

## **Chapter 8**

### **Free Breakfast**

Kevin never really got into ghost stories. He had not seen any specters himself, and in the rare times he got spooked while being alone in his mom's house, he knew it was his own mind playing tricks. Why it did this, he would never know. The mind is weird, like when it conjures dreams that can only be unwound by seasoned poets or professional shrinks. Maybe Kevin got scared once in awhile. He did not believe in ghosts.

The closest he ever came to believing was one night, in Mom's house, when a stranger showed up at the door. Kris and Kevin were just kids then. Everything still seemed normal in their family in those days. This was after Dad had started staying out all night, but before anybody knew he was spending the time on benders. In short, he wasn't around that evening.

Since moving into the house on Long Island a year earlier, Kris and Mom had a few run-ins with what they swore was a ghost in the upstairs corridor. Sometimes they felt it, and a few times they said they saw it in their peripheral vision. They also said they felt a presence at the bottom of the stairs, and it would move up and down the stairs randomly. That's what they said, and they often complained about it to Dad and Kevin, much to their annoyance.

Kevin was never sympathetic to their complaints. At night, when he stood in the corridor, the dark void at the

bottom of the stairs did seem like it held secrets, but he never felt a presence, or caught movements in the corner of his eye. Even as a little kid, he was able to keen out that there was an unhealthy psychological construct behind Kris and Mom's mutual support for each other's paranoia.

Around 8PM one night, there was a knock on the door. Mom opened it, and greeted a young woman named Kerry. She said she had lived in the house a decade before, with her parents, who had inherited it from her grandparents, and now lived far away. She was in the area visiting old friends, and she wanted to come in and look around. Mom was guarded about it at first, but finally allowed the woman in for a tour.

Kris and Kevin were fascinated by this lady who had the gumption to knock on the door of strangers. She told the family about a hiding place behind the kitchen cabinets, which Kevin and Kris had indeed found. She spoke about how the walls were once painted a different color, and how much she liked what the family had done. She told them about a wall that used to be between the living room and front hall. Some owner in the mean years must have removed it.

While looking around the yard, she mentioned an old shed that was now gone, and showed the kids the remains of a tree house could still be seen in a vast oak. Kevin had been wondering what the errant 2x4s nailed high up in the branches were all about. The woman lamented that it was too dark to take pictures of them. Mom seemed like that was about the limit of what she was going to let this woman do, anyway.

Then they went back into the house, and went upstairs. Halfway up, Kerry paused, saying, “Oh, my God. Did you feel that?”

Kevin had not felt a thing, and neither did Mom or Kris. They continued up the stairs, and that was where Kerry told them about her grandmother. Her grandmother had a lot of trinkets around the house, and one of the things Kerry complimented Mom on was the lack of junk sitting around. Her grandmother had kept little china teapots, and colorful glass cups and jars everywhere. They were on the windowsills, on top of the kitchen cabinets, on every spare surface, and after she died in her sleep, it was hell keeping them dust-free. They threw a lot of the stuff away.

Mom didn’t have much of this type of stuff, but it was mostly because the family didn’t have the money, and she worked full-time. Keeping hundreds of trinkets around the house was a game for bored middle-class housewives, which apparently, Kerry’s grandmother was.

One of the places she kept a lot of this junk was on a shelf at the bottom of the stairs, on a wall that was no longer there. She would stand there for hours, arranging and dusting this tripe, and then she would go upstairs to dust a few more of them.

Kerry told the family that her grandmother died in the house, and haunted the place ever since. It was one of the reasons her family moved out. One night, as a young girl, Kerry stood at the top of the stairs, and saw a floating human

shape standing at the bottom. Suddenly, it raced up the stairs toward her, and blew right through her, giving her a chill. As she stood in the same spot, so many years later, Kevin could see the goose bumps rise on her arms as she talked about it.

Before long, Kerry left, and they never saw her again. But Kris and Mom were in hysterics about the visit for weeks. “We knew it!” they would tell Dad and Kevin. Dad rolled his eyes, and Kevin wanted to, but he was there. He heard this woman tell them, unprovoked and unasked, that there was a ghost exactly where Mom and Kris had been imagining one.

After that, he paid a little more attention to the space at the bottom of the stairs. Now, as Kevin stood in this hotel, waiting for the elevator, his own arms were bumping up again.

What Kerry had done to his mother and sister so many years before, he had just witnessed again. Howie had done it to his wife. He confirmed everything she had ever thought about that space in the wall. There was no way she could look at the space ever again. The face had a name, and a story. And it was intertwined with the hospital in Harbin. Kevin had to admit he was freaked out.

Kris remembered better than Kevin the night Kerry visited, and the story of Melanie Claremont was going to floor her. He could not wait to get back to his room to call her.

He waited impatiently for the elevator, and became even more irritated when a dozen elderly folks got on the elevator with him. They were on some kind of tour, and they got off at nearly every floor until the elevator got to his. He

almost laughed aloud when one of them pulled a colored-glass candlestick from a shopping bag to tell everyone, including Kevin, where it would look best in her living room. When he finally got to his floor, he ran down the hall.

The first thing Kevin did was call Kristen. She was not home, which was like her, with her busy lifestyle. “Kris? Hello?” he said into her answering machine. “Pick it up if you’re there.” He gave her a few more seconds. Suddenly Kevin realized that she might not have a machine like he did, but voice mail. If that was true, he was going to sound like an imbecile. He hung up.

Kevin wasn’t hungry, having eaten about a dozen of Annie’s cookies. He looked over at the charred diary on the table. He figured it was time to scrape as much of the char from it as he could, so he could read the damn thing without turning his hands black. Kevin took it into the bathroom and started scraping it over the toilet with one of the plastic cups the hotel kept by the sink. Some of the char fell into the bowl, and conveniently into the cup, but a hell of a lot of it flaked all over the floor.

He kept scraping, removing a lot of the burnt pages as well. Kevin kept as much of the readable material as he could. The pages started to look like parchment, in torn irregular shapes, and the book became a bit lighter. As for the char, there was no way to remove it all. No matter how Kevin held it, the black char still coated his hands.

Kevin wrapped the book in a paper towel and used some of the tape in his bag to make a book cover out of it, like he used to do in grade school. He tried to clean up the floor with a towel, and took the book back out to the room. He carefully opened the book to a random page.

“November 17. I think they started to figure out something. Somebody at the meeting said something about dogs, and the search is now a recovery... Everybody says the river is where to look and that they will dredge the channel until they find something... They will probably look for a few days and then the river will be safe.”

The passage was very difficult to read because of all the sections Kevin had to remove. But the section was interesting because of what Howie had said. Kevin could not escape the possibility that the ‘search’ was for Melanie Claremont. Howie said they never found her. Annie wasn’t from here, so she didn’t know that the people of Harbin held meetings, used search dogs, or dredged the river. If Howie wanted to avoid the details, Kevin could understand.

He knew nothing about ghosts, but he figured if somebody gets lost in a forest, or a town, they don’t return to their home to haunt it. Those stories are all about people who died at home. Howie knew there was a search, which was probably why he scoffed at the idea that Melanie haunted his house. He certainly did not seem disturbed by it.

It was also possible he was hiding something, but Kevin dismissed the idea. Most likely he was simply trying to calm his frantic wife.

Kevin flipped further through the book, and it became even harder to follow. The small pages that were left were almost impossible to keep flat without pulling them out. The only good sections were collected in the middle. Every line ran beyond the burnt edge of the page, and Kevin had to guess what the diarist had written.

He found a passage that was long enough to read, and continued.

“November 18. We decided to wait until the search is done but we took the chair from the office and it will help later. If they see that it’s missing it will just cause a problem for Dr. Claremont and then it will suddenly show up somewhere like their yard. It will be obvious what happened then.”

Kevin shook his head, wondering what the hell this kid was up to. He took something from an office. Doctor Claremont’s office? He wrote ‘we’. He and an accomplice or several took a chair from the office. Kevin did not mind thinking of the word ‘accomplice’, at this point. This kid was involved in something criminal. He knew what had happened to this girl. Maybe he was responsible for it himself.

He was no private investigator, but something told Kevin he was holding an important piece of evidence in a 60-year old crime. He started to read the book voraciously. Much

of it was useless or impossible, but he found a few more segments he could follow.

“November 21. The police are definitely looking at the doctor. They brought him down for questions and Mother said they were rough bastards. She even said bastards in front of us and we laughed. She said sorry but you can’t unsay something. I don’t know if she thinks he killed her but a lot of people do. Boy we laughed about that too.

“November 24. Its moved.

“November 29. There was snow last night and that stopped the search. Everyone was out shoveling while we walked to school and Mother said to stop whining and fussing. She said it was just one measley foot. She went to school with a lot more snow and walked a lot further. She said someday we’ll thank her because it builds character.”

Kevin laughed aloud. This kid may have been a little scumbag, but at least he had to deal with the same adult bullshit every kid had to put up with. But one thing was certain; Melanie had not simply disappeared with a ‘poof’ into the night, like Howie had said. This kid had something to do with it. Kevin found one more passage that was possible to read.

“December 3. We got another foot of snow, and even Mother said it’s a lot for this early, but we still had school. She said my appointment will also be kept and I should stop fussing about the medicine.”

Good, Kevin thought. The kid was sick and was about to die, and he deserved it. There were no more entries after this one, just blank pages. Apparently that was exactly what happened. This kid probably checked into the hospital, and kept his book with him because he would want something to do. And, it seemed that he should have been insanely protective of this diary by now, having filled it with information that could land him in jail for life.

Kevin sat back in the chair. When the hospital burned around the beginning of December 1947, it took this kid, his diary, and any hope of discovering the truth about Melanie Claremont's disappearance. Kevin was the only one in the world to know it for this moment, and it felt special. There was no way to know who the kid was, but some of the people in the town might be able to put it together. Maybe Frank and Howie could help.

Better yet, he figured this could help them. Kevin would bet that a lot of people in town wanted to find out what happened back then. This diary would be added to the town's history, and an ancient crime would be forever solved. This newfound feeling of civic duty felt good.

Kevin closed the diary and put it in his bag. This had to go straight to Frank and Howie the next day.

The action of putting the diary into the bag led Kevin to start cleaning up the room. What a mess he had made of it. He had no real system for dirty clothes, and they were piled on the

chair by the window. Kevin could handle travel for a day or two, but three or more days was starting to be a problem.

But now, he was leaving, and heading back to Long Island the next morning. Kevin decided to pack everything he could, and leave out a change of clothes. He planned to stop by the diner for his free breakfast, and maybe talk to Annie about the diary. The firm paid him a per diem while traveling, so a free meal was pure profit, and even a financial dimwit like Kevin could figure that out.

After that, he would head to Portland to get the drawings, come back to Harbin to give the originals to Ed, and then start on the six-hour drive home. Kevin could be home by dinner if it went well. Having done it once already, he wasn't optimistic. But any time before eleven would be fine.

The return call from Kristen never came. Kevin fell asleep. It had been an insanely long day. The next time his eyes opened, he saw daylight streaming through the windows.

Kevin looked up at the squares of sunlight streaming in, and felt extreme irritation. First, the bright sunlight was hurting his eyes, and second, the damn clock read 9AM. If he was hoping to get the drawings, visit the town guys, and get home before dinner, this was not a great start. He had forgotten to set the damn alarm. Kevin picked up his cell phone and it wouldn't turn on. Now he knew why he didn't get a call from Kris. The phone was out of power, and his charger was at home.

Amanda was probably trying to call him as well. She expected him in the office first thing the next day, and she would definitely want to confirm that. Kevin was starting to get the impression that she regretted making him the manager for this project.

He picked up the hotel phone to call her. She didn't answer, but he left his message about the cell phone, and that he was coming back with a copy of the drawings.

Kevin sped up the usual morning ritual and got everything together, making a quick look around the room. He headed down to the lobby, where the old folks on the tour were just finishing up their breakfast and waiting for their next day-long bus ride. They stood around with their red veterans' jackets and paisley rolling luggage. They looked at Kevin as if he was an interloper trying to freeload on their tour. In fact, he was just trying to figure out where the line for the desk began.

A snobby dude with the slicked-back hair called Kevin up to the desk. After that, he didn't say three words. He placed the receipt on the desk, without a pen, and watched as Kevin put his bag down on the floor before he handed him one. Somebody sure rattled this guy's cage this morning, Kevin figured. Then one of the elderly tourists came to ask for something and the slick-haired guy's face broke into a wide, patronizing grin.

If Kevin hurried, he could still stop by the diner very quickly for breakfast. He felt bad about leaving Annie and Howie's house so quickly, and about causing a stir while he

was there. He had to say something. Kevin pulled up to the diner, and saw dozens of cars in front. The place was packed. He didn't have time for this, but he thought maybe they would make him a bagel sandwich to go. Kevin's mouth started watering with the thought. He was starving.

He opened the door, and could barely close it behind him. There were people standing in the doorway, some of them waiting for a table, some of them were waiting to pay their tab. Instead of just Sam, the cook, there were about 6 people working the grill. Kevin saw a couple of other waitresses, and Annie came out of a back room, looking harried.

Annie took a pencil out of her hair and walked rapidly for the register. This place was buzzing like breakfast joints Kevin had seen in Manhattan. He didn't think this many people even lived in the town. Between the heavy fleece jackets most of the people were wearing, he saw the two guys from the other day sitting at the counter. Nobody had noticed him yet.

The place was also pretty noisy. A family in front of Kevin was paying for their breakfast, and had some kind of disagreement with Annie. The waitress at the counter was yelling something at the two guys. It looked like the three of them were in a row over some burnt eggs or something. Kevin looked back outside, thinking maybe he should just get going and forget about the free breakfast. But his car was now blocked in by a delivery truck. The driver was just getting out.

Kevin turned around to see Sam. He had apparently heard the truck, and as he looked toward the door, his eyes met squarely with Kevin's.

"Kid," he yelled. "Mind getting that door?"

Everyone in the place turned around to look at him, and the din that enveloped the place suddenly stalled. The building was silent. The two guys and the waitress looked at him gravely. The younger guy smirked and shrugged his shoulders. Annie looked up from her register and her face became somber. She looked away.

The door opened. Kevin grabbed it and the delivery man stepped in, pulling a dolly with several cardboard boxes on it.

"Thanks, guy," he said to Kevin. He rolled in a few more feet, and then stopped and looked at everyone. "Hey, it's just me," he announced. "What's everyone so scared of?" The man chuckled as he took off his filthy gloves. Then he realized everyone was looking at Kevin, not him, and he turned around.

"You robbing the place?" he asked, cocking his head.

"Vince, you can just put those over there," Annie said. "Gimme the bill."

"Hey, Annie, this guy's not trouble or anything, is he?" asked the driver, pointing toward Kevin, with a nervous smile. Kevin could not tell if he was serious or not.

"That's still to be seen," said the younger guy from the other day.

"No trouble, Steven," Annie scolded the man, and then looked back at the delivery guy. The place was still silently fixated on Kevin, standing there with the door open. He was half ready to run for it, if not for the delivery truck.

Vince ambled over to the register and gave Annie a slip of paper. She looked quickly at the boxes and pulled several bills out of the register, and handed them to him.

"Chop was pretty big this morning," Vince said.

"Not today, Vince," Annie cut him off.

"Just somethin' coming in, that's all," he said.

"Not today."

Sam poked a thumb in the air toward a couple of his boys. It was a command. They took the boxes and carried them into the back room. Vince took his empty dolly and walked back toward Kevin.

"Looks like they're adding you to the menu, guy," he said.

Kevin held the door open as Vince jauntily stepped out and pulled the dolly behind him. Kevin stood in the doorway, watching him close up his truck. He was still considering taking off himself.

"Now shut that door!" Kevin heard a voice yell. It was the angry guy at the counter. He stepped back and let the door swing shut. Everyone in the room was still watching. He realized there were probably thirty people who all looked like they knew something about him. A lot of them appeared old.

Annie looked at Kevin and said, “You must be starved. Get in here!” She cleared a bunch of newspapers from one of the stools at the counter, the one closest to the register. A woman of considerable size sitting next to it got up, but Annie waved her back down. “You stay right there,” she said.

As Kevin walked toward the stool, Steven got up and approached him, blocking the path to the stool. “We don’t want anyone digging up old ghosts here,” he said. Another man stood behind Kevin, as if he was blocking the route to the door. He was well-dressed, like his family, and he looked like a church pastor. But he was big enough to be rather menacing.

“Okay,” Kevin asked. “What is going on?” He mostly looked at Annie, since she was the only one so far who appeared to be friendly.

“Steven, get out of the way,” she said. He backed off. Then she turned and gestured to the seat. “Sit down,” she said, not sounding very friendly at all. Kevin sat, and the woman on the next stool inched away very slightly. Because of her size, it must have taken a lot of effort, although it was imperceptible to anyone else.

The room was still silent, except for the sizzling grill, and the creaking of the stool as he sat down. Steven sat as well, still glaring at Kevin. The church family and the waitresses were the only ones standing, as were Sam and the boys behind the counter. They turned away only to flip pancakes and eggs. It still smelled really good, but he did not enjoy it.

“Well, what’ll ya have?” Annie asked. “It’s on us.”

For a moment, Kevin had forgotten why he was here. “Oh, yeah. Um, can you make a bagel sandwich, to go?”

“A sandwich? No, no, no,” Annie said, shaking her head. Sam and a couple of the boys smirked. “Sam,” she said. “The works.” Then she turned back to Kevin, “You’re gonna be here awhile.”

The waitresses went back to their duties, carrying dishes and wiping the counter when people were done. Kevin waited silently for his food, trying not to notice how often everyone was looking at him. He did notice one interesting thing. Nobody left. Not even the family that was paying when he came in. They sat down at the one empty table near the front.

The food came quickly, and being in a hurry to leave, Kevin wolfed it down. Annie looked at him disapprovingly.

“Kiddo, you got no need to hurry. There’s a lot of ground to cover,” she said. Just as Kevin finished off his plate, the older guy from the other day stood up.

“Alright, we call this meeting to order,” he said.