

CHAPTER 2

“Is it going to be one of those days?” Dr. Liam Ashburn cursed himself for being so trite. Rent was due, which was stress he dealt with around the fourth week of every month. “When it rains it... dammit, I sound like my grandmother.”

He had been away all week at a small retreat held every year by one of those ghost finding television show. He always liked to see the real ghosts they found that never made it to the small screen. Who had thought General Braxton Bragg still hadn't moved on? There were a thousand mysteries with a thousand more questions running through Liam's but he didn't have time for those now. Rent was to be acquired.

The apartment was small, dingy and upstairs. It was on a little street called Sayonara drive, the closest thing to a ghetto Sacramento had. He thought about the poetry of the name for a second as he knocked on the door. There was some yelling from inside and a moment later the door cracked open. Liam looked down to see the girl, maybe four years old, barefoot and wearing a man's t-shirt like a dress. Liam raised an eyebrow and winked at the child, “Oh good, I'm not the only cliché today.”

Liam took off his old gray cap and rubbed his shaved head, a nervous habit. He started to bald when he was nineteen. His mom had joked that there was too much brain in his head, it was pushing out the hair. Ever since then he kept his head shaved and invested heavily in jaunty caps to fight off the colder months. Today he wore his favorite pub crawling cap with his jeans and untucked brown dress shirt. “Is your mommy home?” He hoped the answer was, “Yes and she has your money ready”.

The girl was pulled inside and the door opened wider. An old latin woman glared at him, her obese arms crossed. She said something in spanish and she didn't sound happy. From behind her a teenage girl said, “She says she is glad you finally here.” Liam thought that something might have been lost in the translation.

“I got here as fast as I could, do you mind if I ask how you got my card?” The girl translated and the old woman replied in Spanish. She used the word Marcus, Liam had his answer before the daughter responded.

“She says that Father Marcus recommended you.”

Liam wondered if the girl was her daughter or just a neighbor, it would be presumptuous of him to assume. “Are you her daughter, is it your brother that is afflicted?”

“Yes.” She nodded while whispering the word.

He saw it out of the corner of his eye and had to fight not to look directly at it. It darted across the ceiling and onto the top of the cupboard. “Take me to him.” He let his eyes lose focus but kept them trained on the young woman.

The daughter translated. There was a brief argument in Spanish before the old woman pointed to a door at the back of the hall. He looked at the pictures covering the walls, there were holes in the family photographs where someone had been angrily torn out. The door at the end of the short hall was closed and had a large iron crucifix hanging on it. It looked like a recent edition. It was a bit crooked and Liam took a moment to straighten it before twisting the knob as quietly as he could.

It was dark and musty. The glow of an old Tandy computer lit the room. The bed looked odd. There was someone in it, but they just weren't shaped right. Liam heard quite sobbing. His hand patted the wall until he was rewarded with a light switch. A boys room, complete with a Claudio Suarez poster on the wall and school books on the desk. His mother was clearly a very strict and orderly woman as nothing was out of place.

Liam walked across the room, startling the form under the covers. The boy sat up quickly in the bed, wiping tears away from his cheeks. In his early teens he already had one of those wispy little mustaches. He was shirtless and turned his head out the window as he sniffled. Liam looked at the odd lumps under the bed covers. "What's your name son?"

The boy started to speak but said nothing. Liam took a quick step forward grabbed the blankets pulling them back quickly, like a band aid. The kids legs weren't visible. There was a mass like a tail so long that it rolled back onto itself, knotted like one giant string of Christmas lights. It took a moment before Liam figured out what it was.

"Oh for the love of Newton kid." He shook his head. "Where is it, where is the book?" The boy looked at him for a second, his eyes darting to the desk.

The old mother spoke in Spanish, the daughter translating as quickly as she could, "My mother wants to know what it is." Liam rummaged through the boys drawers and produced an old leather bound book.

"I think it's your typical boon granting demon. I think I saw it out in your kitchen. This book here isn't very well written, but it will do the trick. You're son tried to get a wish granted and the demon he summoned wasn't controlled very well, so it wasn't exactly granted as intended." Liam looked at the boy, trying not to stare below the belt. "What did you wish for kid?"

"I wanted to be a great man, to shame my father. To show him that his family was better without him." There was a lot of anger, the kind that only an adolescent can conjure up.

"Wow, you really got a twisted little demon." Liam turned back to the girl. "Run down to my car, it's the white Dodge Neon. Get my bag from the back seat." He tossed her his keys and she disappeared through the door.

Liam reached into his shirt pocket and pulled a pair blue tinted glasses from his shirt pocket. He slipped them on and looked around the room. "Come on you little bastard, I know you're here. Let's not make this any more difficult than it has to be." He opened the book to a dog eared page. There were the instructions. They showed their age in the concepts. "We have come a long way in the field of metaphysics kid. This is like trying to learn about chemistry from an alchemist."

He read the instructions slowly, imagining how they would interact with the world. The

girl returned with his bag and set it on the floor next to his feet. “I think I have it now. See kid, the universe is governed by laws. There are a lot of them. We used to think there was some grand unifying theory, then we realized that if we found it, the world would end. So now we just kind of bumble around with the laws we have. You are working within the laws of heaven and hell here. Divine knowledge versus Infernal will.”

The boy stared at him. “Ok I'll sum up, since you aren't going to get it anyway. You did something dumb. You exercised your will over the physical world. That's infernal. That means it calls a demon. Cus you didn't do it right, he twisted your little incantation. So now you got part of your wish, you're a great man.”

“Can I undo it?” He stared wide eyed at Liam.

“Nope... but I can.” Liam reached into his bag and pulled out a roll of cloth and a small clay jar covered in ruins. He unrolled the cloth, inside tucked into little loops were gold and silver needles about six inches long and with varying widths. “Kid I'm sorry, but this is gonna hurt like a son of a bitch.”

The child's mother couldn't bear to watch as Liam started working with the acupuncture needles. She left the room, slamming the door hard enough to tilt the crucifix again. Whelps of pain muffled their way through the door as she tried not to imagine what was happening to her son.

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“Come in and we can discuss this”, Father Marcus stood at the top of the Stairs to St. Irene's. He is a bothersome man who Liam did not like at all. He was easily in his sixties and still sported a full head of dark black hair. Jerk.

“She stiffed me. You knew she couldn't pay and you told her to lie on the phone.” He still had a black eye from the post exorcism bargaining process.

“I'm always amazed that you think you should charge people for your little act.” The priest had taken a step backwards into the churches entranceway.

“It's not an act and you know it. You saw the kid and you wouldn't have sent me if you didn't think it would help.” Liam pointed at his crotch as he talked.

“Don't be vulgar my child. As a matter of fact I did not see him. We can't simply send a priest to the home of every woman who thinks her son is possessed. He discovered his own body and still lacks the self discipline to control his urges. She wouldn't listen to reason so I told her to call you. It was your choice to pretend her sons 'ailment' was real.” Father Marcus was now three good steps into the church.

“Don't walk away from me. You owe me seven hundred and ninety dollars. Better make it Eight Ten for good measure. I'm only charging you for my costs too. I'm doing you a favor.”

“I am not walking away from you. You are free to follow me Mr. Ashburn.”

“Dr. Ashburn, and no I'm not, and you know it.”

“Stubbornly holding to your delusions are we? What are you a doctor of exactly?”

“I'll send you a bill.” Liam turned and stomped down the steps, Marcus chuckled to himself and closed the door.

It occurred to Liam that he needed to start charging people up front. Of course, he would have helped her any way and still been out the money. How could he leave the kid like that? The familiar chirp of his cell phone bull rushed through his thoughts. He flipped it open and hit the speaker phone button as he slid into the driver's seat of his car. “Dr. Ashburn speaking.”

“Ashburn? This is Lt. March from Sac P.D. I was hoping you would meet me for a few minutes tomorrow.” The man had a strong voice on the phone, he was clearly used to commanding.

Liam looked up at the roof of his car without moving his head. “You're a cop with a month for a last name?”

“Excuse me?” The voice on the other side of the line sounded distant, like he was holding the phone away from his mouth to look at it.

“Nothing I'm just having a really strange day. What's up Chuck?” There was a short pause as Liam heard himself, then he laughed.

“What's so funny?”

“I just said 'Upchuck'. Sorry I'm all business now. What can I do for you?” Liam shook his head, clearing out anything not serious.

“I'm glad you're able to focus now. We've got a case here and I was recommended you as a consult. I was hoping you could come down tomorrow and meet with me.”

“Does it pay?”

“There is a standard consultation fee the department is willing to provide, yes. It can be explained to you when you get here. Ten tomorrow morning work for you?”

“Sure, but what do you need a physicist for?”

“I was told you were a metaphysicist. An expert on the occult.”

“It's actually a lot more, and less, complicated than that. But I'm probably the guy you're looking for.”

“Good, see you tomorrow morning Dr. Ashburn.” There was a click and his cell phone registered the call ending.

Liam shoved the cell phone in his pocket and rummaged for his keys. He started his car but

sat quietly for a moment.

“Good Morning Kit.” Liam spoke out loud as he adjusted the air conditioning. The car, like many other cars on the road, did not respond. Liam made his voice sound robotic “Good Morning Liam”. He pulled into traffic and drove directly to the station.

Lt. Charles March was surprised to hear from the front desk that Dr. Ashburn was there to see him.