. He looked both ways up and down Sierra Linda Drive, then crossed the street and walked up the little path toward the front

door. The door was still open. He stopped a few feet from the door and hesitated a moment, not sure what to do next, whether to ring the doorbell, knock on the door, or call out to see if anyone was awake. He could not tell whether anyone was home.

Thor came to the front door, barked a few times, and wagged his tail. He did not growl or bare his teeth.

Sean took a few steps back and prayed that the dog wouldn't jump out and maul him.

"It's okay," Sean said with his hands raised. "It's all right." He put down one arm with caution and reached out a finger to press the doorbell. He flinched in surprise with a sharp intake of air as all the lights on the ground floor flashed on and off, but not on the second floor. The lights stopped flashing.

"What the heck was that all about?" Sean wondered aloud. "Easy," he said to the dog. "Stay. Stay."

Sean turned from the front door and walked down the little path to the street, then crossed the street to his car. He walked around the front of his car and inspected the damage, then leaned against the passenger's side.

In a few minutes, a pair of headlight beams appeared over the rise and a black-and-white cruiser came into view.

Sean flagged down the cruiser, which pulled over and parked in front of the tree where Sean's totaled Buick had smashed into it.

The blue-and-red strobes flashed to caution any oncoming traffic. Two officers got out of the car and approached Sean.

One officer's badge identified him as Officer Westbrook and the other as Officer Miller. He held a flashlight in one hand and aimed it toward Sean and the Buick. "How can we help you, sir?"

"Uh, there was a dog in the middle of the road," Sean said, "and I swerved to avoid it and smashed into this tree."

Officer Miller checked the front of the Buick. "Anyone hurt?"

"No," Sean replied. "There's no one here but me. I saw the dog get up and go into that house over there." He pointed to the house. "The door is open—actually ajar—but I don't know if anyone's home or if they're sleeping. All the lights are off."

"Did you knock or ring the doorbell or call out?" Officer Westbrook asked.

"I rang the doorbell, but all the lights downstairs flashed on and off for several seconds. I don't know what that was about."

"Could be an anti-burglar system to scare away prowlers and burglars."

"Well, I've never seen anything like that before."

"Always a first time, eh?" Officer Miller said with a mischievous smile. "Well, your car's definitely totaled, from what I can see."

"I've got Triple-A," Sean said, "and I can call for a tow truck. I live about six or seven miles from here."

"Have you been drinking, sir?" Officer Westbrook asked.

"I had a few drinks and some food at the Knollwood Tavern. I was heading home from there."

"All right. Could you stand here for a moment, please, sir?"

Sean stood where Officer Westbrook pointed and flashed the light in Sean's face. He squinted from the bright light.

Officer Westbrook could see that Sean's eyes were a little red. "Could I see your driver's license and registration, please?"

"Sure." Sean reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet and flipped it open to show Officer Westbrook his driver's license. "The registration papers are in the glove compartment."

"All right."

Sean reached into the car, opened the glove compartment, and withdrew the registration papers, then handed them to Officer Westbrook, who glanced at them.

"Thank you, sir," Officer Westbrook said. He gave the papers and the wallet back to Sean who put the wallet back in his rear pants pocket and tossed the registration papers on the driver's seat.

"We're going to give you a breathalyzer test," Officer Westbrook said, "and have you walk a straight line and touch your finger to your nose."

Sean's blood alcohol content was lower than the legal limit of 0.08% in the state of California. He also succeeded in walking a straight line without faltering and touched his finger to his nose.

"All right, my partner and I are going to go check out the house and see if anyone's home," Officer Westbrook said. "Please come with us."

They crossed the street and walked up the little path toward the front door.

"There's a dog in the house," Sean said.

Both officers nodded in acknowledgment.

Thor came to the front door and barked a couple times.

Officer Miller pressed the doorbell and the lights on the ground floor flashed on and off for a several seconds. "This doesn't look like an anti-burglar system to me," he said. "They're doorbell signalers for deaf people."

"It sure startled me the first time when I rang the doorbell," Sean said.

"I have an idea," Officer Miller said. He walked down the path toward the street. "Let's flash our lights at the upstairs windows and see what happens."

Officer Miller and Officer Westbrook stepped away from the front door and went toward the

sidewalk. They turned on their car's two five-hundred-watt spotlights and aimed the beams of light at the upstairs windows. They waved them back and forth in the hopes of gaining someone's attention.

After a few minutes, Officer Miller saw a curtain pull aside in one window. "At least someone's home."

A light in one window came on, then a light in the other window. The living room lights came on, and they saw a man, a woman with a baby cradled in her arms, a teenaged boy, and a teenaged girl, all clad in pajamas. They had expressions of concern and curiosity.

"Are you deaf?" Officer Miller asked in sign language.

"Yes," the Bryants signed as they nodded.

"Okay," Officer Miller signed with a nod. "I know fingerspelling and some sign," he signed to them. He turned to speak to Officer Westbrook, signing at the same time so that the family would know what he said. "I took some sign language classes in adult school a few years after I graduated from high school."

He turned to the Bryants. "Please pardon me if I'm not very fluent in sign language," he continued signing. "I haven't had much practice, so I'm more or less signing impaired, if you get my meaning." He flashed them an affable grin.

Nathan, Josslyn, Caden, and Trina smiled in return. They started to relax.

"We understand," Josslyn signed.

"They understand," Officer Miller translated for Officer Westbrook and Sean.

"Just go a little slow for me, okay?" he signed to Josslyn and Nathan, who nodded. "Uh, this gentleman here—" Officer Miller gestured to Sean "—said that there was a black dog sitting in the middle of the road, and he swerved to avoid hitting the dog and crashed his car into that tree across the street."

"Oh, no!" Josslyn signed.

"Which black dog was it?" Nathan signed, though he already suspected Thor.

"This gentleman thinks it might be your dog," Officer Miller said, "because he witnessed the dog get up and go into your house."

"But how did the dog get out?" Nathan signed. "The door was closed and locked and our security system was turned on."

"Well, somehow, some way, the dog got out, because the driver of that car saw it sitting in the middle of the road."

"Are you sure it was a dog?" Josslyn signed.

"The lady wants to know if you're sure it was a dog that you saw?" Officer Miller asked Sean.

"Yes," Sean said with a nod and pointed his finger at Thor. "It was that dog. Black and medium-sized and I saw it go into the house when it got off the street."

"I'll bet it was that spirit," Josslyn signed at high speed to Nathan and hoped Officer Miller didn't catch what she said. "Probably made itself appear as Thor. Remember, it's a shape-shifter."

"I'm sorry," Officer Miller signed. "I didn't catch part of what you just said. Could you slow down and repeat what you said?"

"Hold on," Officer Westbrook said. "I need to ask them if there's anyone else in the house besides them."

"My partner wants to know if there's anyone else in the house besides you guys?" Officer Miller signed to Nathan and Josslyn, who shook their heads in response.

Officer Westbrook pointed at an upstairs window. "Well, I flashed my light in the window on the second floor, and I just saw someone standing there. Someone just pulled the curtain aside and then let go of it."

Officer Miller interpreted what Officer Westbrook had just said.

"Our house," Josslyn signed with hesitation, "is haunted."

"Your house is what?" Officer Miller asked. "Scary? Has a monster in it?"

"No," Josslyn signed. "Our house is *haunted*. There is a spirit in our house, and we've been dealing with it for about six months now."

"We have a paranormal research team coming to investigate our house soon," Nathan signed. "We recently contacted them by e-mail and received a response."

"I see," Officer Miller signed. "I would like the name of that organization along with their contact information. I'd like to contact them for validation."

Josslyn went into the study and brought a printout to Officer Miller. "All the information is there," she signed.

"Thank you, ma'am," Officer Miller said. "Sorry to bother you this late at night. Good night."

As they walked away, Nathan closed and locked the front door and checked the security system. He saw that it had been turned off. "No wonder the upstairs doorbell signalers didn't flash," he signed to Josslyn.

"It was that spirit," Josslyn signed, angry and frustrated. "No doubt about it."

"I know," Nathan signed as he turned on the security system. "We'll just have Thor sleep with us in the bedroom."

"What if the dog gets out of the house again, even while we're sleeping?"

"We can take turns keeping an eye on the dog and sleep in shifts."

The following afternoon, Josslyn pulled into the driveway after she returned from getting some groceries at the local market and noticed Nathan at the living room window. Her skin crawled as she shut off the ignition and unbuckled her seatbelt. She grabbed her purse and got out of the car. She saw Nathan at another window, this time upstairs. Anxiety rose within her, and she slammed the car door and ran to the house.

Upon entry, she dashed upstairs but did not see Nathan at the window. She went into another room, then back downstairs where she saw him in the study.

“Nathan,” she signed with a wave of her arm to draw his attention.

He turned to face Josslyn. “Back so soon? That was quick.”

“How did you get down here so fast?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just saw you upstairs a moment ago and seconds before that, you were standing at the living room window.” Josslyn then realized it was the demon, which had since left Nathan’s body.

Nathan gave her a quizzical look. “I wasn’t standing at either window.”

“Well, I saw you when I pulled up and your eyes were rolled up and all white, your mouth was hanging open and you were standing still. It can only mean one thing.”

Nathan nodded understanding. “It was inside me, and I had no awareness of it at all.”

Anger and frustration rose in Josslyn. “Well, the paranormal research team will be here in a couple days. I just wish it was *today* instead!” She walked out of the study.

Nathan stood there and glared at her from behind as she went into the kitchen to put away the groceries.

“Bitch,” Nathan said out loud in a demonic voice.

Trina and Caden were in their rooms; she read an e-book on her tablet and he logged in online to chat with Jared and Evan.

Nathan lay adrift on his back in the swimming pool and kicked at the water. He floated from one end of the pool to the other in slow, repeated laps, which made him feel serene.

Josslyn gave herself a bubble bath and savored the warm bath water laced with a little lavender oil. She felt relaxed and tranquil as she lay back in the tub with a smile of satisfaction and contentment. A lavender-scented candle sat on the counter near the sink.

Maddie dozed in her crib in the master bedroom, and Thor lay on the floor between the bed and the crib.

Trina swiped the face of the tablet to turn the page of the e-book when a small, black spider appeared at the top of the tablet. It had crept from the back of the device and skittered down the face of the tablet. She flinched in disgust and flicked it away with her hand. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a daddy-long-legs spider inch down her left arm. She swatted it away with her hand and shuddered in disgust.

Caden typed out his next sentence and noticed a small brown spider skitter across the keyboard. He flinched in surprise, smacked it with the palm of his hand, and wiped his hands. He pressed the backspace key to delete what he'd typed and keyed the following:

Darn spider on my keyboard

He pressed the enter key and saw a different type of spider crawl across his lap. He pushed himself away from the computer desk with his arms and legs, and stood up to brush the spider away with a quick swipe of his hand. He then noticed another spider on his right forearm, and he flung that arm in a wide arc with a jerk. The spider flew off his arm and landed on the floor. He approached it and stepped on it with the sole of his shoe. He sat back down and pulled the chair up to his desk. As he did so, yet another spider eased down the front of his computer monitor on its web string. He swatted it away with his hand.

Nathan continued to lay adrift on his back in the pool when he felt a physical force grab his right arm and right leg. He was then pulled underwater.

Unseen hands pushed Josslyn down in the bathtub with such force that she swallowed some bath water in shock and surprise. She was pushed under water farther and constrained.

Nathan flailed against the unseen assailant as he struggled to be released from the grip that held onto him.

Trina observed twenty spiders of various species crawl across the top of her computer desk, vanity table, and bed. More spiders skittered to and fro on the floor. She screamed.

Caden looked up above the computer monitor to see several spiders scamper up and down one wall. He looked at another wall and the ceiling, and saw more spiders move up and down. Two or three of them came down the ceiling via their web strings. He felt one critter creep up the side of his neck and he slapped it with the palm of his hand, which killed it, then he wiped his hand on the outer thigh of his jeans.

Trina pulled up the camera app and took several snapshots, while at the same time, she slapped her arms and legs and flicked and swatted at the spiders that skittered up and down her body. She then pulled up the video app and filmed fifteen seconds of the spiders that were on her computer desk and chair, on the walls, ceiling, windows, and floor.

Caden brushed away the spiders from his smartphone, then pulled up the camera app and took several snapshots around his room. Next, he pulled up the video app and filmed ten seconds of video, all the while he swatted and slapped at spiders on his neck and arms. He ran to the bedroom door and grabbed the doorknob to turn it. The door was locked.

Trina also ran to her bedroom door and placed her hand on the doorknob to turn it. It was locked. She pushed and pulled hard on it, but to no avail. She banged on the bedroom door with her fists and kicked it with one foot. She shrieked in frustration and fright.

Caden pounded on his bedroom door with his fists. He backed up a bit and rammed his shoulder to the door in the hopes of breaking it open, but to no avail. He hefted his leg and slammed his foot against the door several times.

Maddie began to cry as her body sensed the the banging, pounding, and kicking.

Nathan exerted as much force as he could to free himself from invisible hands that held him under water. In his mind and in his heart, he prayed with ardent fervor. *I command you in the name and spirit of Jesus to unhand me this instant!* Nathan felt the tight grip loosen. *I plead the precious blood of Christ over me and over the premises of this property! In Jesus's name, amen!*

The hold on Nathan weakened some more as he continued to pray in thought and in spirit. At last, he was freed, and he broke the water's surface with a gasp. He swam to the edge of the pool and hefted himself out of the water, then ran to the double sliding glass doors. When he went to yank them open, they were locked. The drapes closed on their own volition. He banged and pounded on the double sliding glass doors with his fists.

As Josslyn struggled to free herself, she prayed with fervent ardor in thought and in spirit. The Lord rebuke you! In the name of Jesus, I rebuke you! The tight grip loosened. In the name of Jesus, I command you to let go of me and depart from me! Get thee behind me, Satan! Jesus compels you! I curse your works and send you back whence you came! The hold on Josslyn weakened even more as she continued with fervent prayer. I loose the power of the Holy Spirit to convict you of your guilt! I plead the precious blood of Christ over me and over our house and our family! In Jesus's name, amen!

Josslyn was freed, and her head broke the surface of the bath water. She gasped with relief, stood up, and grabbed a towel nearby, wrapped herself with it, and stepped out of the bathtub. She turned the bathroom doorknob to find it locked. She pulled hard on it, shook and jiggled the door, then banged it with her fists and kicked it with her foot, while she yelled and screamed at the same time.

The bathroom door unlocked itself.

Josslyn yanked it open and ran out of bathroom and through the master bedroom. She saw the bedroom door slam shut. She went to open it, but it was locked. She banged, kicked, pushed, and pulled on it, oblivious of Maddie as the baby cried. An acrid smell of smoke

wafted up to Josslyn's nostrils, and she looked down at the floor. An orange light flickered and undulated and filtered through the underside of the door. That icy-cold hand of fear encircled her heart again. She turned to eye Maddie's crib and ran around the king-sized bed, bundled and covered the baby in two layers of blankets, lifted her, and held her close.

Nathan pulled on one of the double sliding glass doors with such force that it opened. He lost his balance for a second and almost keeled over. He ran up the stairs and down the hall where he found an electric griddle on the floor outside the master bedroom door. Balled-up newspapers burned on the griddle. The door to the master bedroom flew open and Josslyn stood there with Maddie held close to her.

Nathan stooped to pick up the burning griddle and ran into the en suite bathroom and tossed the griddle into the bathtub, which was still full of bath water.

Nathan and Josslyn ran to Trina's door, which was closed, yet it trembled and rattled in an animated fashion as if by an earthquake. Nathan opened the door, which startled Trina, her face tear-streaked.

"What happened?" Nathan signed. His chest rose and fell as he breathed hard.

"The door was locked and I couldn't get out!" Trina signed. "The whole room was full of spiders that came out of nowhere!"

Nathan glanced at the walls behind Trina but did not see spiders anywhere. He ran down the hall to Caden's room and opened the door.

Caden flinched backward in surprise. "I tried getting out and I couldn't," he signed. "The door was locked or stuck or something. The whole room was crawling with a bunch of different kinds of spiders. I even took pictures and a video."

"Me, too," Trina signed.

But there weren't any spiders in Caden's room, either. Caden and Trina turned on their respective devices and were confounded when the digital snapshots and video showed their bedrooms with bare walls and ceilings and nothing on the floors, desks or beds. Not a spider anywhere in any of the pictures.

"But there were spiders!" Trina signed.

"Yeah!" Caden signed. "Yes, there were spiders. They were crawling up and down my neck, my arms, my body, and my legs. They were crawling all over my room."

"That's exactly how it was in my room, too!"

Nathan looked at Caden's smartphone and Trina's tablet. "Maybe the spiders will show up in the pictures and videos later. I don't know. I'm just guessing. Right now, I'm trying to think clearly."

Josslyn walked up to Nathan. "I'm thinking we should go to your parents' or stay at a motel."

"We discussed this before. What if it follows us there?"

"That's a chance we'll just have to take until the investigators come. We need to stay strong in

our faith.”

“All right. Let’s grab some stuff and we’ll head over to my parents’ place.” He turned to Caden and Trina. “I want you guys to stay in our bedroom with the door closed. Keep an eye on Maddie. We’ll be out of here soon.”

Dusk passed and turned into twilight.

The Bryants stayed together in the master bedroom while Josslyn and Nathan packed their clothes. This way, they could watch over one another and be protected, should anything unforeseen happen. They abided by the motto, "The family that prays together stays together."

Josslyn looked up and stared at one wall for a moment. She flapped her hand to get Nathan's attention and pointed to the wall.

Caden and Trina followed Nathan's gaze.

They all felt as if their souls had left their body.

The wooden cross was upside down and colored black. Blood trickled in little droplets that splattered on the hardwood floor every ten seconds.

Nathan approached the cross and raised a hand to touch it. It was moist to the touch. The sticky red liquid could be seen on his fingers. He rubbed the cross with his index and middle fingers and peered at his fingers. The black substance was something like soot. He pulled the cross off the wall and went into the bathroom to run it under warm water and wash it with soap. The blood and soot washed away, revealing the wood underneath. He turned off the faucet and towel-dried the cross. He laid it on the counter adjacent to the sink, then went back into the bedroom.

Nathan and Josslyn finished packing and pulled out suitcases for Caden and Trina.

"Put some of your clothes and bathroom accessories in the suitcases," Nathan signed to Caden.

Caden and Trina went to her bedroom first and packed some clothes for her. Then they went to Caden's bedroom and did the same for him.

Josslyn carried Maddie in one arm as she held her purse in her free hand.

"Ready?" Nathan signed.

Josslyn, Caden, and Trina nodded.

"Let's go," Nathan signed. He led his family out the door of the master bedroom and into the hall.

They went down the hall to the top of the stairs and saw that the ground floor was dark except for a lone lamp in the living room. They went down the stairs and stopped halfway.

The cross on the living room wall was also upside down. It had been covered with soot and dripped with blood.

The living room was covered with newspapers, either balled-up or flat. Streams of toilet paper were lodged in the central air and heating vents in the ceiling. It was the same way in the study, kitchen, and dining room.

Caden stared at all the newspapers in the living room, mystified. "What's with the newspapers,

paper towels, and toilet paper? That's a *lot* of paper."

Trina craned her neck to peer into the dining room. "Where did they come from?"

"These are the newspapers we used to wrap things with when we moved here six months ago," Josslyn signed. "I had saved them and put them in boxes in the den." Josslyn's expression registered understanding. "Do you realize what this means, Nathan? The demon is attempting to burn down the house! The griddle with the burning newspapers in the hall outside our bedroom door was a hint! It wants to burn down our house and kill us! Even the baby! This is the last straw!"

Josslyn ran through the living room and turned on the recessed lighting and the remaining lamps.

Nathan went into the dining room. "Turn on all the lights in the study, the kitchen, and the den, too!" he signed to Caden and Trina. "Do it *now*!"

They turned on all the lights and lamps, then converged in the living room and began to pick up and pull down all the newspapers, toilet paper, and paper towels and throw them in the trash.

Now that they saw what the evil spirit could do to their house and their lives, they were afraid to leave.

"We're gonna have to stay," Nathan signed. "If we leave, it could very well set the house on fire while we're gone. I'm gonna call my parents and let them know we're going to have the kids stay with them." He sat on the couch and turned on the TV and VP to call his parents.

Trina's lower lip quivered from fright. "I'm so scared," she signed, then sobbed and buried her face in her hands.

Josslyn went to Trina and embraced her.

"I'm scared, too," Caden signed.

"Come here," Josslyn signed as she beckoned with an outstretched hand.

Caden went to Josslyn and embraced both her and Trina.

"Listen to me." Josslyn pulled back from the embrace. "We'll be all right. We just have to be strong, have faith and pray, and know that we can beat this thing. This thing cannot beat us, it cannot win. It's not in the cards. God is the ultimate victor. We have to remain steadfast in our faith through Jesus."

Caden and Trina nodded in agreement.

"After your father drops you off at Grandma and Grandpa's place, your father and I will take turns staying on watch to make sure the house is safe. The group from the Skylar and Associates Paranormal Research Institute will be here tomorrow. They'll be able to help us."

Nathan woke up earlier than usual after a restless night, fixed himself a cup of coffee, and went to the study.

To relieve his apprehension about his family and the problems with the house, he spent a few hours researching over-the-counter pink sheets and checked his trades from the day before.



Josslyn woke up about an hour later but stayed in bed for a while.

Thank You, Lord, she prayed in thought, for waking me up this morning. Thank You for this day that You have made. Thank you for blessing us with your protection as we slept the night before. Thank You for Your blessing of another day of life. Let us rejoice this day and rejoice in the Lord. In Jesus's name, amen.

She went downstairs and made some tea, then checked her online boutique to process customers' orders and answer e-mails. She looked forward to meeting members of the Skylar and Associates Paranormal Research Institute and to working with them.

Josslyn decided to do some laundry in order to pass the time before the paranormal investigators arrived. She picked up a hamper of dirty clothes and went to the laundry room. She put the clothes in the washer.

"Josslyn," a voice said.

She added detergent and turned on the washer unit.

"Josslyn," the voice said again.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see her late parents standing before her. The sight of their dead-gray, decomposed flesh made her gag.

Josslyn's parents had been dead for twenty years. Her father had succumbed to acute myeloblastic leukemia, at the age of fifty-six after battling the debilitating disease for a little more than two years. Her mother had died due to complications from Parkinson's Disease, which she'd had for eleven years, along with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis.

Josslyn's father held out his arms with a leery, toothless grin. "Come to Papa," he verbalized, which Josslyn was able to lip read. He beckoned her to come to him and give him a hug.

"Yes . . . come to Papa," Josslyn's mother articulated with a sneer. She beckoned with a wave of her arm. "He's been waiting for you."

Josslyn screamed and ran from the laundry room.

"What happened?" Nathan signed as Josslyn ran into the study.

"I just saw my parents in the laundry room," Josslyn signed, pale and shaken. She wiped tears from her cheeks. "I went to do some laundry and when I walked in, they were standing there."

They looked horrible!”

Nathan went around his desk and drew her to him with his arms.

“It was awful!” Josslyn signed. “I know it wasn’t them! I just know it!”

“It’ll be all right. The Skylar and Associates group will be here soon to help us. If you want, I’ll go with you back to the laundry room and help you with the laundry. Give you some company to make you feel a little better.”

“Thanks, hon. I appreciate it.”

They went back to the laundry room and neither saw Josslyn’s parents. But they did see a dark, solid form run from the middle of the room and through a wall. They saw that it had a full-bodied humanoid contour with a head, shoulders, arms, a torso, and legs. They knew it was the demon.

In the evening, members of the Skylar and Associates Paranormal Research Institute stood before Josslyn, Nathan, and David Osborn.

Eric Skylar led the introductions. He had founded his organization after a personal experience with the paranormal when he had been a college student.

His associates included: Robert, tech manager; Barbara, case manager and researcher; and Colleen, psychic medium with a PhD in demonology.

They all came from various backgrounds. Each of them also had had a personal experience with the paranormal at one point in their lives, ranging from experiencing cold spots to witnessing full-bodied apparitions. The investigators had something in common: to seek answers as to what happens after death and what it is like on “the other side,” as well as to gain more knowledge and understanding of the spiritual realm.

Eric, the lead investigator, glanced around the living room and admired the home’s decor. “So tell us the hot spots and what’s been happening,” he said as David interpreted. “Would you like to give us a tour?”

Josslyn and Nathan took them room by room as David translated to everyone. They reiterated all that had happened since moving there six months prior.

Colleen assimilated what Josslyn and Nathan had told them. “When you woke up with those scratches that one morning and your son’s smartphone showed 666,” she said to Josslyn, “that’s the devil’s way of mocking the Holy Trinity. You know, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The opposite is what we call the Unholy Triad—Satan, the False Prophet, and The Beast.”

She turned to Nathan. “That eerie dream you had with the robed people standing around the bed and your wife’s face turning into a demon is the devil’s way of instilling fear in the family. It’s imitating how the fear of God is instilled in people the way some overzealous preachers espouse the dangers of Hell and eternal torment. We need to understand that the devil mimics God. More importantly, this is God’s battle, not ours. We are just His little helpers in this spiritual conflict that has been going on since the beginning of time.”

Colleen turned to Josslyn once more. “About the pastors who came here, then fled afterward. They were afraid. One needs to understand that fear is a spirit, not just an emotion we feel. As it says in God’s Word, ‘For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of sound mind.’ That’s in Second Timothy, Chapter 1, verse 7, in the King James Version of the Bible. Also, those photos you e-mailed us, the series of snapshots with the bizarre light anomalies, they are definitely evil spirits, no question about it.”

Nathan nodded and thought for a moment. “What about when people see these spirits standing in front of them? They look like a mist or a dark shadow or some other indefinable form.”

“Their true form is never manifested to the human eye. What people see instead is a falsified form. That’s how they want people to see them. They project what *they* want people to see.”

“Well, I’ll tell ya what,” Eric said, “when we first walked in here, I could feel the oppressiveness

in this house; it's palpable. You could cut it with a knife."

The other members nodded in.

"I felt the oppressiveness while on our way here, too," Colleen said, "about an hour before we even set foot in the house."

"All right, here's what we're gonna do," Eric said. "We're gonna get started on setting up the equipment and then go lights out."

The crew brought in and set up various equipment including a laser grid, a REM pod, and an IR digital camera, all of which contained motion sensors to detect spiritual activity, if any.

Cables extended from a van parked by the garage and snaked through the front door into various parts of the residence. A reel with cables lay in the living room. Two sets of monitors had been set up for viewing the investigation.

Josslyn, Nathan, and David stood with the crew around the van.

“Everything’s set,” Robert said. He pointed out the live feeds on the monitors and explained that several cameras would monitor the rooms which had paranormal activity.

“That’s why he’s the best tech manager in our organization,” Eric said to Nathan and Josslyn. “Okay, we’re ready to begin. Now, Robert will man the monitors here in the van. Me, Josslyn, and Nathan will investigate the ground floor with David interpreting. Barbara and Colleen will investigate upstairs. Then, we will switch places and later on, some of us will take turns going outside to check the grounds. All right, everybody, let’s go dark.”

The interior and exterior lights were turned off, the only light the glow of the equipment.

Nathan and Josslyn followed Eric as they conducted a baseline reading in the living room with David in tow. Barbara and Colleen started in the upstairs hall.

Eric lifted his digital audio recorder. “Let’s do an EVP session,” he said to Nathan and Josslyn. “This way, if we get any responses to our questions or comments, we will hear disembodied voices or other sounds on the recorder that we don’t hear with our natural hearing.”

He spoke into the recorder. “This is Eric, founder of Skylar and Associates and lead investigator, Bryants’ residence, living room, with homeowners Nathan and Josslyn, and David, their sign-language interpreter, commencing at 8:45 p.m.” He waited fifteen seconds, then asked the first question. “What is your name?” He gazed into the thermal camera’s screen, which showed normal heat and cold signatures in a range of colors from dark blue to deep red. He waited fifteen seconds before he asked another question. “Are you here, in this room?” Fifteen-second pause. “Why are you here?” He paused for fifteen seconds.

He looked at the K2 meter in his other hand. “I’m getting a reading of point-oh-two on the meter. Either a very high level of electricity did a blip or there is a spirit present.” His walkie-talkie crackled.

“Eric, this is Barbara in the upstairs hall. Colleen and I just heard a low guttural sound for two seconds on the audio recorder. She said it sounded like a growl. There is no reading on the K2 meter, though.”

“Okay. Save that for the analysis. Anything else?”

“Yeah, I asked how did it come to be here and what brought it here. At first, it sounded like a very faint whisper. After playing it back, it sounded like a chuckle, an evil laugh or chortle.”

“All right. Good work.”

Two hours later, both groups converged in the living room and held a briefing.

“I picked up on a presence,” Colleen, the psychic medium, said, “of an evil spirit, a demon. Actually, there are two of them. One is here 24/7 while the other comes and goes whenever it pleases.”

“Is it here in the living room now?” Josslyn signed as David translated. “Right here in this spot?”

“Yes and no. It’s constantly moving about. That’s why some of them are called restless spirits, because they don’t stay in one place for too long.”

“I see,” Nathan signed. “You mean it doesn’t stay in one area, in one room, or do you mean it doesn’t stay in one residence?”

“I mean in one area, in one room. It’ll stay in a residence for as long as it can—years, even decades, until it’s forced out by a cleansing or an exorcism.”

“Do you know what it wants or what they want? Has it said anything to you?”

Josslyn liked Nathan’s line of questioning, then turned to Colleen. “Is it targeting the baby? Threatening it?”

“Uh . . . not exactly, but I have a general idea of what it is doing. More than anything else, it’s targeting the whole family, particularly the parents, but in different ways.”

“At one point,” Barbara said, “the K2 meter spiked to three-point-seven. This is not something I see often because I’m usually behind the desk at the office, managing and researching cases prior to investigations.”

“When the K2 meter spiked, that’s when I knew there was a presence right then,” Colleen added. “I asked why it was here. It said, ‘Let me put it into terms you can understand—I like it here.’”

“I was wondering since you can hear it,” Josslyn asked, “I’m curious to know if you can see it as well?”

“Oh, yeah. I can even describe what it looks like. It has a dragon-like head, though not the kind you see in movies or at annual Chinese New Year parades. This one is beyond evil-looking and it gives me the creeps. More importantly, dragons are symbolic and represent fierceness.”

“The word ‘dragon’ is mentioned a few times in the Book of Revelation,” Josslyn signed as David translated, “with one instance of ‘red dragon’ mentioned as well.”

“Right you are. This one in particular has a pair of horns like a ram’s. It’s so mean and vicious-looking with evil eyes, an odd, pressed-in nose, and a toothy grin.”

“All right,” Eric said. “Good work, everybody. Let’s continue.” Everyone returned to their original places.

Eric’s walkie-talkie crackled. “Robert, here. Just wanted to let you know right away that on one of the monitors showed a shadow move down the second-floor hall. It went from the head of the stairs toward the back.”

“We’re checking it now. Thanks.” Eric pocketed the walkie-talkie. “Let’s head upstairs.”

Barbara and Colleen gauged for the presence of a spirit in the hall. They looked around and pointed the full-spectrum digital camera, thermal camera, and K2 meter in various places. None of the devices detected electromagnetic waves or spiritual activity.

"It's not here now," Colleen said. "I don't sense its presence in the hall, but it's still somewhere in the house."

Eric's walkie-talkie crackled to life once again.

"This is Robert again. I just saw a shadow go across the grid that's projected on the wall in the living room."

"It's playing games with us," Eric said. "Thanks."

"That's why it constantly moves about all the time, rarely sitting still for any length of time," Colleen said. "It has no peace and is never satisfied. That is the way of sin. After thirty years as a psychic medium, having been born with the gift, and continually learning as a demonologist, I know this. So far as I can tell, this is consistent with every investigation of a demonic haunting I've been a part of."



Fifteen minutes later, the investigators conversed amongst themselves to determine the next steps to be taken. They had members switch places, two of whom were assigned to investigate the front yard and backyard.

Eric entered the dining room. "Get anything?"

Barbara shook her head but Colleen stated, "I felt like I was being drawn in here. I'm seeing events that happened recently."

"Like what?" Joslynn asked.

"I see Nathan standing on the dining table and toying with the chandelier. It was rigged to come loose and fall."

Josslyn raised her brows, surprised.

"I also see him in the laundry room, nailing shut the little window by the washer/dryer units."

Josslyn remembered the day Trina was locked in the laundry room.

"Now I'm getting a vision of Nathan opening the front door," Colleen continued, "to let the dog out very late one night . . . the intention was for the dog to get hit by a car coming over the rise."

Josslyn looked at Nathan, dismayed. She shook her head. *How could you?* she thought.

"Soon after, later that same night, he ripped the security panel off the wall by the door."

Nathan's facial expression registered surprise and sorrow. "How was I to know? How could I

remember? I'm so sorry, honey.”

Josslyn realized it had been the demon that used Nathan as a vessel to do these things. “Apology accepted and I forgive—”

The couch glided across the living room floor at a rapid pace toward the dining room with one side upending. It blocked the doorway between the dining room and the living room.

Everyone jumped back in surprise.

The kitchen table from the breakfast nook slid across the kitchen floor at high speed toward the doorway to the dining room. It became airborne and the top of the table slammed into the doorframe, which impeded their escape from the dining room. Four kitchen chairs slid across the floor from their respective places and slammed into the underside of the kitchen table.

Josslyn, Colleen, and Barbara screamed.

“Hand me the flashlight,” Eric said to Barbara.

As Barbara handed it to Eric, the beam of light swooped across Nathan’s face.

Joslyn flapped one hand to get David’s attention. “Point the flashlight at Nathan’s face!” she signed with urgency. “Point the light at Nathan’s face now!”

Nathan’s eyes were rolled back to show a pair of white orbs and his mouth hung open, slack-jawed. A low, guttural groan escaped his lips, then the eyes closed.

Josslyn tapped him on the shoulder. “Nathan!” She shook his arm to get his attention and to get him to snap out of whatever trance he was in. “Nathan, it’s me, Josslyn. Come forward, Nathan!”

Nathan’s eyelids flew open, and Josslyn saw that they were black orbs of nothingness. She felt chills run up her spine and goosebumps roll down her arms. “Nathan!” She shook his arm once again. “Come forward, Nathan!”

Nathan grabbed Josslyn in a choke hold and squeezed her neck with his strong arm.

“The Lord rebuke you, evil spirit!” Colleen said. “In the mighty name of Jesus Christ, I rebuke you!”

A wine glass flew off the cupboard shelf, whizzed over the island into the dining room, and grazed Josslyn’s right ear before it smashed against the wall and shattered. Shards fell to the floor with a tinkling sound.

“Release her!” Colleen said as Josslyn struggled to break free from Nathan’s chokehold. “I command you in the name of —” She doubled over and groaned, gasped for air, then stood up. “I just got punched in the stomach.” She took a few breaths, then continued. “Get thee behind me, Satan! As one who is in tune with the Lord and having knowledge and understanding of the spiritual realm, I command thee in the glorious name, spirit and blood of the Lamb that ye depart from us at once! Away with ye, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord!”

Nathan’s arm relaxed and loosened its grip on Josslyn’s neck. She shoved Nathan’s arm away from her and huffed with anger. “Get out, unclean spirit!” she signed. “In the mighty, holy and

perfect name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and by the blood of the Lamb, we rebuke you! We loose the power of the Holy Spirit to convict you of your wickedness! We command you in the name of Jesus to depart from us, thou vile spirit!"

Nathan slumped against the wall. His knees buckled, and he sank to the ground.

Josslyn and Colleen lifted him up. They held him against the wall.

Nathan opened his eyes. They appeared normal. His eyes were blue. He shook his head to dispel the fog of confusion. "What happened?"

"The demon got inside you," Josslyn signed. "I think it's gone now. How are you feeling?"

"Weak, but I'll be all right. Just need to sit for a few minutes."

"Push the couch, the kitchen table and chairs away from the doorways," Eric said, "so we can get out of here." He glanced at his watch. "It's 6:00 a.m. We've been investigating for nearly nine hours. This is a good time to stop. We'll resume tomorrow evening." He looked at everyone, pensive. "There are answers waiting to be found."

The next evening, with everyone gathered in the living room, Eric gathered his thoughts for a moment, pensive. “We still don’t know how this spirit got in this house.” He took a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. He turned to Robert. “Bring in your equipment and let’s show them what we found. Then, after that, we’re gonna turn it over to Colleen to do a cleansing.”

Robert brought in a laptop and set it on the coffee table.

“First, we’re gonna run some EVPs.” He pulled up the master audio graph. “Just to reiterate, they’re electronic voice phenomena, where disembodied voices or sounds are recorded but not heard with the naked ear.”

Nathan and Josslyn nodded, then looked at the graph on the monitor with the black background and a straight white line. Robert pressed Play and they listened to the sounds while David interpreted and described a low guttural growl followed by a brief chuckle. Next, all but Josslyn and Nathan heard a brief whispering sound that came across as a short hiss.

After that, an inhuman voice said, “Where’s the baby?”

Josslyn drew back from the monitor, appalled. Hairs stood on the back of Nathan’s neck.

“As I explained last night,” Colleen said, “it’s just its way of scaring you by instilling fear, the same way some preachers at the Sunday pulpit instill the fear of God with threats of eternal judgment and hellfire. Don’t let it scare you. It’s just playing one of its sick games.”

Robert pulled up a video viewer. “Now, we’re gonna show you some evidence we caught on video.” He played a video file. “Watch here in this region, right here.” He pointed to a specific area on the monitor.

Nathan and Josslyn observed a shadow glide down the second-floor hallway.

Robert showed them a second video file. “You’ll see something go across.”

A formless, black mass floated across the green grid projected on the living room wall.

Josslyn squirmed in her seat, unnerved. “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Nathan sat up straight, almost rigid. “It takes a lot to scare me, and I’m a big guy, but this . . . this is just beyond words.”

“This particular evil spirit is a shadow demon,” Colleen said, “which was conjured up by some young, dark-haired guy in his early thirties. I can see that he has a tattoo on each hand, that of a septagram on one hand and that of a pentagram on the other—”

“Wait. From what you just said, I recognize the guy,” Nathan signed, “from that dream I told you about that I had a few months back. I was lying naked on a big bed in a dark room. Thirty people in dark robes stood at the foot of the bed in a semi-circle, some of whom were familiar faces like neighbors and other people walking by. I got the feeling that the guy with the tattoos was the leader.”

“According to the visions that I’ve seen,” Colleen said, “and some impressions that I’ve been receiving since beginning this investigation here, this is what happened. . .

“That guy in black had trespassed upon the property one day.”

“By any chance, would you know who this guy was?” Nathan signed.

“He was an aimless drifter. He scoped the grounds for a few weeks. Then, around Halloween, he along with five others sneaked in through the back. The sliding glass door was unlocked. They brought black candles and crystal rocks, a Ouija board, incense, a Satan bible and other items pertaining to the dark arts. They put on black robes with hoods pulled over their heads. One member drew a large pentagram with chalk on the floor in the den.

“Then they chanted an incantation as each member praised and worshipped the devil. The leader wanted to show them something. He said he’d been practicing for weeks and believed Halloween night was the night to demonstrate the master’s power, as he had put it. I sense that he was a show-off with a lot of pride.

“He stood in the middle of the pentagram while chanting. The others stood in a circle. They saw a dark mass rise from the floor. It appeared to be about five feet tall. Then it suddenly lunged toward the leader and shoved him with such force that he was knocked off his feet and flew across the room and slammed into one wall.

“The rest of the group got very scared. I can actually hear screaming as I speak. They ran out of the den and out the back.

“The guy in black who was left behind begged this entity not to hurt him, and he promised to leave the premises. He just took off running and none of them ever came back.”

Josslyn sat on the couch as her mind absorbed all of this. “So, none of the previous homeowners had anything to do with devil worship or bringing this entity into this house?”

“No,” Colleen said. “They were just as much victims of the demonic haunting as you are. The conjuring of this preternatural, which is a spiritual or supernatural being that exists beyond the natural realm—a shadow demon in this particular case—happened that Halloween night, five months before the first family moved into this house in March 2010.”

“I see. The guy who was responsible for all this, where is he now? Is he still around? In the neighborhood, I mean?”

“No, I don’t sense his presence. Not nearby, at least. The impression I’m getting is that he moved to another state.

“In fact, there are *two* demons,” Colleen continued, “one of which is the shadow demon that I’ve spoken of. The other is one of the thrones, principalities, or dominions—the type mentioned in the Bible. This one comes and goes as it pleases. There is nothing to stop it from doing whatever it wants. Demons have free will just like humans. Understand that they are not only evil spirits, but they are fallen angels who fell from the grace of God eons ago, long before the world was made. By nature, they are preternatural. Now the spiritual battle lines have been drawn between these demons and your family, and the battle has begun for your souls here in this house.”

Josslyn nodded in understanding. “Well, our consolation lies in the fact that these evil spirits have already been judged by the Lord, and they’ve been cursed, too. They know their final doom is certain.”

“Correct. This is why they hate the fact that humans—true believers—are saved by God’s grace through the salvation of Christ. They also hate that some of us will stand in judgment of them. It irks them. God did for us what Satan wanted done for him. We were created in God’s image after His likeness, plus He loves us more. He always forgives us for our sins whereas the devil and his angels sinned only once and have never been forgiven. Instead, they’ve been condemned to eternal punishment which will be in the lake of fire, their final destination.”

“Interestingly, though,” Colleen concluded, “the lake of fire is right in Israel, the apple of God’s eye, His own inheritance, His most prized treasure, which they hate more than any other nation in the world. Now, the old Heaven, the old Earth and the old Jerusalem have been marred and tainted by the devil and humans’ sins. It’s for that reason why Heaven and Earth shall pass away. They also know about a new Heaven, a new Earth and a new Jerusalem, which they will never, ever get to see nor get a chance to tarnish, because they will be locked away forever in that place of torment prepared for the devil and his angels. But they will *know* about it. The bottom line is that the Word of God shall stand forever. In Jesus’s name, amen.”

“Amen,” everyone said, while Nathan and Josslyn signed.

Josslyn's emotions swelled with admiration for the team. “I just want to tell you that I’m so glad we came across your website which mentions a a psychic medium with a PhD in demonology in your organization. That’s why we chose you. After all, we are believers.”

“And, you know that unbelievers don’t believe in any of this,” Colleen said. “That’s because they don’t believe in the spiritual realm.” She smiled and took Josslyn’s hands in her own. “I speak on behalf of all of us here when I say we appreciate your trust in us.” Then, she fell forward. She stretched out her arms to help break her fall and rolled to her side.

“You all right?” Eric asked. He bent over and grabbed her arm to help her to her feet.

“I was shoved from behind.” She sat up. “I’m all right, thanks.” She smoothed the front of her shirt and dusted off her jeans.

As Nathan took a step toward her, a section of the hardwood floor panel collapsed and his foot punctured the floor. The hole broke open and his leg went through. “Help!” he signed. “I’m being pulled! I can feel hands on my leg!”

“You’re coming down with us to hell!” the hearing people heard the demon say.

The crew grabbed Nathan and struggled to pull him up from the floor.

Josslyn ran across the room and snatched a wooden cross from one wall. She clutched it in one hand, and with her free hand, recited the Lord’s Prayer in sign. The upper half of the cross snapped back at a forty-five-degree angle.

Colleen reached in her bag and withdrew a silver cross, which she handed to Josslyn. She hung onto the cross with one hand and lifted it before her. “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle!” she signed with the other hand. “Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the enemy who roams the Earth, seeking the ruin of souls!” She felt a burning sensation across her face. Three scratch marks appeared and thin trickles of blood oozed on that side of her face. Her boldness grew even more. “The Lord rebuke thee, Satan! We cast thee forth in the mighty name of Jesus!”

Colleen prayed. "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in—"

A corner table flew from behind and slammed into her back, which knocked her to the ground,.

Robert ran toward Colleen and tripped. He felt his right ankle crack; he writhed in pain and spewed expletives.

"Stop this insanity!" Colleen shouted as she struggled to get to her feet. "I command thee in the mighty name of Jesus Christ!"

A table lamp rose and barreled toward her. She ducked in time. It flew into a wall and shattered upon impact. "I curse your works in the name of Jesus!"

Barbara felt her hair pulled with such force that it jerked her head back and she fell backward. She screamed in surprise. She scrambled to an upright position and headed for the front door. At the door, she realized it was locked. She twisted and turned the knob to try to open the door, but to no avail.

Eric was hoisted in mid-air and flung against the wall where he slumped to the ground, disoriented.

Robert went to a standing floor lamp in one corner of the room to turn on the light. When he turned the switch, the light flashed and sparks flew. Electrical currents ran through his body. He yelped in pain and surprise and tore himself away from the lamp. He struggled for air, doubled over in pain and shock, then collapsed on the floor.

David fell face-first on the floor as he was shoved from behind with incredible force.

Nathan stood with rolled-up white eyes and mouth agape. "Be still and know that I am the god of this world," a voice said from his mouth. "Thou shalt bow down thyself to me for I am a jealous god and thou shalt have no other gods before me."

An oversized mirror popped off the wall and flew toward Josslyn. She sidestepped in time. The mirror slammed into another wall and shattered.

Chaos ensued. Clanging sounds erupted in the kitchen. Pots and pans flew into the dining room.

Nathan sauntered toward Josslyn and gestured for her to come to him. She saw that he appeared as her father.

"Baby, come to me," he verbalized with gray, chapped lips. Then, he transformed to the image of her mother. "I got you, babe," he said in a dead voice. The sight of Nathan filled Josslyn with antipathy.

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" Josslyn signed. "The Lord rebuke thee! We cast ye forth in the mighty name of Jesus!"

The floorboards creaked and groaned. One side of the house shuddered. Stucco splintered and plaster fell from the ceiling. The ceiling bucked and lowered itself. Walls cracked and fragments of plaster fell to the floor. Solar panels broke apart and slid off the roof. Parts of the roof caved in.

People screamed and ran.

Josslyn fell on her knees and prayed with fervent ardor. “Lord, I beseech thee in the mighty name and spirit of Jesus! Please help us and protect us from this evil which attempts to prevail against us as if it were barging against the gates of Heaven! I humbly pray in the name and precious blood of the Lamb! Amen!”

A brilliant, dazzling light, which reflected the Lord’s glory, appeared near the ceiling above Josslyn and the crew. It expanded as it grew brighter.

Josslyn repeated the prayer.

Nathan’s appearance returned to normal.

Eric became less disoriented.

David helped lift up Robert from the floor and walked with him to the couch as Robert hobbled on one foot, breathless. Robert sat on the couch and exhaled a tired sigh.

Colleen and Barbara huddled together and held hands as they watched Josslyn pray in earnest.

The crew heard guttural groans of anger as the evil spirits were forced out of the house.

A few windows burst from within and shards of broken glass flew outward.

Demonic howls cried out.

The holy light shone throughout the house for what seemed an eternity. The brilliance diminished within the next thirty seconds, then faded out.

Everyone stood quiet for a few minutes. They gazed around the dark living room and sensed that the house felt lighter.

Josslyn went to Nathan and saw that he was back to being his normal self. She turned to Colleen. “Are they gone?”

“Yes, I can sense that they’re finally gone for good.”

They all clapped and cheered and gave one another hugs.

Colleen began the cleansing, a process of purification to get rid of the negative residue left by the evil spirits.

They opened all windows and doors, including the sliding glass doors. This way, any and all negativity could clear out with more ease. The house was smudged with white sage, also known as *Salvia apiana*.

She recited prayers and invoked the holy name of the Lord. "All negative energies must leave and do no harm. We have power and nothing to fear. Fear is a spirit, and God hath not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, and of power, and of a sound mind. We draw on the divine power from within our innermost being."

"I break up and release all stagnant energy in this place," she said. "May peace, light, and divine love protect us and be ever present." She went outdoors and smudged the backyard, then the front yard, as well as both sides of the house. Afterward, she extinguished the smudging wand and went back inside. "Bring the dining table and chairs into the den because that's where the portal was opened that Halloween night."

The men went into the dining room and brought the dining table into the center of the den, while the women brought the chairs.

"Please take your seats," Colleen said.

The group sat down in the chairs.

"Please put your elbows on the table with your palms facing out toward one another." They did so.

"Let us pray," Colleen said. "In the name and spirit of Jesus, we rebuke and purge any and all evil from this house. We bind the forces of darkness and lift them up into the mighty hand of the Lord. We loose the power of the Holy Spirit to convict them of their guilt, of their evil, and of their unrepentant wickedness. We cast them forth and command them to return whence they came. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we now close this portal."

Colleen turned down her palms, which touched the top of the table. The others followed suit.

"We seal and consecrate this portal," she said, "never to be opened again. In Jesus's name, amen."

"Amen," all parties said, while Nathan and Josslyn signed.

"Now, we will conclude the cleansing and purification process by using sweetgrass," Colleen said, "which will attract and bring in the blessings, goodness, and warmth that would be inviting and comfortable to anyone who steps into this house." She covered all corners in every room of the house, downstairs and upstairs, as well as the front and backyard, and both sides of the house. "The light will replace the darkness. We have power and nothing to fear. We draw on the divine power from within our innermost being. Light and contentment, come fill this space. In Jesus's name, amen."

"Amen."

Colleen returned to the den. She placed a white candle on a small plate on the table, then lit it, shook the matchstick until its flame went out, and dropped it into a ceramic bowl nearby. A thin wisp of smoke curled and the smell of sulfur wafted through the air. "This is to seal the ritual."

Afterward, she consecrated the grounds. She used a Bible and some Oil of Abramelin, made with olive oil and spices, as an anointing oil. When done, she led everyone back inside.

"Now, I will say a closing prayer. Lord, we dedicate all we have unto You and ask You to set it apart as holy unto You and release Your angels to watch over it and protect it. Position Your mighty warring angels on the corners of this property and around its owners' beds at night. Let no evil come near them. Seal off this family and all we own in the protection of Your blood. Thank You for hearing these prayers and blessings and honoring them. In Jesus's name, we humbly pray. Amen."

"Amen."

"I would like to explain and clarify that the devil and his angels hate anointed powerful praise and worship. God inhabits the praise of His people. Even I keep worship music going in my office all the time. There seems to be a welcoming of the presence of God because of worship music as well as prayer and reading the Bible. Also, the enemy hates it passionately. You, as His anointed and ordained sons and daughters, and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, have a perfectly legal right to praise and worship here at home, even in your home office. It is better that the head of the house lead the proceedings because of his authority. This will help keep you and anyone else from being oppressed by the enemy. Now, I declare that we're all done here. The entire property, both inside and out, is thoroughly cleansed and purified. Congratulations."

Cheers erupted from the group.

Nathan and Josslyn hugged. They were elated that it was over.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you ever so much!" Josslyn signed, overjoyed. "I rejoice in the Lord Jesus! Amen!" She hugged each member of the team.

"Thank you again," Nathan signed. He shook hands with everyone. "We appreciate it very much."

"We'll never forget you," Josslyn signed.

"We won't forget you, either," Eric said. He handed her an invoice with a balance of \$0.00.

Everyone laughed.

EPILOGUE

It had been one month since the house and property had been investigated, cleansed, and consecrated. There had been no other haunting, paranormal activity, or disturbances since then.

Diva and her litter, Thor, Caden, and Trina were back in the house. Abbott and Costello never came back.



“I know we had agreed several months back that we really didn’t want a big to-do for a housewarming party,” Josslyn signed to Nathan one day, “and that we’d be content to settle for a small, intimate gathering like the one we had a while back. Now I’ve decided that I’d like to have a very big shindig.”

Nathan raised his brows in surprise. “A big shindig? Like what?”

“Like a housewarming party to celebrate the success of Eric Skylar and his wonderful team for getting rid of those evil spirits.”

“Okay. When would you like to have it?”

“I was thinking sometime during the Columbus Day weekend, like on Sunday, October 11.”

“Sounds good.”

“And, just for the sake of variety, I’d like to do this at a different venue. Your parents’ place.”

“I think they’d be okay with that.”

“We’ll invite some friends, including Evan, Jared and David.”

“What about Eric and his team from Skylar and Associates?”

“I’d love to invite them, but I think it’s not considered appropriate or professional to invite them to social functions.”

Nathan agreed.

“Oh, and let’s not forget that lovely Norma,” Josslyn signed. “You know how she is about our ‘spooky house’ in spite of it having been cleansed. That’s why I thought of your parents’ place.”



The aroma of broiled chicken kabobs drifted up around Nathan as he manned the grill in his parents’ backyard.

Josslyn walked from the kitchen to the patio. She carried a plastic container while Evan

followed at her side with Maddie in his arms. Josslyn felt a light tap on her arm and turned.

"I'm glad those spooky spirits are no longer in your house to bother you and your wonderful family," Norma said. "Even though you said they've been exorcised from the home, I'm still not ready to set foot in it yet."

"No worries," Josslyn signed. "I understand. By the way, I've got a little surprise for you."

"Oh, dear, you didn't have to."

Josslyn placed the container in front of Norma. "I just know you'd *love* to have some more of those delicious no-bake pink lemonade frozen bars."

"Oh, how wonderful! Bless your heart, Josslyn. Thank you so very much. Although I know how to make them myself now. I've learned how to get on the computer and navigate websites with thousands and thousands of recipes."

"That's great! The sky's the limit, as they say."

Norma nodded with a smile and helped herself to a piece of the pink lemonade frozen bar. "Thank you again, dear. I appreciate it." She popped one into her mouth and rolled her eyes. "Mmm-mmm, delicious!" She licked her finger and thumb, then gave the "okay" sign with her forefinger and thumb encircled. Josslyn delighted in Norma's joy and gave the "thumbs-up" sign.

"I'm going to jump in the pool now," Evan signed to Josslyn. He handed Maddie to Josslyn, then did a cannonball at the deep end. Water splashed up and sloshed over the rim of the pool.

Augusta saw Josslyn walking toward where she sat with George. "You know, having been to your house recently," she signed, "I just have to tell you that it is much, much lighter now."

"Indeed, it is," Josslyn signed.

"It feels as if you can breathe better," George signed. "Not oppressive and suffocating like before."

"I concur," Josslyn signed. "As you can see, we couldn't be happier." She glanced at Nathan by the grill. "Please excuse me a moment. I'll be back shortly. Love you two!"

She gave a peck to each on the cheek, then went to Nathan as he turned the chicken kabobs over on the grill. She put an arm around his waist and looked up at him with love and contentment. She kissed him on the cheek, then on the lips. She held up the three-finger hand sign for "I love you."

Nathan held up the hand sign to return the gesture and the love.

Words—spoken or signed—weren't needed. It was all in their eyes and body language, each with its own expression.

They watched guests mill about the backyard. Another watched, as well.

A different demon observed and grinned.

**The following is a synopsis for Daryl Hajek's next novel,
*Eyes That Hear and Ears That See***

Be careful what you wish for . . .

If you were deaf, how far would you go to get a job?

Kathryn Palmer, a deaf woman, is seeking employment, but without much luck. Sometime after her 30th birthday, she is hired by an information technology corporation. Soon, things unravel and go from bad to worse.

Kathryn will need to do what she must if she is going to make it through both her personal and professional life—*alive*.