

~DETECTIVES ON A TRAIN~

The Woman Who Knew Too Much

It was a cold, dark, Friday morning in late November. As I sat down in my usual seat on the Coaster train to San Diego, my petite French train-mate Amie Dubois sat down across from me. Her look was as dark as the morning, tinged with an uncharacteristic fear, so unlike her usual confident self.

“What’s up, Amie? You look so down today. Hey, it’s Friday. The weekend is upon us.”

Amie shook her head. “My Aunt Edith is missing. Dad’s older sister. Her mail has been piling up, and the postman wondered if something was wrong. They tried

knocking on the door, but there was no answer. Her car was still in the garage, but there was no sign of her. One of her neighbors called late last night and left me a message. I dialed her back first thing this morning.”

“That sounds serious. Did they break in and check?”

“They looked in the windows and went around back. The house looks empty. No lights on at night. The doors were all locked. That’s when the neighbor dug up my number and called me. After I talked with her, I tried my aunt’s phone. No answer, and the message cache was full.”

“So, what are you doing on the train this morning?”

“I have a critical architect meeting this morning at 9 am on a huge new hi-rise in the Seaport Village area. French contractor. I am part translator and part project liaison. It won’t go on without me.”

“Could your roommate Shelly check on her?”

“This is her Friday off. She left early this morning on a camping trip with friends to the mountains. Won’t be back until Sunday.”

“Where does your Aunt live? Maybe I can have my dad send a sheriffs’ car by?”

“She lives in the old original part of Escondido. Wood

frame, two-story, built in the late 1880's. She used to run a fortune teller business out of the original parlor. Always had a strained relationship with the Escondido police."

"Darn, Escondido wouldn't be my dad's jurisdiction. The County Sheriff doesn't cover that area. I'd be glad to help, but as usual, I don't have a car or a driver's license. Is there a train that goes there?"

"You can take the Sprinter Train out of the Oceanside Transit Center."

"So, you mean I'd have to take the Coaster back all the way north to Oceanside and then take the Sprinter. That would take forever."

"That's it. The San Diego Trolley doesn't go that far. Probably some kind of bus, but good luck with that."

"So how long is your meeting this morning?"

"Probably a couple of hours. Out at eleven, most likely. But one of the contractors always wants to do lunch. I doubt I'd be able to catch the late morning train north."

"So, you're saying you won't get home until late afternoon and have your car to be able to run to Escondido. If that's the case, I'll get off at the next stop or two and catch the first northbound train to Oceanside. I've got a quiet day at work so that I can work remotely."

Give me her address, and I'll get there as fast as I can."

"You'd do that for me? I don't need you to go out of your way for someone you don't know."

"After all we've been through, you're like family to me, Ms. DuBois. This situation sounds serious. I looked at the schedules on my phone. I can get back to Oceanside by 8:30 and then take the Sprinter to Escondido and arrive about 9:30. Got the backpack with me with some lock pick tools. Take me a few minutes to get in and check things out. What's the neighbor's name that called? I need to touch base with her before I go breaking in and having the cops show up and get dragged to jail."

Amie laughed. "We don't need you getting' arrested. It's Mrs. Feinstein. House to the right on Fifth. Aunt Edith's house is set back down a long driveway on a small hill. Old Victorian. The street is called Fifth place. Fifteen fifth place."

"Your aunt's full name?"

"Edith DuBois, but she goes by her stage name of Scarlett. Never married. Early seventies. Been in the states half her life."

"You got a picture of her?"

"Not with me. She is an attractive older woman, rail thin, shoulder length dark brown hair, and a smile that can

go from sinister to seductive in the flash of her vivid green eyes.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“She’s been a stage actress most of her life. Played bit parts. From seductive Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, to the Wicked Witch of the West in the *Wizard of Oz*.”

“You mentioned something about fortune telling?”

“In her later years, she’s made a good living telling fortunes for the Nuevo Riche in the area. Works out of the parlor of her Queen Anne Victorian. She has a special technique, tying her show business roots with special playing cards she had made up. The cards have famous people, characters, and sayings on them. She does special readings or what she calls a cartomancy by invitation only, usually in the late evenings on nights with a full moon. It’s pure atmosphere. The house, the moon, the music and the cards, not to mention the subtle aroma of some rare aphrodisiac, when couples are involved.”

“Wow.”

“It gets even better when she asks in her deep voice, tinged with a French accent, questions that pertain to each particular person. The clientele often falls into a magical spell after staring into her seductive eyes and embracing

her subtle facial nuances. Like my parents, she has a carnival background and has learned the fine art of deduction and personality reading.”

“So, have you ever seen one of these card readings?”

“Ten years ago, I came over for vacation with my parents. We visited her, and she let me sit behind the scenes one evening as she did a card deck for a couple that owned one of the car dealerships in town. In short, it was magical.”

“What exactly happened?”

“The guy who owned the dealership brought his new girlfriend with him for a reading. Scarlett had selected some cards that would pertain to their situation. She had them sit in a small room outside the parlor as she readied herself for the scene. They were offered wine and small hors-d'oeuvres. When they walked into the parlor, the atmosphere was perfect; the low music tempo and seductive, lights low, and a mixture of premium incense burning in a tray. The couple was seated in front of a small table, and each was dealt five cards each. Over the next fifteen minutes, Scarlett faced them and had them turn over their cards one at a time. Each card led to an interpretation. One was a new car, another a new house, and then there were the dark cards. Cards that would lead to pain and possible destruction.”

“I can see her seductive smile in my mind’s eye.”

“As great as her smile was, it was her sinister laugh that caught the attention of everyone. She could play Satan himself with her portrayal. The dark cards proved to be pivotal. Her warnings of straying from one another, of adultery, of focusing just on work were so clear. Then as the last cards were turned over the guy’s card came up as bankrupt. The whole room went quiet. It was interesting to see her reduce the volume of the music as the card was revealed.”

“I bet the guy’s stomach turned.”

“More than that. He stood up, angry, ready to leave, but Scarlett led him expertly to sit back down and draw one more card out of the deck. This time the guy drew one that had a picture of an altar, which said marriage.”

“Whoa. Was that card random?”

“Nothing is ever random, where Scarlett is concerned. She guided the couple that the way forward was to get married and stay faithful to each other. The woman was then allowed one more card. This one had a picture of a kid’s playroom.”

“So, I imagine the couple left happy.”

“Happy but frightened of consequences. It’s interesting, because I just looked online at the dealership

web page, that same guy now has four kids and is happily married to the woman that sat next to him that night.”

“So, your aunt is part stage actress, part fortune teller, and part relationship counselor.”

“That’s a good way to put it, and as of this morning, she is missing without a trace.”

I nodded. “The Solana Beach stop is coming up. I’ll get off here to catch the northbound. I’ve got the address; I’ll call or text later this morning when I find out what’s going on.”

Amie held out her hand. “One more thing. You can always tell Scarlett by her bright red scarf she routinely wears around her neck.”

I picked up my backpack and headed off the train, not realizing that my future had just changed in a very sinister way.

After my car accident over six months ago where my girlfriend almost died, and my car, my job and my driver’s license taken away, I’ve had to rely on public transportation for most of my travels. Most of these

travels have been on the Coaster train, that travels multiple times a day back and forth from Oceanside in the north to San Diego Downtown on the south.

I've gotten used to the Coaster. It's reliable, clean, pleasantly quiet, and most of the time, on schedule. The crowd is professional, and I've met a number of friends on my trips, including my daily train-mates Amie DuBois and Shelly Masters. What I found when the Coaster dropped me off in Oceanside mid-morning was that the Sprinter train was a whole different animal.

While the Coaster was a full-size diesel-electric passenger train that had quiet, double decker cars, the sprinter was a modern European style light rail system with single level cars in a two by two combination, diesel powered without a locomotive. The interiors were clean and bright, and the passengers were mainly students going to college or workers commuting to retail or commercial jobs.

The trains left the station every half hour, so I was on my way after a short hiatus. The full Sprinter route has 15 stops versus the eight stops on the Coaster. At first it felt like we were just getting started, when the train would slow down again. I soon got used to the routine, closed my eyes and relaxed for the rest of the trip.

The conductor announced the Escondido Station just

before 10:30 in the morning. Picking up my backpack, I grabbed a baseball hat and headed out to find my way to Scarlett's house. Plugging in the coordinates, my GPS said it would take twenty minutes to walk there. The map guide led me down historical Grand Avenue, with restaurants, stores and a variety of antique shops. Most of the buildings had original storefronts from the thirties, forties and fifties. It was like walking back in time. The brisk November weather was pleasant, and I stopped in a fully restored malt shop for a soda about halfway along. As the older gentleman behind the bar handed me a root beer float, I asked, "Are you familiar with a lady named Scarlett DuBois?"

He nodded, "Most of the old timers do. She's been around in that old Victorian on the hill off fifth for years. Never got married. All sorts of rumors about the old gal. Got to be at least seventy by now. Kept to herself mostly. Some say she has mystical powers. I remember when she played at the Grand Ballroom back in the seventies. Absolutely beautiful with a wicked laugh and endearing smile. Whatcha want with her?"

"A friend of mine is her niece. Says she's gone missing. Just thought I'd ask around."

"That's just like ol' Scarlett. She'd take up with some feller or couple and somehow, she'd tell them something and she'd disappear for a few days and end up with new

car or new clothes, or something done to her house. That place has all sorts of additions over the years. I always figured it to be haunted, with her mystical powers and all. If she's gone, I'd wait a spell and check back. Someone once implied she had an elevator in the house. An elevator to hell, they said. It not only went up, but way way down. Don't know if it's true but that's what they said."

I laughed. "An elevator to Hell. Maybe it got stuck?"

"Tell ya what, that old house is hotter-n-hell in the summertime. You'd always see her hanging out in the backyard in a bathing suit by her pool. Good lookn' gal. Lots of guys hangn' round. But that was the old days. She had lots of fledgling actors and actresses' friends over from the Grand. The above ground pool is long gone. Place is sorta rundown now. Hasn't been much done over the last few years."

"Does she come into town much?"

"Haven't seen her old Nash Metropolitan for a while. That's one of those old 1950's tiny two-seater jobs. Two tone blue and aqua paint, convertible top. Some guy at one of the dealerships kept it up for her. Cute as she was. She always drove it top down with a scarlet red kerchief around her neck, lips painted red. That's how you knew it was Scarlett."

“I heard that was her signature look. Is there anyone I should check with in town that might know where she is?”

“Abigail at the French Cafe might know. Scarlett used to have breakfast there occasionally. They would converse in French and enjoy a croissant or two.”

“Thanks, where’s the bakery located?”

“On the east side of the street a block up. Can’t miss it.”

I left the guy a great tip and walked out the door. The root beer float and nostalgic feel of the area brought back memories. A large banner posted over a slew of pictures he had on the wall of old cars and rock bands said ‘Cruisin’ Grand Escondido Every Friday Night.’ This was a cool town.

I crossed the street and soon found the French cafe. A courtyard adorned the sidewalk out front, with a crowd of customers in lighthearted conversations. The interior had yellow painted walls with painted murals of the French market and countryside. The aroma of croissants and baked egg dishes filled the air. Approaching the counter, I noticed a woman, probably in her late forties, at the bar taking orders and delivering food. A bright colored name tag announced that her name was Abigail. Her long dark hair framed a joyous face. She smiled at me and said, “We

are making a new batch of almond croissants, I highly suggest you add one to your order. It's what makes us famous and keeps the lights on. Besides, every person deserves a piece of heaven once in a while."

Her attitude brought a smile to my face. "I'll have one of those and a cup of coffee along with a conversation, if you have a minute."

"And who do I have the pleasure of conversing with?"

"My name is Cory. I have a good friend named Amie, who is the niece of Scarlett DuBois. We heard that she disappeared, and I'm headed into town to see if we can find out what might have happened to her."

The woman held her hand out. "Abigail Duchene. I've known Scarlett for years, but I must admit, I haven't seen her for a while. You say she disappeared?"

"Amie got a call from a neighbor that the mail had been piling up. No lights on inside and no response at the door. Her car is still in the garage. We have tried her phone, but her voice mailbox is full and no answer. Pete over at the malt shop said you might be a friend."

"Probably as good a friend as she's got. Scarlett is her own woman. Fiercely private at times. Friendly at others. Since she is French, we chat occasionally. She's got that big ol house on the hill on Fifth. Big ol termite infested

albatross, if you ask me. I've asked her numerous times why she just doesn't sell it, and she always replies, 'Too many secrets.' Which is probably true. She's had so many additions over the years and so many acquaintances, heaven knows what you'd find inside, especially upstairs."

"Have you ever been to her home?"

"She did a reading for me about ten years ago, so I've been in the sitting room and inside the parlor on the main floor. Spooky old place. The night I was there a full moon was shining through the side window along with strange music playing and incense burning. Totally creeped me out at first, but then she told me things about myself that no one else could have known. The 'card reading' or whatever you might call it, lasted about fifteen minutes, but stayed with me for a lifetime."

"Sounds enlightening."

"Strange experience, but most all of it has come true. I went to her because the recession had come, and I didn't know whether to quit the business or keep going with it. Life was tough at the time with two little kids."

"So, you went in with questions in mind?"

"Big questions. I'll never forget; she turned over picture cards on the table and looked me in the eye. The first card showed a garden scene. She pictured me in a

French Chateau with a garden of almond and fruit trees. She said I should love my husband and concentrate on the business. Keep it simple and smile. She said my smile is my greatest treasure. I pulled a card with a picture of a sidewalk, so we added seats out there. One card was dark and said the word bankruptcy on it. My heart sank when I turned that one over. That's when she gave me the strangest expression I have ever seen. Half scowl, half smile. In a deep voice she said we would only be successful if we didn't give up and drew an X through the word. I'll never forget that moment. I think about that X every time I want to give up."

"I can imagine that experience was enlightening. How did you find out about her?"

"I just happened to talk with her in the restaurant one day and I mentioned the problems we were having. On a later visit, she offered to give me a reading."

"Did she charge you anything?"

"That was the wonderful part. She offered the reading for free. She wouldn't take money at her house. She said if the experience brought clarity, she was happy to accept gifts."

"Did you reciprocate?"

"At the time it was tough. The business was struggling.

We didn't have any money, so the next time she came in, I just gave her a meal for free. I told her about seeing that X and that I felt better about the business. I just told her that her meals and conversations would always be free here."

"She take you up on that?"

"Scarlett has become a friend over the years. She often comes in late morning on weekdays, when things are quieter. We often sit in the corner and share an almond croissant. She loves the croissants. I never charge her, and she never takes advantage. We speak in French for a few minutes and then just let our hair down. She drops the Scarlett demeanor and just becomes Edith. She has lived a unique life, but often a lonely one. Never married and has no kids or close friends. The big old house has become a huge weight around her neck. For some reason her free spirit is tied to that place. It's like she is trapped and can't leave. Now you say she is missing. Maybe she finally escaped; hopefully not through death."

"I hope to find out. I'm curious though, what was it about her 'reading' that spurred you on? I remember how severe the recession was, especially for small businesses. Not an easy time for business decisions."

"At first it seemed mystical, but it really was just someone that took the time to listen to my problems. The

cards were so specific to my needs. I mean how do you pull a Chateau card from a deck? What card deck would that be, other than my own?"

"Just the little that I've heard about Scarlett, her readings seem powerful and yet specific."

Abigail stood up and looked me in the eye. "I have to get back to work, but I'll tell you this, some days she seems like an angel, some days like a wise counselor, but she is truly, behind the Scarlett facade, a kind and caring person. I hope she is OK."

"I hope so, too."

I sat for a minute at the table and finished my meal. As I got up to leave, I walked back to the front and dropped a twenty in the tip jar and asked Abigail one more question. "Is there anyone in town that you would recommend I talk to if she is truly missing?"

"Max over at Maxwell Motors on ninth has worked on her car for years. Used to own one of the car dealerships back in the eighties. He sold that off and runs a hot-rod shop now. Nice guy. Knows everyone in town. He might know something, but Scarlett doesn't drive much anymore. Hank the Handyman might be someone else you could contact. He's over on Broadway. Other than that, most anyone who has been in town would know of her, but probably not very well."

“Thanks, I’m headed over there now. You’ve been a great help.”

I turned and took a few steps towards the door when I heard Abigail call to me again.

I caught sight of her, and she signaled me to follow her back inside the kitchen area. She pointed to a small office. “I just remembered something,” she said as I followed her in. She closed the door behind us. “Scarlett shared something about a year ago that might be helpful. She told me this in confidence, but under the circumstances, I think you should know. You never know who can hear what in the restaurant, so I thought a closed door might be better.”

I nodded. “I agree, go ahead.”

“Scarlett shared with me that she has a curse, as she calls it, that comes upon her at certain times. It’s basically an omen of things about to happen. She also has a view at times of the spirit world. She explains it as a profound feeling of good or evil. These traits have played a small part of her readings for years. Recently though, she’s had a premonition of death.”

I shook my head. “Her own or someone else?”

“That was the thing. She was intensely paranoid that it was her own, yet she couldn’t be sure.”

“Wow. That’s troubling.”

“The weird this is, it came to her as an intense claustrophobic feeling and vision. She had dreams of a dark, close place, where she could barely breath.”

“That’s enough to scare anyone.”

“The really tough part was that it was like an experience she had as a little girl. When she was six years old, some kids locked her in an old refrigerator and left her to perish.”

“Oh my God.”

“She explains it this way. “The circus I was a part of had set up near an old abandoned house where old appliances had been set outside. As I was walking by, my curiosity got the better of me. I looked in the stove and opened the refrigerator door. Everything had been stripped out. Suddenly some hands grabbed me and forced me in the old icebox. The door slammed, and I knew I was going to die. The kids who locked me in hated me, because my parents were gypsies. I could hear them laughing and mocking as they ran away. Die, gypsy, die. It was completely dark and freezing cold. I couldn’t see my hands and could barely breathe. All I could think to do was pray. I prayed to God that someone would find me, but this old refrigerator was out in the yard of an abandoned house where someone had dumped junk. Our

camp was over a block away. I kept praying for an angel to open the door. I became faint, my breathing shallow as the oxygen was used up. I tried kicking the door and yelling, but I knew no one was around. *Please God, send an angel.* I kept repeating it over and over. In a vision, I saw a woman coming my way. She was looking all over for me, calling my name, *Edith, Edith.* I screamed out, but she didn't hear me. *Edith, where are you?* she yelled again. *I'm here, in here,* I yelled with the little breath I had left. As everything was blacking out, I raised up and pushed against the door with all my weight. Suddenly the fridge rocked one way and then tumbled to the side. I felt it fall and then blacked out. I'm not sure what happened next, but the next thing I remember was a woman in white opening the door and helping me out. The refrigerator was on its back and as I stood and looked around, the bright sunlight blinded my eyes. As I turned back to face the refrigerator, the woman was gone. I was standing alone and scared in a field, but I was alive. I ran home as fast as I could.' Scarlett says that her premonitions started that day and have been with her since then."

"That is so scary. I can't imagine anything worse than suffocating to death in an abandoned refrigerator."

Abigail nodded. "Scarlett says that since that experience, when evil people are in her presence, she gets a cold chill down her spine. Real cold, just like the icebox.

It doesn't happen often, but when it does, she takes precautions.”

I shook my head. “I can see why she might call that a curse. Seeing things about to happen or sensing evil has got to be incredibly disturbing.”

Abigail smiled. “There is a good side to it, though. She can sometimes see angels. She pointed one out one morning when we were sitting in the restaurant. I wouldn't have believed it, but she pointed to a man sitting on the patio out front. She said, ‘He's an angel. He has come to protect your business. Treat him well. He will not let evil pass.’ I thought she was goofy, until later that morning the man stopped an armed robber that had gotten out of a stopped car to rob us. As the robber ran in the front courtyard, the angel man stood up and tripped him. As he fell to the floor, a gun flew out of his hand. The robber was startled, then stood up, ran back to the car and fled. The angel man picked up the gun and handed it to me. He simply said, ‘The police will want to see this,’ and turned and disappeared. I never saw him again. It was unreal, but I saw it all play out.”

“Wow. So, there is a completely different side of Scarlett that few people know.”

“Yes. That's why she is so private and keeps to herself, but it's this premonition that has her tied in knots. I know

one other thing you ought to know. She confided in me that she talked with Pastor McAllen of the tiny First Baptist Church on Fourth Avenue about her reoccurring dream. It's on your way to her house. You might stop in and see if he is there. He may be able to shed some light on the situation."

"I will, Abigail. You've been so helpful. I'll stop back in when I find out something."

"I would appreciate that. I'm so worried about her. I hope the omen didn't come true."

As I walked out of the bakery, many thoughts ran through my head. I was walking to a house with many secrets, owned by a woman with many of her own. But it was the premonition that had me worried. I plugged in First Baptist Church on my GPS and found my way there a few blocks away. The little church was sitting dead center on a small corner lot. It was all white with a pitched roof, small steeple, and a well-manicured lawn surrounded by a white picket fence. As I walked through the front gate, a small sign said office and pointed to a door around the side. Through a window on the door I could see older balding man sitting at a desk. I walked in and introduced myself. "Hello, I'm Cory London and I'm looking for Pastor McAllen."

The man stood up and held out his hand. "I'm Robert

McAllen but you can call me Bob. What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if you could tell me a little about Scarlett DuBois. Abigail over at the French Bakery said you might be aquatinted with her.”

He gave me a severe look. “I guess my first question is, who is Cory London?”

“I’m a good friend of Amie DuBois, Scarlett’s niece. I’m on my way over to her house now. Amie was notified by a neighbor this morning that her Aunt is missing. Her mail has piled up, she doesn’t answer her phone, and there are no lights on at her house.”

Pastor Bob motioned for me to take a seat across from his desk. “Since you are a family connection, I’ll tell you what I know. I met Scarlett about a year ago. Interesting woman. She is very accomplished as an actress and a very talented counselor, which might not be the right way to describe her. Actually, she is what I would call a deductress. She has an uncanny way of reading people.”

“I know what you mean, her niece is the same way. She can tell you all sorts of things about yourself with just a glance and a few questions.”

“So, you’ve experienced the DuBois effect?”

“First time I met Amie, she told me things about myself that no one could have possibly known. It was scary to say the least.”

Pastor Bob leaned back in his chair. “I’ve met thousands of people in my years as a pastor. I’m sorta retired now, and just working here with a small flock of mostly older people. I’ve only met one or two people in my life with Scarlett’s talents. I’ve met individuals that consider themselves to be physic and others that supposedly can talk to the dead, but when you test their abilities they usually fail miserably. Scarlett is different. She has a gift of discernment, one that she calls a curse at times. In a biblical term, I would refer to her as a prophet.”

“A prophet. Hmmm, I hadn’t thought about that type of title.”

“I’ve seen parishioners with numerous spiritual gifts, from healing to prayer, but the gift of prophecy is truly rare. That is one reason that Scarlett came to me. She has had a recurring dream or vision for the past year. One of confinement and possible death. I’ve given her counseling, but she is troubled deeply in her soul. Unfortunately, I can’t see what she is seeing or feel what she is feeling, but I know in my heart what she says is true. Now you say that she is missing. That is troubling, very troubling.”

“I’m headed to her house now; would you like to accompany me?”

“Unfortunately, I have a counseling appointment at 1 pm, otherwise I would. Take my card. I’ll write my cell number on the back. Let me know what you find.”

“Can you tell me a little about her house? Have you ever been there?”

Pastor Bob shook his head. “Spooky old place. A tad bit rundown. Scarlett showed me around when we met there one time. Two floors, an attic, a basement and a beautiful balcony verandah off the second floor with a view of the whole valley.”

“I heard the place has an elevator. Is that true?”

“It’s one that was added on. The shaft is external to the house and the openings exit onto the stairwell landings. Externally, the contractor did a great job of hiding the unit. He basically just extended the side wall of the house out about four feet. It goes from the basement to the second floor. A small stair goes up to the attic area.”

“Why would you add an elevator to a house like that?”

“From what Scarlett told me, it was all about a tax deduction and accessibility. It seems that her Queen Anne is on the registry of historic places. The way the law

works, if you open your house to visitors at certain times for tours and maintain the property, you don't have to pay property taxes and you can even receive stipends for repairs in certain sections of the city. She used to have an annual Christmas party at the home for years. Invited guests from all over the place. Unfortunately, with the disabilities act, the tax deduction disappeared, since guests who couldn't climb stairs could not access the basement or second floor. A crazy technicality in the law for an old place like that.”

“So, she must have hooked up with a contractor or someone?”

“About twenty years ago, they tore down an old bank building in town. It had eight floors at the time with an elevator. The contractor on the job knew Scarlett and basically disassembled the old unit and reassembled it at her home. Did it for free from what I heard. Got a big deduction for upgrading a historic property. Basically, a win-win.”

“It's amazing that the parts were reusable. How do you fit an eight-story elevator in a two-story house?”

“Everything was modular. Supposedly the elevator at the bank building was a retrofit during building expansion in the thirties. Kinda like an erector set. Just stack up the ten-foot girders, add a motor at the top, and then add the

elevator unit and doors. Only took a month or so from what Scarlett said. Really cool historic unit. Brass everywhere.”

“So, it goes from the basement to the second story. I heard someone say it went down to hell.”

The pastor laughed. “I don’t doubt that some people would say that. Scarlett’s gifts often lead people to believe she is into witchcraft and all sorts of other practices. I thought that was the case at first. I really didn’t want to talk with her, especially at the church. When she first approached me, I hesitated, but then agreed to meet at her house. To tell you the truth, I was spooked out. I didn’t even want to go in the front door. That’s the problem. People talk, spread rumors. I’d heard numerous stories about the old house being haunted. However, when Scarlett came to the door, she seemed like a normal person, well dressed with a welcoming smile. The old house was nice inside, with many beautiful period pieces. The kitchen had been upgraded with modern appliances. The elevator had been installed at the back side of the house, with doors from an earlier period. It didn’t look retrofit at all. The brass framework matched the rest of the period architecture.”

“Did you see much of the house?”

“She actually gave me a quick tour. The elevator was

her pride and joy. We entered the small unit and she hit the b button which took us down to a dimly lit half basement. The area was mostly empty but had a large storage area towards the back. It was nice and clean. After that she hit the two button and the elevator slowly climbed to the second floor. The door opened to the top stairway landing, which had a door to one side that led to a large balcony verandah. She led me outside where I could see for miles. Whoever had retrofit the elevator and upgraded the property had done a wonderful job.”

“You say it’s run down?”

“The inside living area was nice, but like any old wooden house, the outside was showing its age. Wood cracking, paint peeling in areas. Nothing out of the ordinary for the area. Personally, I wouldn’t want to own one. I’m surprised she hasn’t sold the place. A lot of upkeep for an older woman who lives alone.”

“Abigail called the place an Albatross. I guess I can understand why.” I stood up to leave. “Thanks for your help, pastor. I’ll call you later when I have some news. Oh, by the way, did Scarlett give you a reading?”

“Not formally, but she did say that she came to me because she got a warm feeling walking by the church.” He smiled. “You never know where angels may hang out.”

I walked out of the small church on fourth and headed over to fifth avenue. In the distance I could see the hill where Scarlett's house was perched. I didn't know what I would find, but I had my own premonition and it wasn't good.

I stood at the base of the hill at Fifth avenue and Fifth Place. Up on the side of a small hill about a hundred yards away stood an old Victorian home, surrounded by a sparse grove of ancient oaks and pine trees. I started the walk up the narrow drive, then stopped about a hundred feet in and turned to view the surrounding neighborhood. On the avenue below were several older homes, mostly craftsman style, built in the twenties and thirties. The Queen Anne home of Scarlett's was built much earlier and for decades must have had the small hillside lot to itself. The neighborhood was in various stages of restoration. A few homes had been completely redone, but most had been patched, painted and poised for the next onslaught of summer heat.

I turned and started my climb again. I thought of notifying the closest neighbor, but I just kept walking. My stomach churned as I feared the worst. Finding a dead

body in a house was not a pleasant experience, but I would know as soon as I opened the door.

It didn't take long to find a rear entrance that would be out of sight of the street. It was an old wooden door with window and screen that faced a small back porch off the kitchen. A few minutes with my tools on the old lock gave success. The lock gave way and the latch sprung. I took a deep breath and entered the home. I stood in a dark kitchen and let out my breath slowly. I peered around as I inhaled again. Thankfully, no smell of death, just a slight scent of rosewater. I called out, "Scarlett, are you here?" Only silence.

The old home reminded me of a few older bed and breakfast places that I had stayed in before. The kitchen was painted white, with dark wooden plank floors and high ceiling. Tall leaded glass windows let in muted yellow light through linen curtains. On one side was a large replica wood stove and long counter containing a modern dishwasher and stand-alone microwave. A white French door refrigerator adorned the opposite wall. Period pictures of the area in frames lined the wall. The center of the room had a wooden island worktop with an overhead hanging copper rack adorned with pots and pans. This was a working kitchen, that could easily accommodate a large party of guests.

Walking out of the kitchen, I entered the dining room.

It had bay windows embellished with white lace curtains on the side, a large ornate sideboard and a long dining table certainly expandable to hold a dozen guests, and a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Picture frames lining the top of the sideboard displayed family members, including a couple that were undoubtedly a younger Amie. I call Scarlett's name again as I entered the sitting room which looked out over the front porch verandah. Inside was a period couch and sitting chairs along with a Queen Anne revival coffee and end tables. The floor had a new rug over hardwood. This was the room that guests would wait in until she would invite them into the parlor for their readings. The question in my head grew stronger; where was Scarlett?

I walked across the hall and entered the parlor door. The room was similar in size to the sitting room. It had a bay window looking out to the front of the property which let in ample light through a small opening in dark purple curtains. The opposite side of the room was sparsely furnished with a two drawer Queen Anne table, with two rounded foot chairs on one side and a larger Queen Anne chair on the other. This was undoubtedly where she did her readings for clients. The only other furniture in the room was a small sofa against the side wall. The wall behind the table and chairs had a corresponding purple curtain full length across the room.

I pulled this back which revealed a small space between the curtain and the wall where it would be easy to conceal people or things. I'm sure this is where Amie was hidden the day she viewed on of the readings. Boxes of candles, incense, and containers of cards were on the floor which certainly had been used during readings.

With the front curtains pulled the room would certainly be very dark. The only visible light being a wall sconce lamp over the sofa. I had now covered the entire bottom floor of the residence. Over the next few minutes I ran upstairs and checked out each of the four bedrooms. The larger one was Scarlett's bedroom, but the queen-sized bed was made, and nothing seemed out of order. The other three bedrooms each had a small twin bed in them and were sparsely furnished. No sign of Scarlett. From the second floor, I tried the elevator, but it didn't seem to work—maybe you had to turn it on somewhere—so I took the stairs to the basement. Just some storage boxes. From the dust on the floor, it didn't appear that anyone had been down there for months. I was frustrated, yet relieved at the same time. No dead body was in the house.

My next foray was to check out the garage. On this property the garage was an older outbuilding, adjacent to the back of the house, that was probably used as a stable when the Queen Anne was built in 1888. I looked down

the hill at the surrounding neighborhood for activity and glanced at my watch. It was 1:30 in the afternoon and everything was quiet. A side door to the garage had a small window at the top. Glancing through it I noticed a car inside that matched the description the soda fountain guy had given me. A few seconds with my lock picks and the door gave way. The inside was dusty and dimly lit from some high windows on the back wall. The interior had been redone with new joists and a shiny Nash Metropolitan car sat in one of the two stalls. A workbench had garden tools on it, but no sign of life, and thankfully, no sign of death. I did a quick perusal, finding nothing of interest, and locked it back up and went back into the kitchen of the house. Still no sign of Scarlett.

On one side of the kitchen a small desk area was set up. I noticed an old PC on the floor under the desk and a vintage computer monitor on top. An old ink jet printer with was on a shelf under the desk, along with some dusty packages of assorted card stock. Probably used to make her special reading cards. A portable phone was sitting in a charger next to an answering machine with a flashing red light. This might lead to some clues, but I needed at call Amie and see how her day was coming along. Dialing her cell, she picked up quickly but was in a planning meeting and couldn't talk long. Said she would take the 3:30 train and get here as soon as she could. I passed on a

few facts and told her the good news that I hadn't found a body. She breathed a sigh of relief.

I knew it would probably be dark by the time Amie arrived, so I decided to check on the other leads that Abigail had given me. Before I walked out, I listened to a couple of her messages. All four that heard were from her neighbor, Mrs. Feinstein, checking up on her. She would be my first stop on my way out. I locked up the house with a key I found in one of the kitchen drawers and headed down the drive to the neighbor's house.

Mrs. Feinstein answered the door and we talked for a few minutes. She was in the middle of a soap opera but said she had picked up the mail for Scarlett after the box overflowed and the postman asked about her. She handed me a two-week stack, which I put in my backpack. I told her that there was no sign of her and not to worry if she saw lights on in the house. She looked at me as she was closing the door, obviously in a hurry to see the climax of her soap. "Running off is not unusual with Scarlett. Probably met up with someone new. Funny though, when she heads off, she usually takes her car. Maybe someone local this time? Thank God there was no body. I was really scared we'd lost her."

"I'll keep in touch," I said, and headed down the street the opposite way than where I came in. The rest of the afternoon was frustrating. I stopped in at Max Motors,

but Max was out at an auction and wouldn't be back until the next day. The secretary in the office knew Scarlett but hadn't seen her or her car in the shop for months. My next stop was Hank the Handyman, but his wife said he was out of town on a big project. Here again, Scarlett hadn't been seen in months.

As the sun was setting, I looked at my watch. It was almost four thirty. My smart phone dinged with a text from Amie. She was on her way in her car. Probably an hour away in traffic. I walked over to a local coffee shop, sat at a table with a coffee and looked through the stack of mail the neighbor gave me. Really frustrating. Almost all junk mail and bills. I picked up a water bill for \$90, a gas bill for \$22, and an electric bill for \$30. Another envelope had a statement for a quarterly elevator maintenance contract for \$25 from a company called Tri City Maintenance. A thought came to me; since she hadn't paid it, maybe that was why the elevator didn't work. The only bright news was a Publisher Clearing House envelope announcing that Scarlett may have won ten million dollars. Surely that's what happened to her; but I wasn't holding my breath.

Amie and I coordinated to meet at Scarlett's house at 5 pm. I gave her a hug as she got out of her car and we entered the house turning lights on room by room. I said, "I don't know for sure what happened, but it appears she

left the house with someone and hasn't come back."

Amie nodded as she looked around the kitchen. "I'd be anxious if it was any other seventy-year-old woman other than my aunt. Scarlett is so independent, I'm not sure what to think."

"It certainly doesn't look like foul play here. Nothing is amiss. Her bed is made. The house is relatively clean, just minor dust from a place that hasn't been lived in in two weeks. Her car and garage are untouched."

"Did you find out anything in town today? You said the gal at the bakery had some info."

"I talked with Abigail at the French bakery and a pastor McAllen at a little church over on fourth. They both said Scarlett had been having dark dreams about being confined and feared death. Like what happened to her as a little girl."

"You mean the refrigerator incident? That isn't good. How long had that been going on?"

"About a year. The troubling thing was, she couldn't discern if it was about her or someone else."

"I remember my parents talking about that. It still gives me chills thinking about it."

"No kidding. I can't imagine dying by suffocation. But

they both said she has a special gift, or curse as Scarlett called it, of discernment. The pastor called it a gift of prophecy. It seems she can also feel or sense good and evil.”

Amie sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. “Let me explain something to you, Cory, that you may not understand. In the carnival and circus circles, you’ll find a lot of magicians, fortune tellers, and mind readers. While there are various talent levels, at least ninety nine percent use discernment or trickery to achieve their results. Only a few, very few, really have a sixth sense. While I can discern a lot of things by observation, questioning, and sleight of hand, I can’t see the future or sense good and evil. But I always wondered about Scarlett. I heard my parents talk about her, but I was never included in much conversation, except the one time I saw her do a reading. It was truly magical. I put that off to showmanship, but it may have been something more.”

“According to Abigail, it was more of a curse than a blessing, especially with the type of dreams she was having.”

Amie thought for a second and then looked at the calendar on her phone. Flipping through dates with her finger she looked up at me. “I was wondering if you would do me a favor, Cory? Would you stay here tonight with me? Driving home to Carlsbad and coming back

doesn't make much sense, especially with traffic. I want to see this place in the morning daylight and do some more sleuthing, but I really don't want to stay here alone."

I shrugged. "I guess I could. I saw some twin beds in the small bedrooms upstairs."

"Good," she nodded. "I really don't want to sleep in Scarlett's bed, but if the guest rooms have beds that will work."

Shaking my head, I said, "I do have to admit, this place is a little scary. Just the smell of rosewater, the creaking boards, and those old pictures with eerie looking faces make it a little creepy. Thinking about Scarlett's premonition is certainly enough to scare the hell out of someone. Personally, I'd rather stay in a regular hotel, but we really need to be at the scene of the crime."

Amie smiled, "Tell you what Cory. I'll treat to dinner and a glass or two of wine; you know-for courage. We'll come back later and deal with this."

"You're on. When we get back, I want to look at that elevator. For some reason it doesn't work. Hopefully, no dead bodies in the car."

"Stop, Cory, you're freaking me out."

"OK, but there are more messages on the answering machine that someone needs to go through. Maybe you

can do that while I'm checking the elevator and breaker box.”

“You got a deal, mister. Lasagna and wine at Giuseppe's on Grand.”

For the next ninety minutes Amie and I shared the events of the day over amazing Italian food and a bottle of red wine. The wine helped get the spook out of the thought of staying in a centuries old house with a missing person. We both agreed there was probably some simple explanation for her disappearance. She might even be home when we got back.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. As we parked Amie's Corolla behind the house, I headed for the electrical panel, while Amie played back the rest of the messages on the answering machine. Grabbing a flashlight from my backpack, I found the electrical panel on the side of the house. Opening it up, all the breakers looked good. One side had a more substantial one marked elevator, which I flipped off and back on. Heading back in, I tried the elevator button on the ground floor. Nothing happened. Taking the flashlight with me, I walked to the basement and tried the button there. Nothing happened again. It was as if the whole unit was off. No light, or noise when I pushed it. I tried sliding the doors apart, but they were locked closed. I was frustrated.

I needed to think how this unit might have been installed. The door in the basement was set in the foundation block wall, while the first-floor door was set in one of the side walls. No other access doors or panels were visible. I decided I might have better luck on the second floor. I climbed the staircase and found the second-floor door on the stairwell landing. Here again, the button didn't operate and there appeared to be no access point.

I was just about to give up, when I noticed that there was a small door on the side of the elevator shaft area that protruded out onto the verandah balcony. I unlocked the top stair door to the verandah and tried the access door. It was locked. After ten minutes with a lock pick and flashlight, I was able to gain access. Shining the light in I could see the inner frame rails, with a sheet metal cover in front of me. Shining the light up I saw cables along with the heavy-duty motor that was situated in the attic above. Everything inside the wooden closet was dark, but as my light scanned the area around the boxed elevator shaft, I saw something suspicious. A sizeable heavy-duty rubber coated power cable had been pulled out of a brass connector. I took the cable wire and touched it to the connector. A huge spark and momentary whir flashed in front of my face. Now I knew why the elevator didn't work.

Fixing the elevator would have to wait for daylight. I would need tools for the repair. Finding the cable off the connector presented a problem. Was it disconnected on purpose or just a bad connection? If it was done on purpose, someone would have to have a key to the access panel. That type of lock was challenging to pick. Not an ordinary key.

The good news was, there was no smell emanating from the shaft, other than one of machine oil. I felt confident that Scarlett was not in the elevator. I closed the access door and headed back into the house. Amie was just finishing up with the phone messages. Over 25 in all. Most were automated sales calls, a few from neighbors, a couple from friends, and the first one on the list being from the elevator company, calling back about the elevator not working. Some guy named Ray said to call him back with a time convenient for repair. He left a cell phone number. Now I was sure the elevator was a maintenance issue. I'd deal with that in the morning.

Over the next couple of hours, Amie and I made a thorough search of the house, which led to more questions than answers. Amie found Scarlett's purse in

one of the kitchen cabinets. Her car keys and wallet were inside. Amie shook her head and said, “Would a woman leave the house without her purse? I know I wouldn’t. If she left with someone, it must have been a close friend, for just a minute. I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all. Not after two weeks. Finding the purse tells me something sinister is going on.”

I responded. “That is true. I can see her heading off with friend for a short errand or maybe go to a neighbor’s house. But you wouldn’t go to lunch or dinner with someone without taking your wallet along. Finding the purse means something out of the ordinary is going on.”

Amie paced back and forth for a few minutes in the kitchen. “I wish it wasn’t so late. I need daylight. Something weird is going on here. We have her car in the garage, her purse in the cabinet, maintenance people calling to arrange appointments. On top of everything else we have her premonition of a tight confining space. Did you look in her car trunk?”

“Yes, I did as well as the interior of her car. Nothing.”

“Was there an old refrigerator in the garage?”

“No.”

“How about sheds or outbuildings?”

“Nope.”

“Anything suspicious at the neighbor’s house?”

“No, the lady seemed sincere. Not nervous or anything.”

“Then we need to check that elevator. Can you hook it up temporarily? I can go to the second floor and push the button after you put the cable back in the connector.”

“Sure, I’ll go outside, open up the panel and jam the cable back in the connector. It won’t stay by itself, but I should be able to hold it till you can push the button. Hopefully, wherever the car is, it comes up to the second floor.”

Amie nodded. “Let’s go.”

We both ran up the stairs. Amie stood outside the elevator door on the stairs landing. I went outside the verandah door next to the elevator, propped it open, and then opened the access panel.

As I held the electrical cable in my hand I said, “On a count of three, I’m going to push the cable in. When I yell ‘now’ push the button, and let’s see what happens.”

Amie yelled back. “Go for it.”

“One, two, three, . . . Now.” A considerable spark flashed before me. Machinery started moving.

Amie yelled back, “A light came on. Something is

going on.”

“I can see the cables moving. I’m not sure how fast this old thing is. Hopefully something happens.”

“The light is still on. I can hear something.”

“Wow, this thing seems to be slow, but it’s still moving.”

Amie yelled back. “Sounds like it is getting close. I wish it had floor markers at the top.”

“I guess you can’t expect everything from a retrofit. The cables are still moving. Must have been in the basement.”

“Definitely close now.”

“The cables just stopped.”

“The door is opening . . . Oh Cory . . .”

“Is she in there?”

“It’s dark inside.”

“Anything inside?”

“It’s empty. No Scarlett.”

“I’m going to release the cable. Stand clear in case it drops.” I pulled the cable back from the connector.

Amie screamed, “I heard the car just click in place.

The safety catch must have caught. Come inside and look.”

I ran in to the stair landing with my flashlight. We both stood outside the open door of the elevator. The elevator car had dropped a few inches, but shining my light inside, there was no sign of anyone. Just some dirt on the floor from where people had been before.

I said, “The good news is, she is not trapped in here. Oh, thank God.”

Amie let out a breath. “I’m so glad she is not here. We still don’t know where she is, but at least she’s not dead in an elevator. That premonition didn’t come true.”

“I was so scared that we would find her on the floor. I say we get some sleep and check the outside of this place as soon as the sun comes up. I’m going to call the elevator guys number tonight and see if he can come out in the morning and fix that connector. She has a maintenance contract, so that way it will be fixed right.”

Amie hugged me. “Thanks for connecting that. Wouldn’t have been able to sleep not knowing. It’s after nine. I’ll take the bedroom at the back by the elevator. You take the small one across the hall. I’ll drive you home in the morning so you can change for work. It looks like the beds are covered with a dust sheet. The covers underneath should be fresh enough.”

“Check it out. I pulled off the dust sheet in here. Pink sheets, probably for a little girl on this twin bed. Probably for you when you were little.”

Amie walked into the little bedroom next to the elevator. “Blue sheets in here. She was covered for nieces or nephews.”

I called and left a message for the elevator guy. I asked him if he could come out early morning to fix the connector. The message service said they offered emergency service during daylight hours, so I had hope I might get a call back in the morning before work. I walked around the house and doused the lights, leaving a cabinet light on in the kitchen. I met Amie in her bedroom and gave her a hug. “Goodnight, Ms. DuBois. Tomorrow is a different day. Hopefully we can get to the bottom of this in the morning.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Thanks Cory. Friends like you are hard to find. Sleep well.”

I headed to my bedroom and decided to just sleep in boxers and a tee shirt. The weather outside was in the forties and this old place was drafty as hell, but the furnace in the basement came on so we wouldn't freeze to death. I pulled up the pink sheets and cartoon blanket and was soon nodding off. A bright moon was glowing through the upper windows. I didn't know what

tomorrow would bring, but at least today we still had hope of finding Scarlett alive. As the moon dimmed and the hum of the heater in the background diminished, I fell sound asleep . . . Until one in the morning when I heard a blood curdling scream. It was Amie. “Come quick Cory. I hear a ghost.”

I ran into Amie’s room, forgetting that I was in my underwear. She was standing next to the bed in a nightgown looking at the ceiling. “I heard something in the attic. It was very faint. A woman’s voice. A woman’s voice calling out my name. The voice said, help me, help me, help me, Amie Louise DuBois help me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not positive. It might have been a dream, but I’m sure I heard it. But I don’t hear it now, standing here. Oh Cory, I’m scared. It was so faint, and I was half asleep. Will you come to bed with me? Maybe you can hear it too? Whoever or whatever it was knew my middle name.”

“I just hear the heater that just came on. Get in bed. I’m going to turn the heater off. I’ll come in and lie with you for a while.”

“Hurry don’t leave me alone for very long. I’ve never been this scared.”

I ran downstairs, dialed down the thermostat, and then climbed into the little twin bed with Amie. It took a minute for the heater to cycle off. We both laid still, staring at the ceiling. Other than the slight noise of the crickets outside and our breathing, everything was quiet.

We laid still for a few minutes, but I didn’t hear anything. I turned to Amie with a laugh, “I guess this is one way to get me in bed with you.”

She hit me and said, “Not funny mister. I know I heard it.”

“Let me try something,” I said. Then I yelled out, “Scarlett is that you?”

Everything was quiet for a second, and then a faint low voice seemed to come from the attic above. “Help me, help me, help me.”

Amie snuggled next to me and held me tight. “Arrrgh. You see, I’m not imagining things.”

“I definitely hear it. The attic is one place we didn’t check.” I yelled out again, “Where are you Scarlett?”

We listened again, this time the voice went in and out. “I can barely breathe. I’m in hell’s basement.”

Amie and I got out of bed and stood looking at the ceiling. I yelled, “Are you in the attic?”

The voice came back after a few seconds, really low this time. “I’m in hell.”

I yelled again. “How do we get there?”

The voice was almost indiscernible. “Push the hell button.”

Amie screamed out, “Where is the hell button, Scarlett?”

We listened again, but the voice was so low it was garbled.

I looked at Amie, her eyes ablaze. “I’m going to try the attic.”

Amie shook her head, “She said it was hell’s basement.”

“I’m going to try the attic first. Let me get my pants. I’ll meet you at the attic stairwell in a minute.”

“OK,” she nodded.

I dressed quickly and picked up my flashlight. I saw a short stairwell running up to the attic outside of Scarlett’s bedroom. Turning on the light, I headed up the short flight. A small door greeted me at the top. I tried the knob. It was locked.

“Is it locked?” cried Amie.

“It’s small. I don’t have time to pick that lock. I’m going to try and break it in with my feet.”

I propped myself against the stair railing and turned sideways. Pulling my legs back, I gave a full force kick. The old wooden door bounced in but didn’t give. “These old places were built strong,” I yelled. “I’m going to try again.”

This time I jumped up and used both feet. The door latch snapped, and the door exploded inward. Using my flashlight, I entered and quickly saw where the voice was coming from.

The attic was not quite tall enough to stand in. At first, I figured I would find Scarlett bound and gagged or something of the sort with her low garbled voice. But there was nothing of the sort. I yelled again for Scarlett and my hunch was confirmed. The sound wasn’t coming from the attic, it was radiating out of the elevator shaft, bouncing off the attic ceiling and we heard it from an upstairs bedroom.

Now everything was coming together. I looked at Amie who was down the attic stairs from me. “She isn’t up here. The voice is coming up the elevator shaft. She must be in some lower floor only accessible from the elevator.”

Amie cried, “How could that be?”

“I don’t know. I heard a rumor today that Scarlett had an elevator to hell. Must be some sub-basement or something. I didn’t see any stairs going down from the basement.”

“Her voice is so faint. She sounds like she is dying. How can we get there?”

“Do you have a hammer?”

“What does a hammer have to do with anything, Cory?”

“Think, Amie. Do you have one in your car?”

“I saw one in the kitchen drawer.”

“Good. Run get it and meet me up on the verandah balcony.”

In a minute I was outside again with the elevator access panel off. Amie came running up with the hammer. “Here it is.”

“Good. I need you to pull this thick cable inside this

brass connector, while I hammer the prongs shut. There will be sparks. Whatever you do, do not touch anything metal, especially the end of the cable. Must be 220 volts. Grip and lift it only on the rubber part.”

I directed the flashlight beam to the connector and cable. “I’ll hold the light and swing the hammer while you lift. If we are lucky, we can get the heavy cable to stay in place.”

“I’m not very strong, Cory. Are you sure?”

“It’s not that heavy, it’s just short and taught. Just make sure not to touch metal. Don’t let the sparks frighten you.”

Amie held the cable with both hands like it was a stick of dynamite, turning her head away. I yelled back, “Don’t be afraid of it. Just lift it on three. It will spark for a second. Once it does, just hold it in contact with the metal. Hopefully this wood handle on the hammer protects me from 220 volts. Here goes, one, two, three.”

A huge spark flashed, but the hammer hit dead center after three blows to the thick tabs on the connector, which fastened the thick cable in place. Now the elevator would work without one of us holding it.

I yelled again. “We did it. Let’s see if we can get the elevator down to hell.”

We both ran inside, almost out of breath from the excitement and stress of the moment. Amie pushed the button on the elevator door. It lit up, the motor above churned and the elevator car raised off the emergency stop and was even with the open door. Now we just had to figure out if and how the elevator could go below the basement. Shining my light on the button panel, there were three buttons, B, 1 and 2.

“I don’t get it,” I screamed. “I only see three buttons.”

Amie took the light from my hands and got down on her knees and inspected the button area. “Check this out Cory, this used to be an eight-floor panel. Someone has retrofit a cover over the lower buttons. Do you have that claw hammer?”

“Here it is.”

“I think I can pop this out and down. Yep, look at this. You just have to know the secret. Now there are nine buttons in all. Look at this, the bottom one is marked ‘Hell.’”

“Let’s get in and go find Scarlett,” I yelled.

We both entered the old elevator. Amie pushed the hell button. The outside door slowly closed, and the elevator car started going down slowly. It rumbled and shook. A dim light illuminated the ceiling of the elevator.

Bastard. I always knew he was no good. Told him so more than once. The law arrested him a while back but didn't have enough evidence to prosecute. He figured I would be one person who knew about his evil deeds. He killed several people. Serial killer. Tried to kill me. I've been in total darkness down here for two weeks. He played all nice. Said he was doing maintenance on the elevator. Had me ride it down here with him. The minute I got out, he closed the door and headed back up. Cut the power and left me for dead. No stairs were ever installed here. Only an emergency ladder on the side of the shaft but it starts fifteen feet up. Couldn't reach it. Only a few friends know the elevator's here. Been a security escape in case a reading goes bad. People freak at times, you know. Never shoulda had Ray extend it another four floors down. The buttons are hidden."

Amie turned. "We can talk upstairs, let's get out of here."

I helped Scarlett to her feet. She was weak and dehydrated. We entered the elevator and I pushed the first-floor button. The elevator started to climb and then suddenly, the light on the ceiling went out and the elevator clunked down on its security stop. We were stuck multiple floors underground. In the sudden silence we could hear faint laughing above.

Scarlett said, "That's Ray's laugh for sure. We're

trapped again.”

Scarlett started to cry. “I’ve had a dream about this for so long. I can’t believe he’s back.”

Amie started to freak out. “I’m brave in a lot of ways but I’m very claustrophobic, Cory. What are we going to do? I’m scared to death and my cell phone says no service.”

I laughed, “That SOB is going to die. He missed us this time, but he doesn’t know it. I need you to lift me up. All these old elevators have a safety hatch on the ceiling of the car. If I can get out on the roof, I can climb up the safety ladder to the attic.”

Amie said, “I can lift you. You ready? I can’t see anything.”

I turned on my flashlight and pulled a water and protein bar out of my backpack for Scarlett. “Here’s some food and water to get you by until I get back. Lift me up.”

I pushed open the upper safety hatch and lifted myself out. Faint light was coming in from above illuminating an old rusty emergency ladder. I got ready to climb. Scarlett

yelled from below, “Be careful Cory, that ladder may not be secure all the way up. It’s a retrofit and may be missing sections. This was supposed to only be for nuclear emergencies.”

I soon found that she was right. Three-foot sections of the ladder were missing, but thankfully the elevator shaft was only five feet square. I was able to put my foot up against the wall and thrust myself upward. Within five minutes I had climbed up to the basement. Bracing my feet on one of the rungs, I tried one of the outer doors, but I didn’t have the leverage to open it. I kept climbing. A chilling laugh descended from above. Ray said, “Trying to climb out? How about a little fire and smoke?” I could see the bright light of flame above me as the old wood of the attic was set on fire. “You’ll burn all the way back to hell—.”

His sinister laugh carried off into the distance. He had buried us deep in the ground but also set the house on fire to conceal the evidence. I only had seconds now to escape as the attic joists were a partial support for the top of the elevator. The whole girder set, motor and cables were at risk of falling. I climbed as fast as I could, but as I got to the top, the attic the heat on the metal was excruciating. If the joists broke, we would all be killed. I called out for help, thinking that someone might be outside. Nothing but the faint sound of sirens in the

distance. No one would be around in the middle of the night. Smoke and a stream of huge embers poured down the shaft. It became almost impossible to breath. My skin and hair were burning as the embers rained down. I patted my hair out with one hand as I held on to the rickety ladder with the other. I could hear the old wood above creaking and crackling which meant the ladder mounts would soon burn through. The house was a large tender box and now it looked like it would take all of us with it.

Suddenly, a torrent of water poured down on my head. Steam and smoke filled the chamber. As the smoke and steam cleared, I was slowly able to climb out into the attic and then outside onto the verandah. Looking down, I saw a man in the backyard with a garden hose spraying the roof at two in the morning. I have no idea who he was, but I knew I had one task before the flames came back. I needed to get the elevator back up. I pulled off the steaming access panel and jammed the cable back into the damp connector. It sparked huge, but then the elevator started to rise. Within a minute, I heard the motors stop and a door open below. Amie screamed in the distance at me. “We’re out.”

I yelled down, “We have a blazing fire up here. Get outside quick.”

I ran downstairs grabbed a few things and looked back

up. Now the whole upstairs was ablaze. I picked up Scarlett's computer, and journals from the kitchen and ran outside. The old Victorian was fully engulfed. Thousands of termites were roasting to death. I stood with Amie and Scarlett in the back yard, watching the blaze from a distance. Amie said, "We heard Ray laughing and saw fire and smoke. What happened up top?"

As the sirens blared and fire trucks approached, I looked over at the pair. "He set the attic on fire to bury us and hide his tracks. It would have worked but there was some guy standing out here with a garden hose, spraying the roof at two in the morning. The water quenched the flames for a few minutes and saved my life, and probably both of yours too. I don't see him now. Not sure where he went or who he was?"

"What happened to Ray? Are we still in danger? Did he get away?"

"When I came out of the attic and back outside to hook up the cable, I saw the bastard climbing over the wall at the other end of the verandah balcony. Must have had a ladder below. He was startled when he saw me. His feet must have missed the ladder. His hands slipped and I heard him scream. I don't think he made it. I saw him drop to the fence railing below and go over the edge. As I was climbing down, I glanced over the wall and saw him crumpled up two stories down."

Amie hugged me. “I’m so glad you were able to get out, Cory. What an evil man. Thankfully we got here in time to save Scarlett’s life.” Amie comforted her aunt as she stood outside shaking, with tears forming in her eyes. Her house of thirty years and all the memories that were enclosed were now up in flames.

Within the hour the whole place was turned to ashes. Three fire companies had responded. An ambulance was sent for Scarlett who spent a couple of days recovering in the hospital from starvation and dehydration. Over the next few hours the police came and took statements from Scarlett and Amie along with an insurance adjuster. Thankfully Amie excluded me from much of the report.

Ray Maguire had fallen off the side roof of the verandah and broken his neck. His body ended up in a tight culvert below. Scarlett’s premonition had come true. With Scarlett’s help, it was proven that Ray had murdered three other women, all in elevator related robbery or rape cases. The women had been left to die in abandoned elevator cars, which was what she was sensing over the past few months. Ray had slipped on the rungs of the ladder from water from the garden hose. We still don’t know who that man was that was spraying the flames that night, but Scarlett says there are many good people in the neighborhood. This guy you might even call an angel, she said with a wink.

Scarlett lost most everything she had, but the insurance payed off on the old place. She was able to save her Nash Metropolitan and she bought a lovely little cottage on the other side of old town. It's funny, she put a small sign outside of her new place. It simply says, 'Hell survivor. Free counseling.' Many people have taken her up on that.

Last time I talked with her she mentioned she would like to build a new Victorian on the property on 5th.

I asked how she would like it furnished. She smiled and said, "Two story, pitched roof, no elevator. A coffee emporium downstairs. I'll call it Heavenly Coffee. At my age I can still make a good cup of coffee and offer a smile. I know one thing; Angels will always be welcome."



THE WOMAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

DETECTIVES ON A TRAIN

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