

## Chapter 2

"It started with the crying," Hanlon said. "A couple of weeks ago I came in dead beat, must have been past midnight. It was raining. Anyway, I was in bed, just falling asleep. All of a sudden I find myself real scared, and I'm listening for this girl crying, so quiet I would have thought I imagined it, only my body knows I didn't. She's crying out there in my garage. I'm all tensed up and my skin is crawling. The next night it's the same. I tried getting drunk before I went to bed, but that made it worse. Now, I hear her all the time. She knows I can hear her."

"You ever see her?"

"No."

Oh, great. When it's all sounds and voices, nine times out of ten you're talking schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is every bit as real and scary as ghosts, in its own way, but nothing I can do jackshit about. "You know who she is?"

"No clue."

"Do you hear her more often some times than others?" I asked. "Only at night, for instance?"

"M—Maybe a little more often when it rains. DK? Do you have any ideas?"

"Call me Will. Nobody calls me DK anymore."

“She's driving me crazy, DK. I can't eat, I can't sleep, I'm missing appointments, I'm blowing sales. I truly need your help. I'm good for the money. If you can think of anything I can do to make her go away, I'll write you a check tomorrow.”

Shit. “I just don't think—“

“Jesus, Will. This is family. Family *and* a thousand dollars.”

I looked out my living room window, wishing I didn't need his money. My reflection looked back at me, tired and pale. “What the hell. Pick me up tomorrow and I'll take a look.”

Silence. “Pick you up? Can't you just...?”

“Write you a prescription? If you're paying me to check it out, I'm going to check it out.” Long silence from Hanlon. “Hey, Tom, piss or get off the pot. Your choice, man.”

“The thing is, I'm really busy right now,” Hanlon stammered. “I don't have . . . I don't think I can work that in.”

“Then buenos fucking noches.” I slammed the phone down on my thousand dollars. If there's anything worse than being a whore, it's being a rejected whore. “God *damn*.”

Probably it was for the best. Probably cousin Tom was beginning the long awful slide into schizophrenia, and nothing short of heavy duty medication would get rid of his ghost. In the long run, we would both be better off this way. Except...a *thousand dollars*! “Fuck!” I shouted, and I kicked my wall hard enough to leave a footprint on it.

Then I stomped over to my stereo and played “Wild Child” thirty-eight times in a row.

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I was listening to Bauhaus when Hanlon called back two days later. He hadn't slept in forty-two hours, he was calling from his car, and if I had time, could I come to his house that night?

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About eight o'clock on a wet July night, Hanlon rolled to a stop in front of my apartment in a Nissan Stanza that had seen better days. I reached into the back of my hallway closet, trying to decide if I should put on my old leather jacket, the one with the fish-hooks sewn onto the undersides of the lapels. I hadn't worn it since the day I'd taken Megan to a movie and nearly had a heart attack when she made a grab for the shiny fish-hooks with her fat toddler fingers.

But tonight, going to the house of a possibly crazy dude, I kind of wanted it on. The experts at the Ultimate Fighting Challenge tell us that sooner or later ninety percent of fights go to ground. I can confirm from my wild youth that the first couple of times some son of a bitch grabbed me and found his hands full of Eagle #8 brass hooks, our tussle was a head butt and a broken nose from being over. Of course that was semi-decent neighborhoods in the good old days, when the other guy was packing maybe a butterfly knife or a roll of quarters in his fist, instead of a Mac-10 with blazer ammo.

On the other hand, it was a muggy ninety-two degrees out and the whole city smelled like a crawdad boil. I put the jacket back in the closet with the feeling I was probably making a mistake.

The rest of my gear was suitably vanilla: a Mens Wearhouse shirt and black jeans over my ancient but classy pair of black Doc Martens. I don't wear jewelry any more.

My wedding ring lives in an aspirin bottle in the medicine cabinet. I always mean to throw it away, but I never do. I wore a stud or a hoop in my left ear for years, but Megan grabbed it when she was little, so I took it out and the hole grew in and the whole idea of a guy in clip-ons seemed to miss the point. Now that Meg was older I could have gotten the ear re-pierced, but these days I'd need to hang a cow-bell from my nipple to keep up. It's hard to make that commitment when you're over thirty and sober.

My mohawk I had shaved off when it began to recede.

I headed out of my apartment, not bothering to lock my door. The rotting gym-sock aroma of the hallway was duking it out with the scent of Vicky's cooking—home-made tamales tonight, to judge by the smell, and pico de gallo.

I clattered downstairs and stepped out into a warm drizzle. As I walked out to the curb, a discarded condom drifted by on the current of run-off and disappeared into a gaping storm drain.

Hanlon leaned across the front seat and rolled down the passenger side window.

"You don't have any tools," he said. "Bells and candles and Bibles."

"Is your ghost Catholic?"

"I don't know."

"Me neither."

Tom Hanlon was balding and tired. He was wearing a London Fog raincoat that was probably expensive when he bought it, sometime before the Berlin Wall came down. Now it was smudged with coffee stains and newsprint. Two of the bottom buttons were missing. His car felt pitifully lived in: Doritos bags and misfolded maps in the back seat, 7-Eleven coffee cups stacked three deep in the cup holder. The dashboard was littered

with receipts from Whataburger and Dairy Queen. My powerful brain worked out that Hanlon was a salesman. My dad spent a year thinking he could get rich moving cheap air ionizers. I know the signs.

Hanlon peered up at me. "Remember me now, DK?"

"Not at all."

"You haven't changed much," he said.

I stood beside the passenger door, rain trickling down my scalp. I wasn't crazy about getting in a car with a haunted driver who hadn't slept in two days.

Hanlon tapped his raincoat pocket. "I have the money right here. All cash. Crisp three dollar bills."

"Great," I said. I got in the car. My cousin stuck out a hand and we shook. He had the Bieler nose, like Aunt Dot; and of course the spooked eyes the haunted always have.

We crept down to the end of my block and turned right on Old Spanish Trail. The rain left needle-tracks on the windshield and the wipers cleared them off. A car rolled by with a swish, leaving treadmarks on the wet road that dissolved as I watched.

At the Fannin Street intersection, an old Korean woman carrying a sack of groceries froze suddenly in Hanlon's headlights. I grabbed for my door handle and yelled as the Stanza plunged through her. My skin prickled in a burst of cold air.

Hanlon jumped. "What the *hell*?"

"Sorry." I forced myself to let go of the door handle. "Thought I saw something."

"A ghost?"

"Yeah."

We passed the Astrodome, heading for the 610 Loop. "You working a shtick on me, DK?"

"Didn't know she wasn't real," I said. "Thought you were about to hit someone."

"You can't tell?"

"Not in the dark." I didn't feel like explaining the black and white thing, but it makes it harder to tell the living from the dead at night.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Hanlon said. "How do you drive?"

"I don't. I smashed up my Dad's car twice, braking for dead people. Let my license lapse. Mostly I take the bus."

Hanlon stared at me. "You don't *drive*?"

I have ways to shock even the most jaded Houston native.

My cousin took the ramp onto 610, accelerated onto the freeway and sifted over one lane, letting traffic drift into place around us. He drove like a man who drove a lot. His shoulders were high and tight and he kept shaking his head. The wipers made their tired heartbeat sound, squeak-chonk, squeak-chonk. We headed east, pouring down the freeway, me staring through the side window as the lights streamed by, apartment blocks and billboards.

"Hey, Will. How long since you've been back to Deer Park?"

"Not long enough." I thought of Uncle Billy, his blind eyes sliding off of mine. *I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*

*Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*

It's harder to tell the living from the dead at night, and harder to tell the ghost roads from the real ones. There weren't many ghost roads in Deer Park when I was a

kid—not like they have them in Galveston, say, or over in the Fourth Ward—but I saw at least one every time I rode the bus to school. They don't stay put, though. One day there might be a long gray alley stretching out behind the 7-Eleven. Everything in it would be in black and white, real sharp and clear so you could read the grain of the cement, or pick out the shadowy pits in the telephone poles and see the rusting staples where old flyers used to be. But the next time I went in for a Slurpee, the alley would be just normal again, with crows on the telephone wires and red and white Coke cans tangled in the hedges.

I never walked down a ghost road myself, not even when Josie left me. There are some places we just aren't meant to go.

Hanlon said, "A ghost can't actually hurt you, can it? She can't actually . . . you know. Touch me."

"Most ghosts don't. But they can still scare you to death. You ever hear about those people who think they're Jesus? They believe it so hard that nail-holes open up in their hands." AJ had told me about that. "I knew this guy once who was haunted by a dead girl," I said. "She kept trying to slash him with a switchblade. At first he couldn't feel anything, but after a couple of weeks, these cuts started opening up on his skin."

Hanlon stared. "My God. What did you do?"

"Got him a box of Winnie the Pooh Band-Aids."

"Like hell."

"They weren't bad cuts. Once he realized he could take the worst she had to dish out, and fix it with a Piglet band-aid, he got less and less afraid, and she did less and less damage."

Hanlon gave a little choked laugh. "I guess that's why they pay you the big bucks."

Amber tail-lights fled along the highway in front of us. I asked one of the questions I always ask the haunted. "What did you want to be when you grew up, Tom?"

"Spy." Hanlon grinned self-consciously. "I wanted to be a secret agent. American James Bond. This was when I was maybe eleven or twelve. Spring-loaded Walther PPK. Micro-camera. Stealing secrets from the Russians to save America. Very hush hush. Nothing in the papers, no appearances on TV. Handshake from the President. Fast car."

Big dreams, small life. Loner. Haunted. Well that's just great, I thought. He's a fucking Cobain.

Generally speaking, I divide people—living and dead—into five groups:

- 1) Buddhas
- 2) Tell-Tale Hearts
- 3) Cobains
- 4) (Jack the) Rippers
- 5) Zombies

I use the rating scale two ways. First, to identify what kind of ghost I have to reckon with. If someone is being haunted by a guilty conscience, that's a Tell-Tale Heart. A mom who let her kid drown in a swimming pool, for example. If you can get her through the worst of the guilt, the ghost will stop coming.

I also use the scale on living people, judging how likely they are to return after death. Buddhas never come back: they have their shit together and they keep their

accounts in order. The Buddha said, Desire is the root of all suffering. So if you don't want to suffer, all you have to do is stop wanting anything. That's the part that gives me trouble.

Cobains are a funny bunch. They brood to the point of obsession. They mix guilt and bitterness. They nearly always feel betrayed, by lovers or parents or life, and especially by themselves. They tend to be introverts with a need to act out: clowns, lady poets, vengeful suicides. Spy—that was perfect. A perfect Cobain.

Hanlon cleared his throat. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but I actually did some work for the CIA when I was selling in Belgium and Germany. I was a mule. That's covert ops jargon. You know, a courier. Mule. Get it?"

I said I got it.

Hanlon smiled, remembering. "Got recruited in Brussels, at Rick's. Rick's is a complete replica of Bogart's joint in *Casablanca*. 344 Avenue Louise, Commune of Ixelles. Very upscale address. It's a hang-out joint for American ex-pats. The guy who worked the territory before me got a hamburger named after him. His case officer picked me up. Always looking for patriotic single men, he said. They paid good money, too, before they cancelled the Cold War."

Hanlon swung around a slow-moving Volvo station. "If I just didn't give a damn, the noises wouldn't matter," he said. "What's a ghost? Nothing. All I got to do is stay away from the garage. And I'm scared as hell to go in there, it makes me want to throw up I get so scared. So what the hell do I do every night? I go into the garage. Why do I do that?" He squeezed his eyes shut. "I lie in bed listening, and now if I *don't* hear the little bitch, I get up and I creep into the laundry room and I stand at the garage door for

hours. Listening." An eighteen-wheeler started to pass us on the left. Reflected in the rear-view mirror, its headlamps spread harsh white light slowly over Hanlon's face, exposing it. His pupils shrank in eyes bloodshot and pouchy from sleeplessness. "I hit her," he said.

"What?"

"I was driving. It was dark, she just walked into the road before I could do anything about it. Maybe she was committing suicide, I don't know."

"You killed her. With your car." Classic: a ghost pulled back by a guilty conscience. I didn't bother saying, *You lied about not knowing her!* Haunted people lie a lot.

"This was in Germany," Hanlon said. "I didn't know what to do. I dragged the body into the bushes on the side of the road. She didn't have any ID, there was no point calling in the accident. They don't like foreigners, you know. The Germans don't. None of the Euros do. They all feel this kind of contempt for Americans. Those Germans, they've forgotten about getting their asses kicked in '45." Hanlon's hands were shaking on the wheel. "It was her fault," he said. "I didn't think she'd find me, not back here in America. But she did. She did." His voice was hoarse. "What the hell does she want?"

"You," I said.

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Hanlon's house was on one of those dreary suburban streets where all the children have grown up and moved away. He turned into an anonymous driveway and parked in front of what I assumed was the haunted garage. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea." He turned off his engine, but left his headlights on, spraying white light through the drizzle,

two big white spots on the garage door. He sat in the car with his hands tight on the wheel. "Sell me, Will. Make your pitch. It's your fee."

"It's your ghost."

Hanlon laughed and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah. I love a product like that. Sells itself. Something the customer needs." Rain creaked and ticked on the roof of the car. "When I was over in Europe, I worked for this company that sold signals. Flashers, strobes, sirens: all that stuff you see on cop cars, fire trucks. Great product. Every town's got to have 'em, and it's always public money." Hanlon set his parking brake and turned off the lights. "Do you ever see these ghosts? I mean, maybe even when the haunted person can't?"

"Sometimes."

"Son of a bitch." My cousin pulled his key out of the ignition and the red brake indicator winked out. We sat together in the dark. I could feel the bulk of his body in the next seat. Think about the thousand bucks, I told myself. Hanlon's coat rustled. In the darkness he said, "What it comes down to is, I need the product."

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He opened his front door and I followed him into an old person's living room. A flower-pattern couch, a large color TV, a china cabinet filled with the kind of knick-knacks my Mamaw Dusty used to love—egg-cups and ceramic owls and coffee spoons with the crests of the different states on top. "This your Mom's house, Tom?"

"Eugenia's. My Daddy remarried. They both passed away last year, is why I came back. House being paid for and all."

Eugenia had done like my Great-Aunt Rebecca and laid down little walkways of clear plastic to keep her champagne-colored carpeting from getting dirty and flattened out. In one corner of the room sat a black piano with its feet in oversized plastic coasters. Sheet music for a hymn was open above the keyboard: "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood." I had a sudden dim memory of singing that in church: *There IS a fountain FILLED with blood—breathe— drawn from Emmanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood—breathe—Lose all their guilty stains.* The throb of the electric organ and the boom of Uncle Billy's voice behind me. *Lose all their guilty stains, lose all their guilty stains.* And after, the decorous rustle of people sitting back down, and then the stealthy advance of the communion tray, heading toward me with its little shot-glasses full of grape juice.

*And SIN-ners plunged beneath that flood*

*Lose all their GUIL-ty stains.*

On a hat stand by the front door was a furred cap. Hanlon picked it up and turned it slowly in his hands. He was still wearing his London Fog coat. "See this? Genuine Soviet Army." He held the hat up so I could see the small red hammer-and-sickle pin stuck to the side. I had a flashback of myself at nineteen, grinning at Josie over a pitcher of beer, thumping a bar table with my fist and thunderously quoting Stalin. *You cannot make a revolution with silk gloves!*

A sharp scream came from the garage, ending in a muffled grunt. My guts cramped up. Shit, shit, shit. So much for schizophrenia.

Hanlon twitched. "Did you hear that? I thought I heard something."

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe a little something." Obviously I was hearing the ghost a lot more clearly than he was. That's why they pay Comrade Will the big bucks. "These sounds always come from the garage?"

"Mostly. Mostly from the garage. Near the car."

Hanlon put back his Genuine Soviet Army cap and headed to the kitchen. He pulled a box of grapefruit juice from the fridge and drank from its spout. His hand was shaking. My cousin had killed this girl and wasn't man enough to stick around and face the music. I didn't feel as much contempt for him as you might think. One thing I've learned from watching the dead is that you can never be sure what you'll do when the very worst happens. But after I had looked in the garage I would tell Hanlon he had to confess, or at least call in a tip about the accident. It's for your own good, I would tell him. But mostly I was thinking of that girl's parents, waiting at home while pictures of their kid got old and yellow in photo albums they couldn't bear to open.

"You can wait here while I poke around the garage," I said.

"No." Hanlon looked over the refrigerator door and tried to smile. "Count me in, buddy." He put away the box of juice and dug a small key out of the silverware drawer by the sink. I followed him through the kitchen into a little laundry room, with a washer and dryer and some shelves overhead. Beyond them was the door to the garage. There were new locks on it: a dead bolt Hanlon turned back, a chain lock he unlatched, a padlock he opened with the key from the kitchen drawer, and a combination lock.

"Are these here to keep the ghost from coming in," I asked, "or you from going out?"

"Both." He dialed the combination lock and opened the door to the garage. The darkness smelled of damp concrete and sawdust and mold. Hanlon flipped a light switch and a bare bulb came on over three unpainted stairs leading down to a concrete floor.

I clattered down the steps. There was a lawnmower in the near corner of the garage, and a wheelbarrow with a few of last year's leaves still blackening at the bottom. A hacksaw and a drill hung on a pegboard against the back wall. Below them was a worktable—screwdrivers and hammers and tackle boxes whose slide trays were jumbled with nuts and nails and screws. In the shadows under the worktable, I saw a gallon can of gasoline next to a plastic bucket full of rags. There was also a utility sink hooked up to the near wall. The tap was leaking, a slow steady drip that had left a trail of rust like a bloodstain on the white basin.

Huddled under the sink was the battered body of a young woman. She was nineteen or twenty, soaking wet, wearing a dripping vest over a wet t-shirt. She was naked from the waist down. Her hips and legs were covered in bruises; they had spread like smoke-stains across her clammy flesh. Her face was mottled and bloated, as if she had been beaten first and then drowned. Her mouth was clumsily gagged with a man's silk tie. Two more ties bound her wrists and ankles. The ties were gray. She was all gray, I realized. All in black and white. This was Hanlon's ghost.

Only this girl hadn't been hit by a car. This girl had been tied up and beaten to death.

Stairs creaked behind me. My cousin's right hand was hidden in the pocket of his coat. He wet his lips. "See anything?" he said.

And right then I realized that sometimes a guy is haunted for a really good reason.