

1:22 a.m.

"But you're supposed to tell me ghosts aren't real." The boy's eyes looked closer to one-in-the-afternoon eyes than one-in-the-morning-eyes.

"Well I've never seen one, if that helps."

"It doesn't, daddy. At all. I don't want them to be real. I don't want *him* to be real. I don't want *right now* to be real."

"Well, while I'm using the word 'never,' I have also never heard of anyone being hurt by a ghost. If they're real, I suspect they are just people who don't have anywhere else to go. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe we just need to give them somewhere to go."

"Somewhere far."

"Well, maybe they can't make it very far. They can't eat. Remember how I always say you need to eat some things you don't like so you have energy to play and run around?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll bet ghosts *wish* they could eat those things so they had enough energy to get to a ghost town where they could live with other ghosts."

"A ghost town?"

"Sure. There are still some around. They're places people left, and maybe they are called 'ghost towns' because that's a good place for a ghost to live and pretend to work and all that."

"You think they want to work? I think they want to play."

"I'll bet you're right. But I'll bet more than anything, they just want a place to be. A place that is theirs... I have an idea. Let's build a ghost house."

"Daddy. I don't want ghosts."

"Well. You don't want *sad and lost* ghosts. But maybe if we build him a house, he will move into it and be happy."

"Where will we put a whole house? Can we put it far away?"

"I'm afraid not, monkey. He can't go far, remember?"

"But where will we put a whole house?"

"Well, it will be small. Like a birdhouse. And we don't even need to put food in it. Piece of cake. For us, I mean. Ghosts can't eat."

The boy giggled against his will. "He won't fit."

"Ghosts can make themselves tiny. Everybody knows that."

They boy considered this as his father sat anxiously, hoping the idea would find traction despite his hollow reasoning on the topic of ghost sizes. Finally he nodded. "Can I paint it?"

"Better than anyone, I think."

9:49 am

"It doesn't matter." He looked at his hands. "Before any of this was here, it was just an ocean. Then one day he decides to throw some dirt in the mix. He makes some mud and bakes it over a flame to make a man. He breathes into that man and creates life. That's how it goes. But one day we figured out how to make that flame ourselves, and decided we had this whole *life* thing figured out for ourselves, thank you very much. Ever since then we've done nothing but bake our own clay armies, choosing to wave away how little we know about breathing life into things."

"As you say," the man said.

"We can't change that."

"Perhaps not." The man slid the box he had brought across the diner table, and opened it. "Take these."

The box was full of keys, each tied to a paper tag with a string.

"What am I supposed to do with these?"

"Nothing more than take them."

The waitress was coming over. He closed the lid to the box.

"Well well. New faces. Hello, gentlemen. To what do we owe the pleasure?" she asked.

"My friend and I have always wanted to stop in here on our way through," the man said, "and something about the place on this trip called to us, I guess."

Friend.

"Well I'm not too fond of guessing, but I guess I'm fond of that one," she said.

Classic diner waitress talk. She was good at it. He wondered how long she had been practicing this brand of sass. He tried to read her name tag, but missed it as she turned to look at him. He looked at his hands in a panic, cursing the placement of that name tag.

"Well. Let me bring you boys some menus," she said. He could hear her smile in her words.

He looked up and attempted a thanks, but didn't have time between her wink at him and her departure.

"Gentlemen to boys," the man said. "Back we go. If we stay here long enough, we just might get a look at that ocean."

11:56 a.m.

"What am I supposed to do with these?"

He pulled the first card off the top of the deck, almost like a reflex. Queen of Diamonds.

"Same thing you always do with everything I give you." There was no humor in the man's voice or answer.

He replaced the Queen and covered the deck with a menu. Something about the swords.

"I don't know." He sounded more tired than he meant to.

"I know you don't." That smile.

The waitress was returning with more coffee. The pot with the orange spout. God damn it.

"I need more." Even more tired this time.

"I just gave you more," the man replied.

"That's not what I—"

"More coffee?" The waitress. She sounded less tired than she looked.

"No. I mean yes. Please. But regular, please."

"This is regular."

"But the spout is orange."

"And I'm wearing a name badge that says 'Tina', but that's really my middle name."

The man across the table raised his eyebrows and laughed. Genuinely. It sounded amazing and horrible at the same time. "Tina" didn't seem to have an opinion either way. She poured the coffee and went back to her straws.

He moved the menu away from the cards. The man across the table slid out of the booth and stood.

"I'll be back this way soon. January 15th." The man was looking at the cards, and for a moment looked almost sad. Well, more sad than the man usually looked. And before there was time to think about that, the man was

gone.

He turned the cards over to look at the bottom card. Eight of It Didn't Matter.

All the magic I have known, I've had to make myself.

12:42 p.m.

When she was sure the riders were past the east gate, Ellie lifted her head and looked toward the house. The short fat one they left at the front door was digging around in his pockets. The tall one in the barn was still out of view.

She watched the former continue his search, and though she couldn't see his face from her branch in the oak, she could see he was upset. His hands moved from pocket to pocket, in and out. He was panicking.

She heard him curse, and he stepped from the porch, hands still plunging and patting. "The hell are my cards..." He was angry.

He turned toward the barn, and she looked to the front door of the house. It was open just a few inches, and Michael was peeking through the opening. She could tell it was him by his 5-year-old silhouette against the setting sun coming through the kitchen windows behind him. And she could see the bar of light coming through the open door getting wider as he slowly opened it more.

No.

Oh no.

She rolled over the branch and fell to the ground into the grass. And shrieked on the way down.

The short fat one stopped and turned to look.

"Who's that?" He was startled.

Ellie lay still, clearly exposed in the short grass.

"A girl..." His gun was out now. He was coming to her. He was excited.

Ellie closed her eyes.

"Well hello there, young lady." He was nearly to her. "Hey. Little girl." He was panting. Ellie held her breath, and closed her eyes tighter.

"Well that's just cute. A little possum. I like that. But ain't nobody ever died then kept breathing and crunching up their eyes like that, sweetheart. And you don't see me don't mean I don't see you. What do you say you stand up and let me have a look at you?" He smelled like sweat.

Ellie opened her eyes.

The short fat one smiled with teeth that looked like river rocks that hadn't been wet long enough to be smooth. "Yes sir. That's what I figured. A little possum. What's your name, little possum? And I said stand up." He was

staring.

Ellie stood, looking at the ground that made up the three steps between her and the short fat one. "El— Eleanor. Sir. Eleanor. I'm sorry. I'm thirteen. I'm Eleanor."

"As you said. You ain't too bright, are you, El— Eleanor?" He smelled like fire.

Eleanor shook her head. Eleanor looked at the ground.

"Well that's just fine. Pretty ones don't need to be smart ones. Ain't that right?" He was anxious.

Eleanor nodded. Eleanor looked at the ground.

"Yes sir." He holstered his gun and reached for his handkerchief.
He was stupid.

"Now how about you look at me." His shadow was wiping the sweat from its face vigorously.

Eleanor raised her head toward the house.

Ellie saw Michael on the porch.

Elizabeth looked at the short fat man, and took the first of those three steps. And the second.

"Well now—OOF!"

The third step landed in the short fat one's crotch. Her hand went to his gun as he fell, and she swung her hip around away from him, which lead her chest, which lead her arm, which lead her hand, which lead his gun in a wide arc to the back of his head.

"HNNNnn..."

He was out, and Elizabeth was running toward the porch, looking at the barn.

A voice came from nowhere. From everywhere. "Where's your friend?"

The barn and house and Michael were gone. Now there was a mailbox. A group of teenagers. Parked cars. A pane of glass.

He turned from the window.

"I'm sorry?" He looked up at Tina.

"Oh no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I'll call ahead next time and let you know I'm coming to your table." She smiled.

He smiled back. "I was somewhere else."

"Welcome back."

"Thank you."

"Where is your friend? Is what I was asking."

He looked out the window again. Then at the empty seat across from him in the booth. "It looks as though he's not coming." He sounded tired. But looked relieved.

"Sorry. Do you want to... keep waiting?"

"...I don't think I should."

She looked at him, and wondered. "Well then, any time you want to drop in and order nothing would be just fine by me. Just leave the appropriate tip." She smiled and turned to the counter.

He stood.

"I'll see you next time, then?" She was walking to the back, half-shouting over her shoulder.

She talks to people she can't see.

He smiled. "Yes. You will."

12:55 p.m.

He slid lid of the box closed and set the box back on the cloth.

How long have I got?

The bells on the front door jingled the arrival of a customer, and he looked up to see a small man dressed in one of the poorest-fitting suits he had ever seen. The man had somehow managed to find a jacket that was too long overall, yet too short in the sleeves. He was walking up the center aisle, reading the labels on the small wood boxes.

"Hi. Welcome to—"

"You own this place?" The customer's voice fit him as well as the suit. Far too heavy to come from such a light instrument.

Not long.

"I do."

"My lucky day. You're a hard man to find."

"I agree. I've been looking longer than anyone." He smiled.

This took the customer by surprise as he arrived at the back counter where the shopkeeper stood.

"You agree, he says."

"I agree. So I say."

The customer sensed the shift in the shopkeeper's tone and removed his sunglasses.

"You know who I am?" The customer waited half-smiling for confirmation that his unsunglassed face was world-famous.

"I don't. But I can guess."

The customer's eyes narrowed. "Then guess."

"You're a man who likes to sit five booths from me in diners, stand three rows from me in libraries, and tell people they are hard to find when he has found them at least six times, if I count the time you passed me in Boston. But I'm not convinced you saw me that time."

The customer's face was all disappointment and enraged anxiety. "Well. Then I guess it's down to business."

"As you say."

"I'm looking for a key."

"I'm sorry, but I don't carry anything like that. There's a hardware store just down the—"

The customer held up a hand. "Let's start again." His voice seemed to calm, against the escalated tension his still-raised hand introduced.

"Yes," the shopkeeper replied, "let's start again." He smiled. "This time, I'll be you. I'm looking for something I'll never find. Because I don't know where the boy went. And there is something wrong with my map... how am I doing?"

"...you knew?"

"I did."

The customer looked over the shopkeeper's shoulder as the door to the back alley closed.

"You're too late," the shopkeeper said. "But, if it helps you die peacefully, I think maybe we both are."

4:32 p.m.

"You're here to see someone you love."

The woman with the red hat was looking at him now.

"I'm sorry?"

"You're here to see someone you love," she repeated.

His smile broadened. "What makes you say that?"

"Because you've been sitting here alone with your suit and backpack smiling at the floor for half an hour. You're not here on business, because you have a backpack, and not a briefcase or something fancier. And you're wearing all black with no tie. And you don't look like a man who would run a nightclub. So I'd say you're here for pleasure and not business. Then there is that smile. Then there is that box you're holding. It's too beautiful to be holding something boring, or even something for someone boring. So who is she?"

"Who said it's a woman?"

"True, true. I'm sorry. I should know better than to make assumptions in this city. Who is he or she?"

The subway slowed. The conductor's voice came over the speaker. "Powell Street."

He smiled at her sitting there in her jacket that looked like it was made for Everest expeditions, while wearing that hat he had seen women wear in groups with their purple dresses. Maybe she was a low-ranking member of that order who hadn't earned the purple dress yet.

"Someone very close to me," he replied.

"I can tell. It's all in that smile, and how you carry yourself. It's all over you."

The subway stopped, the doors opened, and he stood.

"I knew I was right," she beamed. "Well bless you and whoever it is, and I'll go back to minding my own business."

"I'm sorry, I wish I could say you were right." He was still smiling as he stepped through the doors. He turned around to face her as she sat waiting to leave. "I'm not here to love someone. Not this time."

His smile weakened a little.

"I'm here to kill someone."

The doors closed, and he saw her shock through the warped glass as the train left.

4:54 pm

The boy looked up from his hands.

The man spoke. "What did you see?"

"I... I don't know."

"Remember."

"I was in a house. Except it wasn't a house. It was... something else. I... it's gone."

The man put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You know how to get back. And I'm afraid this time... it's going to hurt."

5:12 p.m.

"I have no gifts to bring pa rum pum pum PUMM. I have no gifts to bring pa rum pum pum PUMMM. I have no gifts to bring pa rum pum pum PUMMMM." Simon was singing today. He sang to Miss Alice. He sang to the mailbox as he looked for his "adventures." Now he was singing to the canned corn as he made sure they all looked at him.

Yes sir.

"I have a big fat ring on my bigfat THUMMMMB." He laughed at that one, and remembered what Mr. Blue said about noises.

"SORRY MISTER BLUE!" he yelled into the canned corn.

No answer.

Wait.

He sniffed the air.

A lady.

He turned to his left. Nobody.

He turned to his right. *There she is.*

There was a lady at the end of the aisle. She was looking at the green beans. She was holding a lot of bread.

"That is a lot of bread." He smiled and pointed at the bread.

"Is it?" She smiled. But not the best kind.

No sir.

"I have no bread to bring on my bigfat HEADDDD," he sang. He laughed harder at that one, and thought about the ladies in one of his adventures that carried food on their heads.

She looked scared now. He broke it again.

"Sorry. That's a lot of bread. Sorry."

She smiled the almost worst kind, and walked away.

He always broke it.

"I have no gifts to bring..." he whispered to the corn.

When he was finished with the cans, he looked at his watch. Mickey was pointing at the dot after the 5 with his broken arm.

Before not after, Simon.

"OH NO I HAVE TO GO OH NO OH NO" he yelled as he ran across the front of the store and through the front door.

There were boys out there throwing things at the wall. He thought about going *the other way*, but Mickey was pointing at late, and *the other way* was a bad way.

He ran toward them. And sang. "I HAVE NO GIFTS TO BRING PA RUM PUM PUMM PUMM. I HAVE NO GIFTS TO BRING PA RUM PUM PUMM PUMM."

He took a breath as he ran past them. Just long enough to hear a laugh and a "RETAR—"

"I HAVE NO GIFTS TO BRING PA RUM PUM PUMM PUMMM PUMMMM PUMMMMMMMMM
PUMMMMMMMMMMMMM." He had his hands to his ears now. And was running his best.

He made it around the corner and down Miss Alice's road. He was breathing hard. He dropped a hand to his pocket. It was still there. And the boys were gone.

He looked at his watch. He looked toward Miss Alice's house.

And he saw.

Across the street, a man leaned against a light post. He was looking at Simon.

No.

No no no no no no no.

Simon closed his eyes, covered his ears, and yelled.

"YOU GET AWAY MISTER BLACK. YOU GET AWAY AND YOU NEVER COME BACK. *YOU! GET! AWAY!*
AND! YOU! NEVER! COME! BACK!"

"Simon! Simon!" *Miss Alice.* She was running toward him.

Simon pointed at the light post.

Miss Alice looked at the light post.

Simon looked at the light post.

The light flickered on.

And Mr. Black was gone.

5:59 p.m.

The tiny bell mounted above the door announced the guest's arrival.

The guest stood dripping in the doorway, and looked around the room.

The man behind the counter smiled. "Good evening, sir."

The guest only stood. And looked.

The man behind the counter spoke again. "May I be of some service, sir?"

"I'm not ready."

The man behind the counter studied the guest. After a pause, he spoke. "Of course, sir. Please do come in."

The guest entered, and closed the door behind him.

"Very well, sir. Your key?"

"I'm not ready."

The man behind the counter smiled again. "Of course, sir."

The guest looked around the room, and spoke. "My son."

"Of course, sir."

"What about my son?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, sir."

The guest looked at the floor. Tears were coming now. "My son."

The man behind the counter stood watching the guest for a moment. "He is a fine boy, sir."

The inbound sobbing began to take the guest, and he reached into his pocket. His hand shook as he pulled the hand and the key from that pocket, and he closed a fist around the key. "But my son."

The man behind the counter's smile faded as he looked at the man's fist. "He has the slow boy."

"I'm not ready."

"Yet here you stand."

The guest looked up, tears mixing with the rain still dripping from his hair. He looked at his fist, and opened it. The tag on the key was crushed, and its ink was smeared. He looked at it the way a cat might look at a book.

"Your key."

The guest stepped forward and set the key on the counter. "I will never be ready."

"Of course." The man behind the counter took the key, and turned to the boxes behind him. He returned and handed the guest an envelope. On it was the number 22.

The guest took the envelope, and the sobbing arrived.

The man behind the counter smiled once again, and placed a hand on the guest's shoulder. "Welcome to The Starlight, sir."

9:10 pm

"Did you see the house?"

"I don't know what I saw. It was dark."

"Well. You'll see it soon enough, I suppose."

"I get the feeling I don't want to see it."

"You don't."

"I also get the feeling you don't want to see it."

"A life like mine takes away whatever line there ever was between wanting to not see something and trying not to think about something. Might as well swim faster to dry off. I'll see it whether I want to or not. You have a choice."

"Choice left the party a long time ago. Right about the time we met. Where is Tina?"

The man studied him. "You're scared."

"Throw a rock in the air. You'll hit someone who is scared. Fear doesn't make me any different than anyone else."

"Maybe not. But what does make you different is: out of all the fears people carry with them, none of theirs are of rocks thrown by me."

"Yeah, well they haven't seen your rocks."

The man smiled. "As you say."

