ABSTRACT

THE GHOST OF CARVER RANCH

by Roy Clayton Davis

Winnie may not believe in ghosts, but she does believe in her ghost-hunting club’s special kind of magic—its ability to help her forget the move, her mom’s divorce, and the way California kids look at her when she talks. But even this refuge is fleeting; the principal has come to shut down Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R., leaving time for just one last adventure. Now, trapped in 1891 and on the lookout for a ghost, a witch, and a murderer, Winnie and the rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. must embrace the very quirks and talents that made them pariahs back home. *The Ghost of Carver Ranch*, complete at 60,000 words, is a realistic mystery/ghost book for tween readers. It has a team of quirky characters involved in a dark mystery. Much of the story is set against a detailed, historical backdrop.
THE GHOST OF CARVER RANCH

A Thesis

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By

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BOOK I: THE LETTER

1. The Case of the Haunted Locker

Locker 53 didn’t look haunted. It sat in the top row, painted an ugly dark green like all the other Richland Junior High School lockers. Winnie wasn’t sure what she expected—maybe spooky noises coming from inside, or cobwebs covering the front. It should at least be raining, she thought, like in horror movies. But instead the sky was bright blue and cloudless. Back in North Dakota, where she was from, a Thursday in December would be dark and cold and snowy. Here the weather stayed so nice and boring that they could even put student lockers on the outsides of buildings, like this group of lockers outside the gymnasium.

Winnie waited, holding Scratchy the hamster, while the three other members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. did their things. Kat drew a circle on the ground with white chalk. Every time she bent over, her tight, black pleather pants creaked like an old door, and all the charm necklaces she wore banged together like wind chimes. Kat swore the charms brought good luck. The luckiest was a five-inch tall silver penguin that, to Winnie, looked like it weighed a pound.

When Kat finished the circle, she began drawing weird symbols, like letters from an alien alphabet, all around the outside. “Gotta steal more chalk from Walker’s class,” she muttered under her breath.

Brewer paced back and forth along the lockers with one of those doctor heart-listening-thingies in his ears—Winnie thought it was called a stethoscope. Every once in a while he’d put it against a locker, listen, and nod his head. “Could be xenodwarfs,” he said, listening to locker 57. “Those are little aliens the government trains to live in houses and spy on people. But normally they don’t speak English.”
“Really?” Kat said, concentrating on her drawing. “I thought xenodwarfs were aliens that lived in washing machines and stole your socks.”

“What? I’ve never heard of…” Brewer stopped and looked down at her. At five-ten, he was the tallest in the Club, and built like a stick figure. Today he was wearing his green army camouflage fatigues. Like everything else he wore, the outfit was too small for him. His black wrists and ankles stuck out of the cuffs.

Brewer shook his head. “Okay, laugh all you want,” he said to Kat, “but when the government\alien\monster conspiracy takes over the world, we’ll see how funny you think it is.”

“All right, you guys,” Eric said. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground, typing on is laptop computer. “We’ve only got thirty minutes ‘til the bell rings. You can argue about sock-stealing aliens later.” He stopped typing and closed his computer.

“Kat, how’s the magic circle going?”

“Almost finished,” she said, sticking out her tongue at Brewer when his back was turned. “I really should light some white candles, too,” she added, “but with my luck a lunch monitor would catch me, and I’d get another detention. Stupid no-candle rule.”

“I’m sure it will be good enough,” Eric said, setting his computer carefully on the ground and then standing up. “Let’s get ready.”

Winnie thought if anyone walked by right now, they’d pick out Eric as the one person who didn’t belong in Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. Unlike the rest of them he fit in at school. In fact, he was actually popular. He played on the baseball team and was a star pitcher. He had friends outside the club, and lots of girls thought he was cute. And he even dressed normal—right now he wore a Lakers’ jersey and jeans. Not that Winnie dressed weird on purpose, but her mom didn’t have a lot of money for new clothes after the move and the divorce. On some days, like today, Winnie was stuck wearing her old farm overalls. And the hamster in her hands wasn’t exactly helping her blend in either.

“Okay, Ashley,” Eric said, “Anything we need to watch out for?”

Ashley, a sixth-grader, had come to the Club on Wednesday with her haunted locker problem. She told them that she was hearing a voice in her locker, and that sometimes the voice told her to do things, like go run around the school, or go sit down.

Now Ashley stood at the end of the row of lockers. Eric had made her lookout, so
she could watch for nosey teachers who might ask too many questions. “Well,” Ashley said, biting her lip, “It only talks sometimes. It might not do it for you.”

“Finished,” Kat said, standing up and dusting chalk off her hands. “As long as everyone’s in the circle, we should be safe from the ghost. Just don’t step outside or let anything touch the chalk line. If the circle breaks, the magic gets messed up.”

Winnie held Scratchy the hamster against her chest and joined Brewer and Eric and Kat in the circle. It was a tight fit—Brewer’s elbow poked her in the ribs, and one of Kat’s charms caught on a button of her overalls. This is silly, she thought. Maybe she should just step across the circle to make more room. She didn’t believe in Kat’s magic anyway—she thought it was just for fun, like card tricks and sawing people in half. But before she could untangle herself and move, Eric twisted the combination lock and opened the locker door.

Inside the dark cubbyhole, folders and textbooks fought for space. There were scrunchies and folded-up notes and pictures of boy bands and makeup cases and a pair of dirty socks that smelled like Winnie’s dog after he’d been playing in the rain.

“You’re right, this is scary,” Kat said, laughing.

Winnie was about to agree, when she gasped. There was a shape between the math books and gym shorts—in the darkness a disembodied head floated. Its pale face stared back at her.
Chapter 2: The Dream

Winnie heard a high-pitched scream that at first she was afraid had come out of her, but then she saw Brewer backing up with his hands over his mouth.

“The circle!” Kat hissed, but it was too late. Brewer put his size 11 boot right on the chalk line.

“Run for your lives!” Brewer shouted, and took off along the back of the gym. As he ran by the corner of the building, he tripped over Ashley’s lunch cooler, and fell face first into one of the grass-and-palm-tree planters that dotted the concrete landscape of the school.

“Calm down, everyone,” Eric said. “It’s just us.”

Winnie first checked to make sure she hadn’t squeezed the hamster in her panic, and then looked in the locker again. A dirty mirror hung from the wall behind the books. The pale face she saw staring back at her was Kat’s—Kat normally had fair skin, and the dark lipstick and eye shadow that she wore made her look even paler. To the left of Kat was Eric’s reflection—short blonde hair, blue eyes. Behind them Winnie’s own face stared back at her, complete with glasses, freckles and curly brown hair. After a moment, Brewer’s thin, black face appeared in the mirror too.

“Knew it…all along,” Brewer said, breathing hard. “Was…was just testing everyone’s reflexes.”

Kat looked at him in the mirror. “Maybe you should go test your underwear. Might need changing.”

“So-oh,” Winnie said, trying to stop another Brewer vs. Kat fight, “shouldn’t we move all this stuff so we can look around?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth she silently cursed herself. When she was nervous or scared, her North Dakota accent would take over. It made some of her one-syllable words—“no,” “yeah”—sound like
two-syllable words—“no’oh,” “yeah’ah”. She hated it. Kids looked at her funny when she talked that way. So ever since the first week of school she’d been practicing hard to talk normal.

Things were so much easier back at her old school.

“Ashley,” Eric said, “give us a hand?”

Ashley left her lookout post at the corner of the building and joined them, and soon they had the locker completely emptied. All of Ashley’s stuff sat on the ground, and Ashley sat next to it, sorting through it all. At one point Winnie saw Ashley blush and shove something from the pile into her pocket.

With a mirror and a flashlight, Brewer inspected the empty locker. “I’m not seeing any wires,” he said.

“That the voice can’t be coming from a radio,” Eric said. “But there has to be a logical explanation.” He’d taken a baseball out of his laptop carrying case, and now he tossed the ball into the air and caught it a couple times. He did that whenever he was deep in thought.

Winnie let Scratchy loose inside the locker. The hamster only sniffed around, but if there were a ghost Scratchy would have gone nuts. At least, that was Brewer’s theory. According to all the books he read, animals were more sensitive to ghosts than people were. A dog or cat would work better, but the Club wasn’t allowed to keep big animals at school.

Eric caught the baseball again and peered into the locker with Brewer. Winnie had to smile at their size difference. Eric was as tall as a regular seventh-grader, and his head was right at locker height, but Brewer had to crouch to look inside. “You checked the back wall?” Eric asked.

“Solid,” Brewer said.

“What about the mirror? Maybe that’s…” Eric didn’t finish his sentence, but instead cocked his head to the side. “Do you hear that?”

Winnie put Scratchy on her shoulder and leaned toward the locker. She didn’t hear anything at first but then, as if from far away, she heard, “You’re late, O’Connell.” “That’s her!” Ashley said from her seat on the ground.

Brewer took a step backwards, and the members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. looked at
each other. Nobody’s last name was O’Connell.

“Drop and give me twenty!” the locker said, louder now.

Brewer got on the ground and started doing pushups, counting after each one.

“You’re insane,” Kat said, but Winnie agreed with Brewer. What if the ghost got angry because they didn’t all do push-ups? She’d never met an angry ghost—or any ghost, really—but she didn’t want to take chances.

She set Scratchy back into the hamster carrying-cage and got ready to do pushups. Eric, meanwhile, poked the back of the locker muttering, “Has to be…logical explanation.” Suddenly there was a squeal of bending metal, and Eric pulled out the dirty mirror.

The voice was now loud and clear: “All right class, I need two team captains. Sandra and José, get the dodge balls.”

“Hey, that’s Miss Randall,” Kat said. “The P.E. teacher.”

Winnie hadn’t met Miss Randall, but she did know that Richland Junior High had two lunches. The members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. ate at lunch #1. Students who had Lunch #2 were still in class, and some even had P.E. right now.

“There’s a hole in the wall here,” Eric said. “I can see light at the end. I bet it goes all the way to the gym.”

Ashley shook her head. “I didn’t do it. The mirror isn’t mine. It was there when I started school.”

Kat peered into the locker and Winnie joined her. From the ground Brewer grunted, “nineteen….and…twenty!” He stood up and looked over their shoulders.

Winnie saw a rough hole in the metal at the back of the locker, about two inches across, which kept going right through the plaster and concrete wall of the school.

“Hey,” she said, “Betcha maintenance just slapped a mirror over the hole cause that was cheaper than fixing it.”

“Winnie’s probably right,” Eric said, nodding. “I knew it wouldn’t be a real ghost.”

And that, she thought, had been the case with all their mysteries. They looked spooky at first, but there was always a logical explanation in the end. Kinda like a Scooby Doo cartoon, except the Club never got to pull the mask off some old guy who
owns the haunted amusement park or whatever.

“Or,” Brewer said, “maybe the hole was made by the ghost of a dead P.E. teacher, and the light we’re seeing is the creature itself!”

“Yeah, right,” Kat said, “and I bet it wanders through the gym at night, feeding on jock straps and smelly socks.” She moaned like a ghost, and then reached down and grabbed Ashley’s old socks from the pile of locker stuff and pretended to eat them. Ashley tried to grab them back.

“That’s gross,” Winnie said, laughing. She could imagine just how bad those socks must smell, and thought that she wouldn’t dare put them that close to her nose. Then, suddenly, she did smell something like…

...like stale cigarettes and heavy cologne. The classroom only had a few students; it was lunchtime. A couple sixth-graders had frozen in the middle of their chess game and now they stared at the door. He stood there, silhouetted against the sunlight like an evil shadow…

Even though it had been years since her last dream, years since the accident, Winnie knew what was happening. She shook her head to snap herself out of the vision. “So, ah…we should be gettin' back to the Club now?” she said, interrupting Brewer and Eric’s discussion of plywood and dry rot and alien termites.

“We still have a little time,” Eric said. “I wanted to strap my mini web-cam on Scratchy and send her down the hole. Maybe we can find out how it was made.”

“And we can spy on Miss Randall’s class,” Kat chimed in. “Why do we need to go now?”

What was Winnie supposed to say? Hey guys, I used to have these dreams that predict the future, and I just remembered one from last night about the end of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R.? Instead she said, “We need ta hurry, we’re getting a visit from the principal.”
Chapter 3: The End of an Era

As Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. packed up their equipment, Winnie tried to think of an excuse for knowing about the principal’s visit. Finally she said that she overheard Principal Latham talking to their advisor during morning break. Eric and Kat seemed to buy it, but Brewer just looked at her funny.

Ashley stuffed everything back into her locker, including the old socks. “I’m glad it’s not a ghost,” she said. “Thanks a lot you guys. That’s the best five bucks I ever spent.”

“Five dollars?” Eric asked, hoisting his laptop carrier onto his shoulder. “But we don’t—”

“It’s our pleasure,” Kat said, stepping in front of Eric. “Just be sure to tell all your friends about S.P.E.C.T.E.R.’s paranormal investigations.” She handed Ashley a handmade business card that had a friendly-looking ghost drawn on it with black ink. “And remember, mysteries are half price on Tuesdays.”

Before Eric or Brewer could question Kat, Winnie hurried towards the portables—the classrooms at the back of the school that were supposed to be temporary, even though they’d been there since the 1980s. “Come on,” she said. “The principal might’ve already left.”

They jogged over to 17A, the last portable in the last row. Signs covered the door. The only permanent one read Mr. Mathers 7th/8th Grade Math. Below that were signs for the Chess Club, Science Club, and Math Club. Around and on top of these were smaller posters for student elections, car wash fundraisers, and a school dance from three years ago. Taped to the bottom of the door, in black letters on gray construction paper, was their Club’s sign:
Inside the almost empty air-conditioned room, two 6th-graders from the Chess Club were arguing over a game. Mr. Mathers, a short, bearded man who wore a lot of plaid, snored softly in his chair. On the desk in front of him soup cooled and congealed in a Tupperware container.

Winnie headed towards the back of the classroom—S.P.E.C.T.E.R. territory. Here the club had two computers of their very own, a section of counter top, and four desks. One desk held Itchy and Scratchy’s cage. On another sat folders with S.P.E.C.T.E.R. case files. The last two desks were for the Club computers. And the countertop against the wall held Eric’s inventions. They didn’t look like much—computer circuit boards, milk cartons wrapped in wire, and disassembled alarm clocks. There was also an old X-Box he was trying to fix.

No sign of the principal. Winnie breathed a sigh of relief—maybe it had been a regular dumb dream after all. Then an adult voice behind her said, “Hold the door, please.”

The room went quiet immediately. The sixth-graders stared with their mouths half-open. Principal Latham stood in the doorway—a tall, bald man, somewhere between Dad and Grandpa age, who liked to wear gray suits. He smelled of cigarettes and cologne, and he held a large yellow envelope in his hand. From the door, he shouted,
“Richard, if you’re not too busy.”

At his desk Mr. Mathers awoke with a start, looking confused. Then he stood, wiped cracker crumbs off his shirt, and joined the principal outside. Once the door shut, the sixth-graders went back to arguing, although now in whispers.

“You were right, Winnie,” Brewer said, sitting down at a desk and getting out his lunch. “Do you think Latham’s here on the government’s behalf? So he can confiscate Eric’s inventions to use in the war on terror?” From his zipper-cooler, Brewer pulled out an organic apple, some organic walnuts, and an organic tofu-salad sandwich on organic wheat bread. A few months ago Brewer had decided that pesticides and fertilizers contained mind-control drugs. Now he only ate organic food—and even then he’d look at it suspiciously before taking an experimental bite to decide if it was safe.

“Maybe he’s here to give me a student citizenship award,” Kat said, and laughed. Her lunch came in a brown paper bag with the name Mark Donovan on it in big, Sharpie letters.

“From the look on Winnie’s face,” Eric said, “I don’t think Latham’s here with good news.” Eric had a hard, plastic Igloo cooler, and from it he took his low-carb lunch of chicken and veggies that his dad made. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“Uh…no, not really,” Winnie lied. “Just heard him talking about stopping by.”

She tried to avoid making eye contact with Eric and the others and took out her own lunch. It wasn’t anything exciting—just PB&J and a diet soda. Every morning her mom took Sam, her little sister, to school on the way to work. Most days Winnie packed her own lunch.

Eric’s right, she thought, eating her sandwich. It is bad news. Her special dreams always showed a future that could not be changed. That’s why she hated them so much. Right now Principal Latham was telling their advisor, Mr. Mathers, that he was shutting down Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. Why did she even bother dragging the rest of the group back here? The Club was doomed. And that sucked because S.P.E.C.T.E.R. was beginning to feel like home in a way her new house and new neighborhood didn’t yet. The Club had saved her a few months ago. When she transferred in as a seventh-grader in September, her clothes and Dakota accent made her an outcast right away. If Eric hadn’t asked her to join S.P.E.C.T.E.R. she might not have made any friends at all.
She still wondered why Eric had asked her to join in the first place. She wasn’t a witch like Kat or an information machine like Brewer.

The door opened and Mr. Mathers and the principal stepped in. Mathers went quickly to his desk and buried his face in a book. The two sixth-graders, sensing trouble, left their chess game and fled the classroom.

“I have bad news,” Latham said. He put on a sad face that looked fake to Winnie. “The school has decided to shut down your club.”


“Budget reasons,” the principal said. “You wouldn’t understand. But the school needs your computers and club allowance for other, more important after-school programs.” He came over to Eric and for one terrifying moment Winnie thought Latham might actually pat him on the head. Instead he continued, “This is a blessing in disguise, Eric. It will let you concentrate on more important things, like baseball. And you, Katrina,” he said, turning to Kat. “You can spend more time on your homework. It would help your grades.”

“But we do important things,” Eric said, standing up and turning a little red. “What about Operation Night Owl?”

The Sycamore Street Project, or Operation Night Owl, was their famous case from last year. It happened before Winnie joined S.P.E.C.T.E.R., though she’d heard the story so many times she knew it by heart. The Club had set up a tape recorder in an abandoned house and left it running all night. When they got it the next day and played it back, they found they had eight hours of blank tape, broken in the middle by a man’s voice saying one word: Closet.

Winnie had asked why that was so strange. Eric told her that the history of the house made that one word a big coincidence. The former owner, a Mr. Shelby, had hanged himself.

His body had been found days later in the front closet.

Principal Latham waved his hand at Eric as if shooing a fly. “A voice on tape isn’t going to shock the scientific community. Listen, kids,” he said, giving up on his fake smile, “it’s already been decided. Return all the equipment you’ve borrowed from
the Science Department. Maintenance will be come tomorrow to pick up the computers.”

He put a hand on the doorknob behind him. “One more thing,” he said. He tossed the yellow envelope on Winnie’s desk. “I’m not your personal secretary. Have your mail delivered to your homes.”

With that he stepped out, letting the door slam shut behind him.
4. The Letter

Kat ran at the door and kicked it several times. Her charms jangled. “Why that son of a…budget reasons my butt. He’s always wanted to shut us down. He’s a coward, a stupid little…” Kat continued with several four-letter words. Winnie glanced nervously at Mr. Mathers, but he’d gone back to sleep.

“This is horrible,” Brewer said, pacing back and forth between a row of desks. “We can’t lose the Club. I mean, Headquarters is safe. It’s one of the few places where they can’t listen to us or try to control our brains with radio waves.”

“You’re paranoid,” Kat said. She hopped up on the desk behind Winnie, her pleather pants creaking as she crossed her legs.

Brewer turned to her. “I’m not paranoid,” he said seriously, “if they really are after me.”

Kat ignored him. “This totally bites. Writing reports about Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. is how I’m making up for my incomplete in English.” She flipped her long black hair forward and pulled a length of it into her mouth. She did that whenever she was nervous. Winnie often wondered why someone with naturally blonde hair like Kat’s would dye it black. Winnie would give anything to have hair like that, instead of her own boring brown.

She also wondered if dyed hair tasted differently when you chewed on it.

Eric sat down at the computer desk next to Winnie. His face was still a little red. “Latham’s just like my dad,” he said. “If it’s not academics or sports it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t even exist.”

Winnie looked down at her hands, a little embarrassed by all the emotions in the room. She usually kept hers buried. Then she remembered the letter Mr. Latham had tossed on her desk. It was one of those big, yellowish envelopes the size of a notebook.
And it had a Wells Fargo logo on it. Wasn’t Wells Fargo a bank? She didn’t think the Club had a bank account.

Winnie looked at Eric, but he was just staring at their computer’s screensaver. It showed a bunch of UFO’s flying across farmland and abducting cows, which would make surprised little “Moo!” noises. So, Winnie opened the yellow envelope and shook it. A smaller, regular-sized white envelope landed on her desk:

Winnie sat at an empty desk and studied the envelope:

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S.P.E.C.T.E. R.
Richland Junioř High
324 McGuffin Way
Sunnygrové, Califo'nia
Zone 13
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Brewer stopped pacing and sat on top of the desk in front of Winnie. “Wow. Totally old school,” he said, looking at the letter. “The Z in Zip Code stands for Zone. But the Post Office hasn’t called them Zones for a long time, not since the 1960s.”

“Can I see the letter?” Eric said, looking up from the computer. As Winnie handed him the envelope, she saw that he’d already gotten a baseball out of his backpack. He tossed the ball up and caught it—he did that whenever he was deep in thought. “You guys notice anything weird about this?”

Winnie studied the envelope again. It was a dirty white and yellow in the corners. And when she’d picked it up, she noticed it felt thick and fuzzy, like it was made out of construction paper.

“It's old?” Winnie asked.
“Exactly!” Eric said. “Someone’s been keeping this letter for a long time.”

Kat spit out her hair. “So open the letter already. Or are we going to try to read it by holding it up to the light?”

Brewer took the letter from Eric. “I wish we could dust it for fingerprints,” he said, getting a dreamy look in his eyes. “Well, here goes nothin’.” He carefully tore the envelope along the seam, and then turned the whole thing over. A folded paper and a four-inch wide cardboard square landed on Winnie’s desk. Brewer picked up the paper. “This letter is typed on the same kind of paper as the envelope,” he said, running his fingers along the page. “And it’s from a typewriter, not a printer. You can feel the bumps where the keys hit.”

Eric picked up the cardboard square. To Winnie it looked like laminated construction paper. At least that’s what she saw on her side. The other side must have something different because Eric got really pale.

“Looks like you just saw a ghost,” Kat said, poking Eric in the ribs.

Blinking and taking short, shallow breaths, Eric turned the cardboard around. On the other side was a brown and white photograph. It reminded Winnie of the old photographs in the library’s display case, which showed what California looked like a hundred years ago.

But this picture wasn’t orange groves and dusty dirt roads. It had been taken at night, and showed an old house’s upper window with light coming from it. A person stood at the window. It was hard to see details because another light came from outside, reflecting on the glass. And a line, maybe a crack in the camera lens, ran diagonally across the whole picture.

Winnie started to ask why Eric was so freaked out, when she saw it: the figure in the window was not complete. Even though it was standing okay, and apparently looking at the camera, there were parts missing. Where a normal person would have a neck, left shoulder, and chest, there was only empty space.
Winnie suddenly felt cold.

“That’s…that’s real,” Brewer said. He leaned backwards, away from the photograph, and then lost his balance and slipped off of the desk and onto the floor. “S’okay,” he said from the ground.

Eric held the picture as far out from himself as he could, as if he thought the ghost might jump through the photograph and grab him. “There has to be a rational explanation for this,” he said. “But the weird thing is—”

“You mean weirder than a ghost?” Kat said.

“The weird thing is,” Eric continued, still a bit pale, “is that it looks…familiar.”

“It does?” Kat asked, leaning forward and looking at the picture from different directions. “I can’t really make out the dead guy’s face.”

Winnie risked another peek now that her goose bumps were going away. She had seen hundreds of pictures of weird stuff on the Internet, and had gone with the Club to see more than a few horror movies. Even though this was the most realistic “ghost” she’d ever seen it was still just a photograph. And a photograph couldn’t hurt her, could it?

“What about the letter,” she said. “What’s it say?”

“I’ve still got it,” Brewer said. He used the counter next to him to pull himself off the floor, and caught his jacket on a broken X-Box 360 that Eric had been working on. Brewer tried to free himself but his jacket wouldn’t come unhooked. So he tugged, hard—ripping a small hole in his jacket and bringing the X-Box crashing down. Everyone jumped at the noise.

“Uh, I think that was beyond fixing anyway,” Brewer said, smoothing down his
torn camouflage jacket. He opened the letter and set it on Winnie’s desk:

Dear Sirs and Ladies of S.P.E.C.T.E. R.,

It has come to my attention that your organization has an interest in events and phenomena not easily explained by the methods of modern science. If this is true, then may I humbly suggest an investigation into the so-called Ghost of Cavern Ranch. (A picture is included.) This apparition, or hoax, as the case may be, most often appears two hours past sundown. Happy hunting.

Since duly,

Ben

“Whoever Ben is, he’s very polite,” Winnie observed.

“He seems to know about our Club,” Eric said. He put the picture face down on the desk.

“Where does he get his stationary,” Kat asked, “Used Mildewy Stuff Emporium?” Everyone gave her a funny look. “What? You don’t smell that?”
Now that Kat mentioned it, Winnie had caught something coming from the letter, envelope, and picture. They smelled like the reference section of the library—the part where the super-old histories and maps of San Diego County were kept. And the picture didn’t look like it came from a regular camera. It looked more like the old pictures in her grandmother’s photo album.

“So, this envelope doesn’t only look old,” Brewer said, “it is old.” He carefully sat back down on the desk in front of Winnie. “I wonder how something that’s been around so long got a stamp from this year.”

“And who sent it to us?” Winnie asked. “The only Ben I know is Ben Martin.”

“The kid who picks his nose in history class?” Brewer asked.

“And eats it,” Kat added.

“Interesting…” Eric leaned over the letter, with his finger an inch away from the paper, as if he was afraid that it would crumble to dust if he touched it. “The typewriter they used has a broken key. See how every letter ‘r’ is a bit higher than the other letters?”

Winnie saw it. The ‘r’s floated a tiny bit off the straight line of the other letters. It was just like the mildewy smell—hard to notice until someone pointed it out, then you couldn’t miss it.

“Wells Fargo has been around for a long time,” Brewer said, still scanning the letter. “They used to deliver mail. Whoever sent it could have left instructions for the company to hold on to the letter and deliver it later.”

Eric leaned back and began one-hand catching his baseball. Every time he tossed it, it missed the ceiling by inches. “So this letter’s like time travel,” he said. “Someone from the past is talking to us. I just wish we could talk back.”

“Hold on,” Brewer said, and began pacing again. “If Ben wrote the letter a long time ago, then how did he know about Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R.? We’ve only been around since last year.”

“Does anyone else feel like scary music should be playing?” Kat said. She had taken out her tarot cards. Now she laid them out on the desk next to her in a cross pattern, frowning over each one.

“And it’s a strange coincidence,” Brewer added, “that the letter arrives on the
very last day of our Club. I smell a conspiracy.”

Winnie jumped up from her seat. “Maybe, if we can find this ghost, then the principal won’t shut down the club, yah know? Cause we’ll have scientific evidence of supernatural stuff.”

“Well, even if it doesn’t save the club,” Eric said, “this is the best mystery we’ve had. The letter and picture might be fake, but we won’t know for sure until we check out this ghost for ourselves.” He looked at the clock, then clicked the mouse, taking the computer off screensaver mode. “We’ve got one more day before we have to return all our equipment,” he said, his voice low and serious. “Head to your classes for now. But check your e-mail for updates. Tonight…we go ghost hunting.”
6. Under Cover

Winnie had a hard time concentrating during American History class, where Mr. Long showed a short movie entitled *Southern California: 1880-1920*. It could hardly be called a movie, though, because all it had were still, black and white pictures. California looked a lot different back then—not many trees or roads or houses, just a lot of hills with small plants, grass, and dirt. Winnie guessed that if the film were in color, most of California would be brown anyway. All the people in the pictures looked very dressed up. Even the men working on orange groves were wearing suits.

During the film, a narrator with a nasal voice said things like:

- **December 31**, 1882: The first electric arc lights are installed in Los Angeles.
- **Winter, 1891**: Record low temperatures of twenty-one degrees are recorded. Forty percent of the region’s citrus crop is destroyed.
- **1895**: The city of Riverside boasts the highest per capita income in the United States. Sunnygrove, east of San Diego, has the second highest.

Even if it were an interesting film, Winnie would still be thinking about the ghost-hunt. She kept flipping back and forth between being excited and nervous—excited because this was the best lead (and best photograph) they’d ever had; nervous because she was going out at night to a strange place, and she didn’t know anything about this Ben person who invited them.

- **January 1**, 1915: The Panama-California Exposition opens. Animals from the Exposition are quarantined and later bring the San Diego Zoo into being.
- **Winter, 1916**: Unusually heavy rains cause flooding of the Sunnygrove River. The Richland Dam breaks. Fifteen lives are lost, along with several bridges and hundreds of acres of citrus groves. Many citrus farmers are forced out of business...
In her last class, English, Winnie made a list of all the things she had to do to prepare for the evening. Since her dad was an amateur photographer, and had taught her how to work cameras, the group put her in charge of the Nikon 520—a professional camera on loan from the art department. She needed to get new film and find all the attachments that were somewhere in her room at home.

She also had to convince her mom to let her go out on a school night. Oh no! She suddenly remembered that tonight her mom was going on a date. Which meant they’d have to find a babysitter for Sam. Winnie felt a familiar pang of guilt. She hated to leave Sam alone. Sam, who was always cheerful, even with burn scars covering her face. What had happened to Sam was all Winnie’s fault. For the millionth time, she wished she could somehow travel back to that terrible winter day and do things differently.

The teacher let the class have free time for the last five minutes, so Winnie sat down at one of the computer stations along the back wall and checked her e-mail. She had an e-mail from Eric:
Hey guys. I didn’t find anything about the ghost online, but Carver Ranch is real. It was built by Daniel B. Carver around 1882 and is now being preserved by the San Diego Historical Society. We’ll go over there tonight at 6:00 and look around.

Hours: 10:00 am to 7:00 pm, Tuesday through Saturday.

Location: 532 S. Locust Street, near Edwards Cinema. Transportation has been arranged. (Brewer’s mom is driving)

Kat: Meet me at Club Headquarters after class to help load equipment.

Brewer and Winnie: We’re in luck. There is a Brittany Carver going to our school. She might be related to the Daniel Carver who built the ranch. Her last class is typing with Mrs. Vu. Intercept and question re. Daniel Carver and family. (Note: I said question, not interrogate, Brewer!) Your cover story is that you are writing an article for the Richland Review. Good luck.

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Tired of Pop-Ups?
Guillotine Spam-Blocker: Easy to Install. Sign up now
As soon as Winnie logged off, Brewer rushed into the classroom, bumping into students on their way out.

“Can I help you?” Miss Norton asked.

Brewer jumped like he’d just been pinched.

“He’s with me,” Winnie said, shouldering her backpack. She grabbed Brewer’s elbow and led him outside. “I thought we usually met by the lockers,” she whispered.

“I just got the e-mail,” he said, shifting from one foot to the other, “and I didn’t want to miss Brittany.” He had changed out of his army fatigues, and now wore something quite unusual for him—regular clothes: jeans and a button-down shirt. He carried a note pad in one hand and had a pencil tucked behind his ear. A Richland Review button was pinned to his shirt pocket.

“Where in the world do yah keep all these outfits?” she asked. “And whose glasses are those?”

“Every good spy is a master of disguise,” Brewer said, squinting at her. He had perfect vision, so Winnie guessed the glasses would be giving him a headache before long. “Let’s go,” he said and he started across the lunch area toward the Arts Building.

It was a hot, dry California day and Winnie began panting as she tried to keep up with Brewer and his long legs. The final bell hadn’t rung yet, so there weren’t many students outside.

They had almost reached Brittany’s classroom when Brewer suddenly ducked behind the corner of the gymnasium.

“What’s…up?” Winnie asked between breaths. She noticed Ashley’s haunted locker a couple rows down.

Brewer peered around the corner of the building. “Just making sure we’re not being followed,” he said. He watched the quad, the open space between the gym and the Home Ec. buildings, for a moment more. Then he gave the “all clear” sign by sticking his thumb in the air.

He hurried out into the open. Winnie ran right behind him, and when he came to a quick stop a few seconds later, she slammed into his back.

“Hey, what’s the deal?” she asked, rubbing her nose. When she stepped around him she got her answer. A group of boys blocked their path.
“Would you look at that!” Steven Mahoney said. “Freaky has a girlfriend.”
“He is not my boyfriend,” Winnie said. She felt herself blushing.

“He’s not my boyfriend, dontcha know,” Carl Spencer said, making fun of her Dakota accent.

“Leave her alone,” Brewer said, stepping forward.

“What’s a matter, Gregory?” Steven asked. He was a stocky blonde kid with a crew cut and a pink scalp. “Don’t like us messin’ with your girl?”

Gregory? Was that his real name? Winnie hadn’t heard it before. She looked around for a teacher, but all she could see were a couple planters with palm trees, and the Home Ec. Building across the way. Since the bell hadn’t rung most everyone was still in class. She and Brewer were alone on the hot, white concrete.

“My name’s not Gregory, it’s Brewer,” he said.

Some of the boys laughed.

“Come on, let’s go,” one of the eighth grade boys said, beginning to walk away.

“Coach wanted to see us right after school,”

Carl ignored him. “What kind of name is ‘Brewer’?” he asked.

“It’s from Operation Brewer,” Brewer said, looking around the quad for help, like Winnie had. “That was the US attack on the Admiralty Islands in February of 1944, which was just a big diversion so the Roosevelt administration could steal UFO files from a secret island base—”

“Do you try to be a freak?” Steven stepped forward. “Or does it just come naturally?” He poked Brewer in the chest.

Brewer was taller than Steven, but he still retreated from the other boy. Winnie wished Brewer would show them some of those Kung Fu moves he was always practicing. Not to hurt them, just to scare them away.
Carl was also pushing Brewer now. “Did some aliens abduct you? Is that why you’re so weird?”

Dave McMullin came up to Winnie. He had short hair, too, and would have been cute except for the ugly expression on his face. “You’re in that Club, huh? I heard about it. You’re trying to find the Loch Ness monster or something, right? Aren’t you a little old to be playing make believe?”

“We study ghosts,” Winnie said, even though she knew they’d make fun of that too. It was a no-win situation. Whatever she told them, they’d find something to tease her about. “It’s a science called parapsychology.”

Dave laughed. “You probably run around with sheets over your heads trying to scare people.” He took a step closer.

Winnie tried to step away, but when she backed up she felt the hot, stucco wall behind her. The boys had them cornered against the gymnasium.

“Hey Eric,” Brewer suddenly said in a loud voice.

Winnie looked up and saw Eric walking to his locker. She had to look twice because she hardly recognized him. Whenever Cub S.P.E.C.T.E.R. hung out together, Eric wore a serious expression, like he was thinking great thoughts; like wonderful inventions were being built in his head. Now, as he walked towards them, he had a big silly grin on his face. He looked like a regular seventh-grader.

“You know this guy?” Steven asked him, pointing at Brewer. “You’re not, like, friends or anything are you?”

“Nah, I’ve just seen him around,” Eric said. He tossed his baseball over to Steven.

Winnie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The boys still had them trapped. Why was Eric lying? Why didn’t he tell his teammates to leave her and Brewer alone?

“Well,” Steven said, tossing Eric’s ball back, “We were just saying how great it was that a couple of the S.P.E.C.T.E.R. geeks were going out. I think we should send them on a honeymoon.”

“Yeah,” Dave said. “Uh, where are we going to send them?”

Steven put his arm around Eric’s shoulder. “I think we could fit both of them into one of the PE lockers. Wouldn’t that be romantic?”
Before Eric could reply, the bell rang, and students started pouring out of the gym and the Home Ec. building. Soon the quad was filled with laughter and shouts and brightly colored backpacks. The dreadful quiet of just moments ago seemed like a dream.

“We’ll catch up with you later,” Steven said, giving Brewer one last poke. The boys headed towards the baseball field. Eric took off in the opposite direction.

“What happened?” Winnie asked, once they were alone and walking towards Mrs. Vu’s class. “Why didn’t Eric say anything?”

“I’m not really surprised,” Brewer said. He talked softly, and his eyes blinked rapidly behind the borrowed glasses. “Haven’t you noticed that Eric never invites us out to his baseball games?”

“Well,” Winnie said, “He does other things with us.”

“Yeah. Just as long as his teammates aren’t around.”

Winnie started to protest. There had to be a rational explanation, as Eric himself would say. But Brewer grabbed her shoulder with one hand and pointed with the other. “The blonde in the cheerleader outfit,” he said. “That’s her.”

“Yah sure?”

“Yup,” he said, hurrying them both across the quad. “I’ve memorized last year’s yearbook.” They stopped in the shade of the Home Ec. Building, where the girl was zipping up her backpack.

“Brittany Carver,” Brewer said in a bad English accent. “Aaron Benjamin here from the Richland Review. This is my partner, Erin Brokovitch.” He flipped open his notepad. “We have a few important questions to ask you, miss.”

“I’ve got practice,” Brittany said, looking towards the athletic field. “Can’t we do this another time?”

“Well, we do need to get the article written today,” Brewer said. Then he puffed up his chest. “The news waits for no one. Ah, stop the presses and all that.”

Brittany still didn’t look convinced. How could Winnie get her to stay for a minute? What’s a cheerleader interested in?

“Of course, we’d put your name in the paper,” Winnie said. “We might even use a few lines about the cheerleading squad.”
Brittany slipped her backpack over her shoulders. “Well…”

“Excellent,” Brewer said, still doing his weird version of an English accent. “We are doing a story on Daniel Carver’s ranch.” He pulled the pencil out from behind his ear. “Are you, by chance, related to him?”

“Yeah,” Brittany said. “He’s my great-great grandfather.”

They were in luck! Winnie tried not to let her excitement show. But she didn’t know what to say now. They couldn’t go right out and ask about ghosts. Brittany would think they were nuts.

“Uhm…do you know how many children were in Daniel’s family?” Winnie asked. She wished she had something official-looking to write in, like Brewer did. Instead she just shoved her hands in the pockets of her overalls.

“Five all together,” Brittany said.

Brewer wrote that on the notepad. “Have you ever been to the Ranch?” he asked.

“We used to have family reunions there before my uncle gave it to the city.”

Brittany looked bored. Winnie noticed that there were hardly any students left in the quad now.

“So, ah…part of this article is on local legends,” Winnie said. “Do you know any weird stories about the Ranch? Like, ghost st—”

“I’m not supposed to talk about that,” Brittany said, sharply.

Brewer flinched.

“Oh, sorry,” Winnie said. “We were just trying to—”

“I don’t know what you’ve heard, but it’s not true…” Brittany paused for a moment and bit her lower lip. “Look, all I can tell you is that something really bad happened at the Ranch about a hundred years ago. Something bad happened to one of the kids. And it took a long time for the family to get over it. So you don’t need to be bringing that stuff up now, okay?”

“Blimey,” Brewer said. They both looked at him and he put his hand over his mouth.


“Okay,” Brittany said. “Sorry if I snapped at you.” She looked down towards the athletic field where the cheerleaders were doing stretches. “It’s just that there’s no reason
to dig up that sorta thing. Let the dead rest in peace.”
8. The Missing Child

When Winnie and Brewer returned to Club Headquarters they found the room empty except for Eric and a napping Mr. Mathers. Eric had already cleared off the Club’s counter space of its usual odds and ends. Now it was piled high with radios, binoculars, flashlights and rock-climbing rope. A digital camera sat side-by-side with Eric’s laptop, and two first aid kits were balanced on the club’s tape recorder. And in the middle of a jumble of cords and cables sat three things that looked like milk cartons wrapped in silver wire, which had to be Eric’s inventions.

Eric didn’t see them come in. He was busy pointing a gadget—it looked like a satellite dish, except it was small enough to fit on a stick—at the walls and listening through a set of earphones.

Winnie forgot about the weird interview with Brittany Carver in a second. “What’s the deal now?” she shouted, Dakota accent kicking in. “How come you pretended not to be Brewer’s friend?”

Eric winced and ripped off his earphones. “Damn that hurt.” He tried to smile at her. “Didn’t your mother teach you to never yell at a man with a parabolic microphone?”

“My mother taught me that friends were supposed to stick up for each other, doncha know?” Winnie was so furious she couldn’t sit down. She just tossed her backpack on a desk and paced back and forth. I must look like Brewer, she thought.

Brewer, meanwhile, sat down at a computer and tried to disappear.

“Listen, I’m sorry about the guys,” Eric said. “They can be jerks. But I wouldn’t have let them hurt you or Brewer.” He set the microphone-thingy down on the counter with the rest of the equipment, then walked over and tried to take her hand. Winnie wouldn’t let him.

“I couldn’t tell them about the club,” he continued as he watched her pace,
“because I have to keep baseball and S.P.E.C.T.E.R. separate. I can’t go around during practice zoning out and telling my teammates about a new invention I came up with. Just like I can’t goof off and tell dirty jokes and talk about baseball all day here.”

“Why not?” Winnie demanded, stopping in front of him. As the newest member of the Club, she knew she shouldn’t be rocking the boat like this. But she kept thinking about the helpless look on Brewer’s face as the bullies closed in on him. “Why can’t you just be who you want in front of anyone?”

“Cause it doesn’t work like that,” Kat said from the doorway. Now that the last bell had rung, she had turned her tee-shirt right side out. In white letters on a black background it read: Your Village Called, Their Idiot is Missing. She set her backpack down on a desk and took out her tarot cards. “Man, it’s hot enough out there to cook a horse. Anyway,” she said, turning to Winnie. “There are certain rules. You’re either a jock or a nerd or a band geek or a Goth or whatever. You have to pick.”

Rules according to who? Winnie wanted to say, but Kat had already jumped up on another desk and began laying out her cards. “We’re still going tonight?” she asked Eric, “cause I’m getting some strange readings from the tarot deck.”

“Yeah, of course,” Eric said. Then he whispered to Winnie, “We’ll talk later,” and joined Brewer at the other computer. “So,” Eric asked, “what did my undercover reporters find out?”

“Another conspiracy,” Brewer said, raising his head, clearly glad the topic had changed. He told Eric and Kat all about their interview with Brittany Carver. While he told the story, Winnie calmed down a bit. At the time she’d told herself that there’d be a logical explanation for Eric’s behavior, and this was it. He was just trying to have two different groups of friends. Could she stay mad at him for that?

When Brewer finished, Eric frowned and said, “Something about that story sounds wrong.” He began typing away at the computer.

“Did you find anything on the Internet?” Brewer asked. “Is the Ranch built on an ancient Native American burial ground?”

“Didn’t find anything about ghosts,” Eric said. “But I found a picture of the guy who started the ranch back in 1886. His name was Daniel Carver. This is him.” Eric rotated the computer’s flat-screen monitor so that they all could see. A black and white
photo of a man’s face filled the screen. He had thick hair parted in the middle and a big
bushy walrus mustache that hung down on either side of his mouth. He had dark, deep-
set eyes and a scar on his check. Overall he looked more like a bank robber than a
rancher. Winnie couldn’t be certain because of the mustache, but if she had to guess
she’d say he was frowning.

“I’ve also got directions to the Ranch,” Eric said, bringing up a MapQuest screen.
“Only fifteen minutes away, in a neighborhood behind Edwards Megaplex 20.”

“I’ve been to the Megaplex a bunch of times,” Kat said, not looking up from her
cards. “Never noticed an old ranch. It’s like a little bit of history right in our own
backyard.” She sighed. “I just don’t get it, I’ve laid the cards out four times—”

“Four!” Eric shouted. “That’s it!” He made the MapQuest screen vanish with a
few keystrokes and brought up a figure that looked like a line drawing of a tree. Winnie
recognized it from history class as a family tree, with names instead of leaves at the ends
of the branches. “There should only be Four,” he said. “Someone altered the records.”

“Stop,” Kat said. “You’re starting to sound like Brewer.”

“No, it’s the Carver children,” Eric said. “Winnie, Brittany told you there were
five brothers and sisters. But all the records and histories of the Carver family show that
Daniel and his wife only had four children.”

“What’s that mean?” Winnie asked.

“It means,” Eric said, “That since there’s no record of a fifth child being born,
then someone had to alter the family history on purpose. Probably to cover something
up.”

“See!” Brewer said, “I told you there’d be a conspiracy but no, nobody ever
listens to anything…”

And Winnie wasn’t listening. Instead she thought about their mysterious letter
sent from long ago, written by a person who somehow knew that Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R.
would form one day at Richland Junior High. That was almost like magic, almost like
real-life supernatural.

“What if that spooky picture has somethin’ to do with that missing kid,” Winnie
said, interrupting Brewer. “What if this mystery we have-ta solve isn’t about a ghost, but
from a ghost?”
The members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. stood across the street and gazed at the haunted house. Winnie shivered, as much from excitement as the cold, and wished she had brought a jacket. She wasn’t used to California weather, where a hot day could turn into such a chilly evening. Brewer looked warm, though. He had changed into yet another outfit. It was his spy suit, which was all black from his boots to his vest. He wore a black ski hat, and had smeared some sort of black paint on his nose and under his eyes.

Kat’s outfit was even stranger. Brewer had dressed to be camouflaged at night, but Kat was going to stick out like a sore thumb in the dark. She wore large silver earrings, silver bracelets and dozens of silver necklaces, all holding her weird charms—moons with letters on them, animals with human heads, several different Egyptian ankhs and a five-inch tall silver penguin that looked like it weighed a pound.

Eric must have read a weather report, because he wore a leather jacket over his Lakers jersey. With Winnie still in her overalls Eric was, again, the most normal-looking person in the group.

On the car ride over, Brewer’s mom hadn’t asked questions about what they were wearing, much to Winnie’s surprise. Instead Mrs. Lyndon just told them to have fun at the Ranch. She’d pick them up at eight o’clock, an hour after the Ranch closed. Eric hoped that they wouldn’t get booted out exactly at seven. If Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. could stay till until seven twenty, then they’d be at the Ranch two hours past sundown. According to the letter, that was when the ghost would appear.

“Let’s do this,” Eric said, blowing on his hands to warm them. They grabbed
their heavy backpacks, full of ghost-detecting equipment, and crossed over to the other sidewalk. An ivy-covered brick wall surrounded the entire property. Winnie stood on her tiptoes but all she could see over the wall was the roof of the house and the tops of trees.

Eric guessed that the main entrance would be the large wooden gate on their left, but when they got closer they noticed a small sign:

![SERVICE ENTRANCE
Visitors Please Use
Side Entrance]

Side entrance? Winnie looked to her left and right. Ivy-covered wall stretched off into the distance.

“This will be quicker if we split up,” Eric said. Brewer and I will go left. Kat and Winnie take the right. Whoever finds the gate first use the radio to tell the others.”

“Don’t they always split up in horror movies?” Brewer asked, his eyes darting everywhere. “Then the monster picks them off one by one.”

“Monsters only kill teenagers who are making out,” Kat said, grabbing Winnie’s hand and dragging her off along the sidewalk. “We’ll be safe as long as we keep our lips to ourselves.”

Winnie kept looking over her shoulder until Eric and Brewer were out of sight. She knew she shouldn’t feel afraid. She and Kat could do anything the boys could do. Plus, they had Kat’s magic penguin. Still, Winnie found herself counting the number of steps it took to get through the dark part in between streetlights.

After a couple minutes Kat shouted, “Uck, I’m stuck!” Her big penguin charm had caught on her belt, forcing her to hunch over. Winnie couldn’t help giggling.

“Sure,” Kat said, “Laugh now, but when one of these charms saves you from an angry ghost, you’ll be thanking me.” She stopped walking and tried to untangle herself.

“Anyway, I probably won’t be wearing these again. If this Ranch thing doesn’t work out,
if we lose the Club, then this will be my last day as a Goth chick.”

“Huh? You can do that?” Winnie said. Kat had stopped right in the middle of two streetlights, on the very darkest part of the sidewalk. Winnie hoped Kat would hurry up and get untangled. “I thought Goths were…ah…born that way,” Winnie said. “I can’t imagine you without black hair and pale make-up and blue lipstick.”

“Silly girl,” Kat said, tugging at the necklace. “I wasn’t always Goth. Last semester I was hardcore punk—short, spiked, pink hair, metal studs on my clothes, all that. Got in trouble a lot. I even smoked.”

“You…smoked?”

“Yeah, it was nasty,” Kat said. “Brewer and Eric know about it. That’s why I chew my hair. It’s how I quit smoking.” She tugged one last time and the necklace broke with a pop. The big silver penguin crashed to the sidewalk, making Winnie jump.

Winnie bent down to pick up the charm. “So-oh, why do you keep switching your look?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Kat said. She took the penguin from Winnie and attached it to another silver necklace. “I guess I was tired of being the same as everyone else—another rich blonde girl from the suburbs, who would be a cheerleader and date a guy on the football team and all that stuff. But when I changed my style I became just another punk girl or just another Goth chic. They’re all the same too.” She studied Winnie. “You’re lucky you are who you are. I’m jealous sometimes.”

“What? Of me?” Winnie couldn’t believe that. Kat was so pretty and independent and not afraid of anyone. Winnie had always been envious of her. For a moment she forgot all about the haunted house right next to them.

“Sure,” Kat said. “You’ve got your own style. With your accent and your overalls and your whole cowgirl attitude, you’ve got your own thing going.”

Winnie never considered being different might be a good thing. Most of the time she just wanted to blend in. “But what about the witch stuff?” she asked. “That’s original, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” Kat said. She adjusted her necklaces and she and Winnie began walking again, both looking for the other gate in the wall. “Check out the Internet,” Kat said, after a moment. “There’s lots of Wicca websites. And, besides, I’m not sure I
really believe that magic stuff works.”

“You’ve never tried it?”

“Nope,” Kat said. “If I tried to cast a spell and it didn’t work, then I’d know for sure it’s just make-believe. But if I don’t try it—”

“Then there’s always a maybe,” Winnie finished.

“Exactly!” Kat said, then, “Hey, I found the gate.” She pointed ahead of them.

Set in the wall was a large wooden gate, held together by wooden pegs and crossed with black iron bands. Actually, it looked more like a large castle door. All it needed, Winnie thought, was a moat with alligators. She unhooked the two-way radio from her belt and called the boys. By the time Brewer and Eric arrived, though, she had found another sign. This one was handwritten on a piece of notebook paper:

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Sorry we missed you.
The Ranch will be open tomorrow at 10:00 am.
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“Crap,” Eric said when he saw the note. “This is turning out to be a very bad day.” He threw down his backpack.

“All part of the Conspiracy,” Brewer said, checking out the sidewalk in either direction, and peering across the deserted street. “They don’t want us to find out about the ghost.”

Kat, meanwhile, had been investigating the gate. “Uhm, guys, this is open. Why don’t we just go in?”

The rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. looked at each other in silence for a moment.

“It’s suspicious,” Brewer said, testing the handle of the gate himself. “But I’m ready for danger.”

Eric picked up his backpack. “If we get caught, we can just say we’re ghost hunters,” he said. “It wouldn’t be a lie. We have the equipment to prove it. I don’t think
we’d get in a lot of trouble.”

Winnie’s gut told her to say no. To say, sorry guys, we gave it our best shot. She hadn’t ever done anything illegal in her life, and planned to keep it that way. But the Club meant so much to them, and everyone looked so sad…

“Maybe we can take just a quick look around,” Winnie finally said.

“Excellent,” Kat said, already making her way inside. “Besides, it’d only be trespassing if someone really lived there. This is like hanging around in the parking lot after the grocery store closes.”

Winnie nodded like she knew what Kat meant.

Less than an hour later, when things began to go horribly wrong, when Winnie believed she’d never see her mother or sister again, she’d think back on this one bad decision, and how it changed their lives forever.
“Ohhh, spooky,” Kat said.

Winnie could barely see her, but from the sound of her voice, she could tell that her friend was smiling. It was a lot darker on the Ranch grounds. Trees blocked the moonlight, and there were no streetlights close by.

Eric turned on his flashlight and walked to the nearest tree. “Lemons,” he said. “According to the information I found on-line, some of the trees on the property are over eighty years old.”

“I bet the Carvers were totally tired of lemonade,” Kat said, turning on her own flashlight.

They found themselves in the middle of a lemon grove. Trees ran in even rows about twenty feet apart. Winnie was surprised to see branches bowing down under the weight of hundreds of lemons. Back home, at this time of year, all the trees would be brown and bare.

“They really should pick these,” she said, walking to the nearest tree. “Branches can break under too much weight.”

“Well, farm girl,” Kat said, “grab a snack and let’s move. We’re going to lose Brewer.”

Winnie looked ahead to where Kat pointed her flashlight. She saw Brewer dodging from one tree to the next, trying to hide in the shadows.

They followed Brewer farther into the property, until the house itself finally came into view through the trees. Just then Winnie heard a loud metallic Clang, followed by an even louder “Ouch!” She found Brewer holding his shin, standing next to a sooty iron pot.

“Is it an early-warning system?” Brewer asked. “To stop robbers?”
“Actually, it’s a coal bucket,” Winnie said. “In the old days they used these to keep trees from freezing at night.” She bent over and pointed to the bottom of the pot, where a layer of ash was caked onto the iron. “They would fill the buckets with coal and light them. The smoke that came out was really thick. It would stay close to the ground and keep the trees warm during—”

“Hey,” Eric said. “That’s the window.” He stood a few yards away, at the point where the lemon trees ended and the house lawn began. In one hand he held his flashlight, and in the other, the black and white picture that had come with their mysterious letter.

Winnie joined him and, looking up at the second floor, felt the same cold shiver that the picture had given her earlier. The window matched the one in their photograph. This wasn’t a hoax. A long time ago someone had actually taken a picture of a ghost from this very spot.

“Wait a second,” Kat said. She was staring over Eric’s shoulder at the photograph. “Remember what you said earlier? About that ghost-thing looking familiar? I think I know what you mean now.”

Winnie studied the picture and tried to see what Kat was talking about, but it still just looked like a ghost with a blurry face. She looked at the other members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. The flashlight beam reflecting off the picture tinted their faces a grayish color, almost like that of a corpse. Winnie shivered and told herself to stop being such a chicken.

Brewer had taken out his night-vision goggles. After peering at the house for a while, he handed the heavy goggles over to Winnie. To her they looked like regular binoculars but with a couple extra knobs added. “These amplify ambient light,” he said.

Winnie nodded like she knew what he meant, and held the binoculars up to her eyes. They were amazing. She could see the house clearly, bathed in greenish light. It looked like the Queen Anne-style houses she’d seen in old photographs, with a peaked roof and balconies around little doors on the second and third floors.

“The ghost won’t show for another forty-five minutes,” Eric said, looking at his watch. “We can explore the house a bit before setting up in the ghost room.”

They picked up their backpacks and headed across the lawn. The grass was in
need of mowing. Rabbits darted out of their way as they passed.

The stairs leading up to the front porch sagged, and creaked loudly when Winnie stepped on them. The front porch itself needed a new coat of paint.

“Not exactly the Holiday Inn, is it?” Kat said.

The front door seemed to be in pretty good shape. It was made of thick wood and Winnie thought it looked large enough to ride a horse through. Eric tried twisting the big brass doorknob. It didn’t move. Though she was ashamed to admit it, Winnie felt a little relieved.

“What can we do?” she asked.

“I’ll check around the side,” Brewer said, “maybe I can find an open door.” He hopped off the porch and into the bushes.

After Brewer was out of sight, Winnie said, quietly, “Isn’t this breaking and entering or something?”

“Nope,” Kat said, shaking her head. “It’s only B and E if the house is locked. If it isn’t, then it’s just trespassing.”

Winnie thought about her earlier conversation with Kat. Why did she know so much about the rules? Just what sort of illegal things had her friend done during her “bad girl” phase last semester?


Winnie heard it—the sound of the doorknob being slowly turned. Everyone took a step backwards as the door opened, revealing an unlit hallway. A tall figure stood framed in the doorway. Someone behind Winnie moved their flashlight over the figure, but the shape (ghost?) just seemed to absorb the light, as if were made out of the shadows themselves.

Winnie tried to remember the Club’s Official Operating Procedures for Encounters with Suspected Supernatural Entities:

- Step 1: Don’t Panic!
- Step 2: Record the Event.
- Step 3: Once Steps One and Two are completed, you may Panic.

Record the Event, Record the Event, Winnie chanted to herself to keep from...
bolting off the porch. She brought the digital Nikon that hung around her neck up to eye level and focused. From her right she heard Kat yell, “Okay, ghost, say ‘Cheese!’”
Winnie thought her hands were shaking too badly to get a good picture, but she pressed the button on the camera anyway. The flash painted the doorway in blinding white light.

“Ugh!”

Ugh? Did ghosts say “Ugh?”

“Are you trying to blind me?” Brewer said. He was rubbing his eyes.

“We thought you were a ghost,” Kat said, giving him a harder-than-playful punch. Then she looked Brewer up and down. “Got to admit, though, that black-suit of yours really works.”

“I told you I was finding a way in,” Brewer said. He had leaves stuck to his vest and cap. “The kitchen door around back was unlocked. And there’s no security system—I checked.” He brushed off some of the leaves. “You guys have to come see this place. It’s like a museum in here.” And with that Brewer retreated back into the darkness of the house.

As soon as she stepped over the threshold Winnie was assaulted by the cold, dusty smell of spaces left unused. She found herself in an entrance hall that ran past a stairway and further into the house. Archways opened to rooms on the left and right. The archways were high, and the stairs were steep—it looked like the house had been built for a pretty big person.

Winnie noticed that her first steps past the doormat made a crinkly sound. She pointed her flashlight to the floor. A plastic runner led off into the darkness.

“Probably to protect the carpets,” Kat said, and then, “Hey! A light switch.”

Brewer shot out his hand and grabbed Kat’s arm before she could reach the wall. “If those lights work,” he said, “people might be able to see them from the street. No
“No need to get your panties in a bunch,” Kat replied, rubbing her wrist. “Anyway, this doesn’t look like any museum I’ve visited.” She walked into the room on the right, ignoring the plastic runner and walking right on the carpet.

Winnie left Kat and Brewer to fight it out, and followed Eric through the archway on the left. She found herself in what looked like a regular living room, except with really old, fancy furniture.

“This is a recreation museum,” Eric said. “I read about it on their website. The Historical Society fixed up the house to look exactly like it did when it was built back in 1882.” He pointed his flashlight at a faded rug that looked old enough to wrap a mummy.

It was hard for Winnie to get a good sense of the room, only being able to see a piece at a time with her flashlight. Oil lamps sat on the mantle of a fireplace large enough to roast an eighth-grader. Above the fireplace hung a painting of hunting dogs and men on horses. A rocking chair sat to the right of the fireplace, and tucked against the wall was an old-fashioned radio with large, wooden knobs.

“Hey,” Winnie said. “I don’t think they had radios in 1882.”

“And H.P. Lovecraft wasn’t born yet, but here’s one of his books.” Eric stood in front of a squat bookcase on the other side of the room. “They’ve got antiques here from a bunch of different years.”

Eric looked like he’d take a while, so Winnie decided to follow the plastic runners through the next archway. Here was a music room with a harp and a full-sized grand piano. Velvet ropes, like in real museums, hung from brass poles on either side of the path. Winnie could just imagine this place during the day: bored groups of fifth graders, looking forward to lunch time, being led single file through the house by elderly tour guides in 1880’s costumes.

As she ran her flashlight across the music room, shadows danced and jumped. She looked nervously behind her—being alone in a haunted house was probably not the best idea, she thought. She headed back and found Eric still browsing the bookcase. She had to tug on his jacket a couple times before he stood and followed her to the entrance hall. There they found Kat and Brewer, flashlights in each other’s faces, arguing about
Official Club Procedures. “That ‘no-touch’ rule is only for physical evidence,” Kat was saying “like ghost-slime or something. I can pick up that vase if I wanted.”

“You guys are loud enough to wake the dead,” Eric said in a whisper. “Let’s keep it professional people. We need to go set up our equipment.”

“We’ll finish this later,” Kat hissed at Brewer, and the both of them followed Eric and Winnie upstairs.

Winnie noticed the dusty smell was even thicker, and the house felt even colder as they climbed the tall steps. A picture hung on the wall about halfway up the stairs. When she got closer Winnie saw that it was actually a framed photograph, brown and faded. A typed card below the picture read, “Daniel B. Carver circa 1890.” It showed a tall, lanky man with a walrus mustache, standing in front of Carver House with one booted foot on the steps and his hat in his hands. He wasn’t smiling. He looks even scarier here than in his other picture, Winnie thought.

The stairs finally leveled off at a balcony that ran around the entire upper floor and looked out over the entrance hall. Several doors faced each other across the wide, open space.

“One of these has to be our ghost room,” Kat said. Winnie felt a bit jealous. Kat didn’t sound scared at all; excited maybe, but not scared.

“The room from the ghost picture has a little outside balcony and a window facing the side lawn,” Eric said. “It should be easy to find. Let’s split up.”

Winnie and Eric took the first door on the right. It was unlocked, but one of those velvet ropes blocked the entrance. A gold-lettered sign propped on a chair read “Day Room.”

“I don’t think anyone will mind,” Eric said, ducking under the rope. Winnie followed.

The room was crowded with antiques. Bookshelves lined two walls. An orange velvet love seat sat in one corner, and in another a wooden spinning wheel stood next to a mannequin. The mannequin was dressed in a white blouse and a puffy skirt with a large ribbon on the back, and even though it didn’t have a head Winnie felt like it was watching her.

“No way, an old Spaulding!” Eric was looking at red ball sitting on a little glass
display stand. “They made these in the 1880’s,” he said. “Painting the baseballs red helped reduce glare. You wouldn’t lose them in the sun.”

Eric picked up the ball and Winnie winced. There seemed to be an agreement that no one would touch anything. Seeing Eric with the baseball reminded Winnie that they were trespassing. Even if the ghost wasn’t real, a curious cop would be.

“Man, the guys on the team would freak if they saw this.” Eric tossed the ball in the air a couple times and then got into a pitching stance. “Bottom of the ninth, runners on first and second…”

Winnie left him to his game and went to check the window. She had to edge around a large blue globe that sat on a wrought iron stand in order to look outside. There was the side lawn all right. But she didn’t see a balcony. That meant that this wasn’t the room from the ghost picture.

“Not this one,” Eric said. He was looking over her shoulder, pressed close because of the tight space between the globe and the window. Winnie could feel his breath, and smell his mint gum.

“Excuse me,” she said, scooting around him.

“This the room?” Brewer asked from the door. He stepped over the velvet rope easily with his long legs. Kat followed right behind him.

“Nope,” Winnie said.

“But this has to be the room,” Brewer said. “The window we’re looking for, the one from the picture, is on the left side of the house, and me and Kat already checked the other room along this wall. Come on.”

Brewer led them out, through the hall, and into the room next door. A huge four-poster bed sat at its center, behind a rectangle of velvet ropes. A plastic runner made a path around the outside of the bed.

Brewer pulled aside a curtain from one of the room’s two windows and pointed. “See, there’s the lawn. At least, a corner of it. But the ghost’s room should have a view from right in the middle. It should be in between this room and the one you guys checked.”

“Maybe we got the rooms mixed up,” Eric said. “There has to be a logical explanation—”
“Logical, yes logical…” Brewer muttered, pacing back and forth next to the bed. Winnie looked at Eric. He was frowning and searching through his pockets for his own baseball. Kat stared at the big bed, and Winnie guessed it was taking all her willpower not to jump up on it and start bouncing.

Finally Brewer exclaimed, “Eric, you’re right. There is a logical explanation.” He dashed out into the hall and a moment later Winnie heard a knocking noise.

In the hall they found Brewer with his ear pressed against the wall. He knocked three times, listening closely: “Nope, not here,” he said. Then he scooted sideways a bit and knocked again.

At first Winnie thought Brewer had gone crazy, like Kat always said he would. But then she realized what he was doing. He was listening for a hollow sound.

“You think they walled off the room?” Eric asked.

“Yup,” Brewer said. “I bet we could find where the door used to be. Everyone start banging on the wall.”

“Then do what?” Kat asked. “Dig a hole through to the room? Come on.” She headed for the stairway.

“We can’t give up,” Brewer said. “This might be our one chance to get physical evidence of a supernatural entity!”

“Sometimes I think that huge IQ of yours gets in the way,” Kat said, taking the stairs two at a time. “If we can see the window we can get to it. All we have to do is climb.”
“I can’t believe I didn’t think of climbing,” Brewer said, once they had all gotten outside. “Especially since I’m the one who brought the equipment. Kat, could you shine your flashlight down here?” He opened up his backpack and took out a coil of rope and some metal hooks, like the ones some people used to hook keys onto their belts.

“Sure you know what you’re doing?” Kat asked.

“I’ve seen every Mission Impossible movie at least twenty times,” Brewer said, simply.

While Brewer set up, Winnie turned in a slow circle with her flashlight. She half-expected to see a pair of red, glowing eyes watching them from the lemon grove. Instead all she saw were a couple rabbits at the edge of the lawn, their eyes shining black in the starlight, watching Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. with half-finished blades of grass poking out of their mouths.

“All right,” Brewer said after a couple minutes. He stood up with a coil of rope and some kind of harness. “What you do is thread the rope that’s above you through here, and you can pull up on this to break yourself if you start to fall. I’ll show you how to put on the—”

“The rope above you?” Eric asked. “What do you mean?”

Brewer looked up at the balcony outside the ghost room. “Oh. I guess I never learned that part. In all the movies I saw, the climbers already had ropes coming from the mountain or building above them.” He shrugged. “I guess I never thought about who put those ropes there.”

“So much IQ, so little sense,” Kat said, pointing the flashlight at her face so Brewer could see her stick out her tongue.

Winnie felt embarrassed by the sense of relief that washed over her. It was the
same feeling she got when they found the sign telling them the Ranch was closed. Maybe part of her wasn’t ready to take Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. past horror movies and sleepovers and Internet research. She knew she’d feel better if they only had an adult with them…

Smack

Eric had taken a baseball out of his backpack and was playing one-handed catch with it. Winnie didn’t know how he managed to keep catching the ball in the dark. Each time he caught it, the ball made a “smack” sound that seemed much too loud on the hushed Ranch grounds.

After a dozen catches, Eric told them he had a plan. He instructed Brewer to take fishing line out of his mini survival Kit. (‘Why do you carry fishing line?’ Kat wanted to know. “There isn’t any water for miles!”) Eric tied one end of the fishing line around his baseball, and then tried to tie the other end to one of Brewer’s climbing ropes. Winnie offered to help him tie the line and the rope together. She’d learned all types of knots working on her parents’ farm.

When everything was ready, Eric began throwing his baseball with the fishing line attached up to the second-floor balcony—the balcony in front of the ghost room.

“Simple yet Brilliant,” Brewer said to no one in particular.

After only three tries, Eric managed to throw the baseball over the railing and onto the balcony. Then the baseball bounced off the balcony in between two posts of the railing. Eric caught the ball with one hand and untied the fishing line. By pulling that end of the fishing line he was able to pull Brewer’s climbing rope onto the balcony, up over and under the railing, and then back down. When he finished he was holding both ends of Brewer’s climbing rope, which hung down from the second floor.

“Winnie, tie these ends to something that won’t move.”

Winnie used her flashlight to locate a water spigot. It didn’t move when she yanked on it and then kicked it, so she used it to tie off the ropes. By the time she returned to the group Brewer had his climbing harness on.

“I’ll go up first to show everyone how it’s done,” Brewer said, clearly enjoying being the expert. “Since there’s only one harness I’ll have to toss this one down after I’m done.”
Kat looked doubtfully at the set up. “If I break my legs doin’ this I’m telling everyone you made me climb.” She held her penguin charm with one hand, and pulled a length of hair into her mouth with the other.

Winnie watched Brewer give the rope a test, and then he began to walk straight up the side of the house by leaning back on the rope. She had to hand it to the guy; he looked just like a stuntman in a Hollywood movie. Even Kat seemed impressed. “Maybe,” she said to Kat, “Brewer is the super-spy he’s always talking about being.” But she spoke too soon. A cry came from above, followed by a whirring of rope through metal. Everyone pointed their flashlights up. For a precarious moment, Brewer held on to the edge of the balcony with one hand. Then he dropped down into the bushes.

“Brewer!” Winnie screamed. As she ran to him she tried to remember the first aid she learned from her dad. They’d have to make a splint with sticks to set any broken bones. Then they’d have to use sweaters and jackets and a couple long branches to make a stretcher.

She got to the bushes that ran next to this side of the house and began feeling around for Brewer or, if things went horribly wrong, a body. She jumped when the leaves rustled and Brewer stood up all by himself.

“Wow,” he said, pulling small branches out of his hair. “That was stupid. I should’ve looped the rope over and through the carabineer—”

“But…you…fell almost ten feet.” Winnie had to restrain herself from checking him for broken bones.

“Hey,” Brewer said, smiling in Winnie’s flashlight beam, “if you’re as clumsy as me, you learn how to take a fall. And the bushes helped a bit.” Kat and Eric joined Winnie, and soon three flashlights were trained on Brewer. “I guess I got lucky,” Brewer said, blinking in the light. “I know how to attach the rope now. Same thing won’t happen again. I’ll go first to prove it. But I’d understand if you all don’t want to risk climbing.”

Eric looked up to the balcony, about fifteen feet above them. “We’ll put it to a vote,” he said. “No big deal if anyone wants to go back now. A dusty old picture of a ghost isn’t worth getting hurt for.”

By the look on Eric’s face, Winnie could tell that no matter what he said it was a
big deal to him.

“Well, you know I’m in,” Brewer said.

“What the heck,” Kat said. “My tarot cards didn’t say anything about falling to our deaths.”

So, this was peer pressure Winnie thought. “Why not,” she said, trying to smile. “I know first aid.”

Brewer made his second climb without any problems. After he hauled himself over the balcony, he peered in the window before calling back down. “Too dark to see anything,” he said. “I guess it’s not a glowing ghost.”

Winnie went next, and between the boost from Eric and the help up from Brewer, the climb wasn’t bad at all, even with her backpack and camera weighing her down. Then it was Kat’s turn, followed by Eric. Soon they were all crowded together on the tiny balcony.

Winnie peered in the window. It was pitch black inside but she tried to see anyway. She turned away, though, when she began to imagine something else; something with open spaces where a shoulder and chest should be, peering back at her.

She stepped aside and Brewer tried opening the window. It wouldn’t budge. Kat joined him and on a count of three they both pulled at the same time. With a groan of wood and a shower of paint chips the window came open. Stale air brushed Winnie’s cheek.

“Hurray for teamwork,” Brewer said. He began to throw his leg over the window ledge but stopped and looked at Eric. “Would you like to do the honors, captain?”

Eric smiled. “Thanks, but you go on ahead.”

“Okay, you’re the boss.” Brewer climbed inside, followed by Kat. Brewer had to slide in headfirst because he was too tall to duck.

Eric wasn’t getting ready to follow.

“If you’re a little scared, that’s okay,” Winnie said. “I’ve been jumping at shadows all night.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that.” Eric looked at her and the moonlight in his eyes reminded Winnie of the eyes of the rabbits. “I was just thinking that this is our big chance. First
the letter and the picture, then the missing child and the sealed room—it looks like there’s something supernatural going on here. And I don’t mean a voice-on-a-tape supernatural. I mean real right-before-your-eyes proof…”

He gazed out over the lawn. Winnie could hear Kat and Brewer in the room, moving around and talking in low voices. Otherwise the night was silent. No crickets or planes or even traffic in the distance.

“You know why I’m so skeptical?” he said, finally. “Why I always look for a rational explanation? It’s because I don’t want to get my hopes up and be disappointed. I’ve been let down by too many fake ghosts and dead-end mysteries already. But if ghosts do exist, if paranormal phenomena are real, then that means scientists don’t have all the answers. It means that Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. is doing something that matters in the world. It means my dad would have to listen to what I’m interested in for a change.”

Eric sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. Winnie had an impulse and went with it. She gave him a hug.

“Whoa, no need to get all sappy,” he said. But he hugged back briefly.

When Eric let go he moved to the window, but Winnie wanted to make the moment last a bit longer. “So-oh, what did you tell your dad you were doing tonight?” she asked. Yup, she thought, there’s that darned Dakota accent, just when it was least welcome.

“Actually, I didn’t have to tell him anything. He’s on a date tonight.”

“Really? My mom too.”

“ Weird, huh?” he said. “I mean, I should be happy for him and all but still…”

“Yeah,” Winnie laughed. “And this is my mom’s first date since the separation. I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to come out tonight ‘cause I was supposed to baby-sit my sister.” With the thought of Sam came that familiar pang of guilt and the memory of her horrible dreams.

“Well…” Eric said.

Suddenly Winnie had the urge to tell him everything, to tell him that there were mysteries out there, to tell him that she herself was proof because she had dreams that predicted the future. But those dreams just ended up hurting the people she cared about. So instead she said, “You know, I’ve always wondered why you invited me to join the
Club back in—"

“What’s the hold up?” Kat shouted from inside. “Someone fall off?”

“Yeah, we’re coming,” Eric said. Then he whispered to Winnie: “We’ll have time to talk later. Right now let’s go get our ghost.”
14. Countdown

As soon as Winnie climbed through the window, Kat came bouncing up to her. “Guess what I found,” she said, shining her flashlight on some white fabric on the floor. “Pajamas!”

They didn’t look like any pj’s Winnie had seen before. They looked more like a dress with puffy sleeves. “Do you think that’s from the 1880’s?” she asked.

“Must be,” Kat said. “And I thought Underoos were weird.”

Winnie looked around. This was once a kid’s bedroom. There were two small beds, two dressers, two wardrobes, and two nightstands with oil lamps. A really old circus poster was tacked to the back of the door and a toy wooden gun sat on one of the dressers. Long ago the walls had been painted to look like a jungle, with ferocious animals, but all Winnie could spot now was the occasional striped tail or gleaming fang.

Opposite the window stood a single door that, according to Brewer, was blocked off from the other side. Winnie guessed the room had been sealed for a long time. It didn’t have the light layer of dust that seemed to cover the rest of the house.

“We’re sticking to official S.P.E.C.T.E.R. operating procedures,” Brewer said, helping Eric through the window. “We haven’t touched anything, in case the ghost’s manifestation is tied to a particular object. We don’t want to scare it away.”

“I might have moved the pajamas with my toe before I spotted them,” Kat said. “Otherwise, we’re zero contamination. Where do you want the parabolic microphone set up?”

“Your call,” Eric said. “Just be sure to coordinate with Brewer and the digital camera.”

“Roger.”

Winnie got the infrared filter out of her backpack and attached it to the Nikkon
520—the camera they’d use to take pictures from outside the house. Then she loaded the special film for low-light photography. Now that the big event was here, most of her jitters were gone.

“It will be two hours past sundown in fifteen…no, fourteen minutes,” Eric said. He sat on the floor, plugging a battery pack into the wire-wrapped milk cartons.

“What are those, anyways?” Winnie asked.

“Sniffers,” he said. “Some books I’ve read say that haunts manifest olfactorally as well as visually.”

“That means ghosts stink,” Brewer said. He set a tape recorder up on one of the nightstands.

“I’m not sure these will work,” Eric continued. “But I modeled them after smoke detectors. If the ghost smells like anything from roses to rotten cabbage, we should pick it up.” He plugged the last carton into a battery pack and flipped a switch.

“Digital camera’s all ready,” Brewer said. “Aimed at the window. I’ve set it to record a picture every five seconds.”

“I’ve got the parabolic microphone aimed across the room,” Kat said. “That way we won’t pick up any outside noise from the window. But if that ghost even farts we’ll have the sound recorded.”

“And I’ve got another tape recorder running besides the one attached to the microphone,” Brewer said “I tested both of ‘em and they came up A-Okay.”

“All right then,” Eric said as he stood. “Let’s get out of here. We’ll set up on the lawn with my laptop and Winnie’s Nikon.”

“Don’t suppose I could convince you to let me stay?” Kat asked. “I’ve memorized a protection spell.”

“No way,” Eric said, moving to the window. “You know Club policy: No supernatural contact. People still don’t know what ghosts are. They could be spirits or aliens; they could be travelers from another dimension or another time. But most important, they could be dangerous.”

Winnie took one last look at the room and felt proud to be a member of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. The microphone, which still looked to her like a mini satellite dish, was set in a corner by the window and the digital camera sat on another stand by the door.
Eric’s “sniffers” were evenly spaced throughout the room. The set-up looked like a real ghost-hunter operation.

Since Brewer was going to have to do his snake impression again in order to fit through the window, Winnie had a little time left. She wanted to check out the other side of the door. Sure, the room was walled off, but what did the inside of a wall look like?

She reached for the door handle, half-expecting it not to turn, but it twisted smoothly. The door opened inward. Darkness greeted her on the other side. Winnie could tell right away that there wasn’t a wall in front of her. She aimed her flashlight and found a balcony that ran to the left and right. Past the balcony she could see the stairs and the front hallway.
“Hey, Eric,” Winnie said. “I think I found another way down. We must have
gotten our doors mixed up.”

“Not possible,” Brewer said from behind her. “We double-checked.”

“Well, I’m looking at the first floor right now.” Winnie stepped out into the hall
and leaned over the railing. She couldn’t figure how they missed the ghost-room when
they searched earlier. Maybe they’d been checking the wrong side of the house, and
were looking at another lawn out the windows. After all, the group hadn’t walked around
the entire house yet.

“Wow, like, total turn around,” Kat said, as she and the rest of Club

Eric ran his flashlight along the opposite wall, then back into the ghost room
behind him. “I don’t know how we got mixed up,” he said, shutting the door. “But we’ll
have to worry about that later. I want to be outside before our ghost shows.”

He led the way downstairs. As Winnie got closer to ground level, she thought she
noticed a new smell. “Anyone else smell smoke?” she asked.

“Maybe it’s another wildfire in the foothills,” Eric said. “It’s been really dry this
year. My dad says that…”

But Winnie wasn’t listening. The picture at the middle of the staircase caught her
attention. Before it had been a photograph of Daniel B. Carver, the tall spooky guy with
the mustache. But here in front of her was a painting of cows in a field. Could her mind
be playing tricks on her? Had she seen the picture of Mr. Carver somewhere else?

When she reached the bottom of the stairs she poked her head into the room that
was now on her right, the living room, hoping to spot the Carver photograph somewhere.
Her flashlight picked out the bookcase and the fireplace and the rocking chair, but no Mr.
Carver. And no old-fashioned radio! Did she imagine that, too? Should she say anything?

Winnie looked over her shoulder—Eric had already opened the front door. She took a moment to jog over to the short bookcase and run her flashlight along the spines of the books: Most of the volumes looked like poetry books. There were also a couple bibles, and bound copies of magazines like Harpers and The Country Magazine. She didn’t see any book by a guy named ‘Lovecraft’ though.

“Hey guys,” Winnie said. “Some stuff’s missing.”

“I think we’re running out of time,” Kat said, but walked over anyways. “What’s up?”

Winnie told her about the book and the radio. By the time she finished, the whole group had quietly gathered in the living room. Wait a minute…quietly? That wasn’t right. Winnie pointed the flashlight on the floor. “And those crinkly plastic runners are missing too,” she added.

“There has to be a logical explanation,” Eric said. “Anyway, we can talk about this outside. We should get going.” He returned to the front door. “We’ll look around some more later when we come back for our equipment. But Winnie’s right, stuff has changed. So be careful when you go outside. Volunteers from the Historical Society might still be here cleaning up or something.” With his flashlight trained ahead of him, Eric stepped out.

At the door Winnie coughed and noticed that her eyes were watering. The smoke smell had gotten stronger while they were downstairs, creeping up on her until it stung her nose every time she breathed. Then she heard Eric shout from outside: “The orchard’s on fire!”

Winnie piled through the door with Kat and Brewer, getting stuck for a second as they all tried to go out shoulder to shoulder. Out on the porch the smell was so strong it seemed to claw at Winnie’s throat. She could see the lawn and a couple trees, but everything past that was blanketed in smoke.

“It’s on all sides,” Kat said, pulling a length of ebony hair into her mouth.

“This was probably their plan all along,” Brewer moaned, pacing the porch.

“We’re doomed.”
“Let’s…let’s try the kitchen door,” Eric said as he began to cough.

All Winnie could think was that, if they did get trapped, Brewer’s mom wouldn’t be here for another half hour at least. She had a horrible image of her own mother waiting in the living room chair, getting more and more worried as the minutes crept by, until finally a police officer came to tell her the bad news.

Winnie looked up at the sky, ready to say a silent prayer, when she noticed the stars. That wasn’t right. Why could she see stars?

“Hey everybody, there’s no fire,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Kat said through a mouthful of hair. “We can all see the smoke.”

“Yeah, but look up,” Winnie said. “I can see stars. I can even see the tops of some trees. This smoke is sticking close to the ground, and smoke from burning wood shouldn’t do that.” She looked back at the group. “Someone must have lit the coal buckets.”

Eric held the sleeve of his jacket over his nose. “Winnie’s right. If the orchard was on fire we’d see flames, and hear the trees burning. We’re okay.”

Brewer had walked to the edge of the front porch and was peering around the corner of the house. “Hey,” he said. “My rope’s not hanging from the balcony any more.”

Winnie had a hard time imagining thieves stealing a bit of climbing rope. “Well, it is cold tonight,” she said. “Maybe those Historical Society people got the smoke going because they’re worried about the lemons freezing. And maybe they put the rope in their lost and found box.”

Kat began to laugh, but it turned into a cough. “Winnie, you’re starting to sound just like Eric with his rational explanations.”

“Thanks,” Winnie said. She looked out towards the grove and tried to spot any Historical Society people amidst the trees. After a moment, almost as if her thoughts had summoned it, a figure appeared in the smoke and began moving towards the house. She couldn’t see any details, but if it looked anything like the ghost from their picture, Winnie knew she would scream.

“Should we go back into the house?” Brewer asked, spotting the shape.
“No, we need to start getting answers,” Eric said. “I think we should stand our ground.”

“Me too,” Kat said. She fished through the charms on her necklaces until she found the silver penguin, and held it out towards the figure.

Eric pulled a baseball out of the accessories pocket in his laptop carrying case and held it behind his back.

Brewer got into Karate stance.

Winnie couldn’t think of anything to do but raise her camera. Already today she had been fooled into thinking there was a ghost when there wasn’t one. And now she was kinda hoping this was another false alarm.

It seemed to take forever before the figure got close enough for them to get a good look. It was short; Winnie noticed that first, and it didn’t float like a ghost. But even when it stepped clear of the smoke and onto the lawn, Winnie still didn’t think she was seeing things right.

Wearing a round, brown hat, knee breeches and a button-down brown shirt with a broad, white collar, the boy in front of them looked like he’d stepped out of a Tom Sawyer book.
The boy looked at the ground as he walked, as if he were searching for something in the dark, and he didn’t see Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. until he reached the porch. Then he looked so startled that Winnie felt bad for not saying something earlier. He stumbled back a few steps, pin-wheeled his arms, but lost his balance and fell down on the damp lawn.

“Sorry, we didn’t mean to scare you,” Winnie said.

“That’s okay, miss,” the boy said. He stood and began searching the grass again. “I’m looking for Spikey are you here to see Papa?”

Winnie headed for the edge of the porch and Brewer grabbed her arm. “We don’t know who—or what—he is,” he whispered.

“He’s just a kid looking for his pet,” Winnie said, simply, and walked down the steps and onto the grass. The boy looked really worried, and her heart went out to him. The Club’s earlier scare now seemed silly by comparison. He was probably just the kid of one of the Historical Society volunteers, still dressed in his volunteer costume.

“What’s Spikey look like?” she asked when she reached the boy.

“He’s green and he has a tail and horns on his head.” The boy met her eyes. It was obvious this was simply a boy and no ghost or spirit. “Are you going to help me look?” he asked.

Winnie crouched down and began searching through the grass. After a minute the rest of the Club joined her. “His pet sounds like a horned toed lizard or a bearded dragon,” she said, in case any of the others knew what those were. As she searched, she noticed that the boy kept stealing glances at her flashlight.

Finally, Winnie reached the point where the lawn met the lemon trees. She was about to turn around and keep searching when she spotted a tiny creature hanging from a
lemon tree branch, twisting on the end of a loop of yarn. She held her flashlight between her neck and her shoulder and reached out to gently untie the lizard from its noose. The animal looked scared but otherwise unhurt.

“Who would hang a lizard?” Kat asked from behind her. “That’s just wrong.”

“Spikey!” the boy shouted, running to them and taking the lizard. Then he turned and gave Winnie his full attention. “Shall I take you to my father now?”

“Maybe in a bit.” Would his parents be mad that they were there? “I’m Winnie. What’s your name?”

“I’m Timothy.”

“Pleased to meetcha, Timothy,” Winnie said, holding out her hand. She guessed Timothy was seven or eight years old.

“My pleasure, miss,” he said, shaking her hand firmly. Then he looked her up and down. “Why are you wearing boy’s clothes?”

Boy’s clothes? She was only wearing overalls. Sure, they weren’t really trendy, but she knew more girls that wore them than boys. Winnie was about to ask what he meant when the rest of the Club gathered around the kid.

“That’s a horned toed?” Brewer asked.

“Cool lizard,” Eric said.

Timothy looked at the lizard in his hands, then held it up to his cheek. “No, Spikey’s warm right now,” he said. “He’s been in my hands.”

Eric and Brewer exchanged confused glances.

“Do your parents work for the Historical Society?” Eric asked.

Timothy looked Eric over. “My parents are working in the orchard, filling the coal buckets.” He pointed to his flashlight. “Mister, what kind of lantern is that?” Not waiting for an answer, he switched to Kat. “You’re dressed like a boy, too.”

“You’re a trip, kid,” Kat said, laughing. “You’re parents really are into this historical stuff, aren’t they? Does your family live in the house?”

Brewer, who had been pacing for a bit, finally squatted next to Timothy and smiled. “Timothy, what do you call someone like me?”

“A colored person,” the boy said, without hesitation.

“And what—” Brewer began, but Kat interrupted him.
“Hey guys,” she said, fidgeting with her charm necklaces, “I don’t want to take away Brewer’s job of resident paranoid freak, but I really don’t want to be talking to any cops tonight. If this kid’s parents are here they might call somebody.”

“Agreed,” Eric said, though he was giving Brewer a strange look. “I’m guessing those Historical Society people are still here, and none of us want to be calling our parents from a police station. I say we get our equipment and take off.”

“Nice meeting you, Timothy,” Winnie said over her shoulder as she followed the others back to the house. The boy just watched them leave, frowning and scratching his head. The expression would have been cute if Winnie didn’t have a feeling in her gut that something wasn’t right.

Ahead of her, Eric was taking the stairs two at a time. “Don’t worry about what equipment goes where,” he was saying. “Just shove everything in the backpacks and we’ll sort it out later.” But it turned out there was nothing to put away, and no backpacks to put it in. When they got back to the ghost room they found that all the equipment they’d set up had vanished.

“Not good, man,” Brewer said. “That was my brother’s digital recorder. He’s going to kill me.”

“No! My Sniffers,” Eric said. “They were prototypes. I don’t have any others.”

Though it was a selfish thought, Winnie was glad she had the Nikkon 520 around her neck. She couldn’t imagine explaining the loss of that particular item to their art teacher, Mr. Nagita.

“I say we talk to these Historical Society people,” Eric said, his face turning slightly red. “I don’t care if they find out we were trespassing. They shouldn’t have taken our stuff.”

He left the room and jogged downstairs. Kat called after him, saying she’d build him new Sniffers herself if he wanted. Getting caught wasn’t worth it. Winnie, too, was surprised by how angry Eric was. Only Brewer seemed calm.

“He’ll get answers all right,” Brewer said softly as they followed after Eric, “But not the ones he wants.”

“You think you know what’s going on?” Winnie asked.

“I have a theory.”
They passed the painting of cows halfway down the stairs. “Does your theory explain why this used to be a photograph of Daniel Carver?” Winnie asked.

Brewer laughed. “You’ve got a good eye. I’m glad you’re in the Club.”

“Thanks,” Winnie said. Was that why Eric asked her to join S.P.E.C.T.E.R.? Because she noticed things? Moving back through the hall and past the sitting room, Winnie tried to live up to Brewer’s praise. She began to spot other changes that she’d missed before: All of the old oil lamps were now filled with oil. A clock on the wall now told the correct time, and its pendulum swung back and forth. The wallpaper in the hallway had a different pattern—green flower shapes on a gold backing. Before it had simply been white and gold striped.

When they stepped out onto the front porch (which didn’t creak at all) there was no sign of Timothy. Smoke, thick as ever, reached out from the trees.

Eric stood on the porch steps. “Come on, guys. The property is only four acres. If we split up, we can find these Historical Society people even with all the smoke.”

Just then a bright light appeared from behind Winnie, making her shadow stretch across the lawn. Turning, she saw Timothy step through the front door, holding a boxy-looking oil lantern on a hook. Winnie thought those were called hurricane lanterns because glass protected the flame from wind on all sides.

“Timothy,” Eric began. “Do you know what happened to our—?”

“Hold on a second,” Brewer said to Eric. “If you don’t mind.” Brewer knelt again next to the boy, whose face was lit from below, making his cheeks glow and hiding his eyes in shadows. “Timothy, I know this must be confusing and scary, having a bunch of strangers show up, but could you answer just one more question?”

“Sure,” Timothy said, not looking confused or scared at all, as far as Winnie could tell.

“What year is it?”

Timothy laughed. “Why it’s 1891, of course.”
17. Travelers

Winnie gasped.

“You mean, ‘1891’ is what your parents tell you to say,” Eric suggested. “When you’re helping them at the museum.” Timothy just frowned. “You know that’s really not what year it is,” Eric said.

“But it makes sense,” Brewer said, standing up. “No radio, no plastic runners. A room that was walled off and then wasn’t…I think the switch happened when we entered the ghost room.”

“Are you talking about time travel?” Winnie asked. Brewer had his strange theories, but this one was way out there.

“That’s impossible,” Eric said. “Look, I can show you we’re still in the same year.” He slipped his laptop case off his shoulder and sat down on the porch with his computer. “I’ve got a wireless modem. My computer’s clock automatically updates itself every minute according to the atomic clock in Denver, Colorado, and that’s the most accurate clock in the country. It will just take a second to connect.”

Timothy had been watching Eric with curiosity, but when the computer monitor came on blasting Star Wars theme music he uttered a short yelp.

“What kind of lantern is that?” he asked.

Brewer nodded at Eric and gave him an “I told you so” look.

“That’s a computer,” Winnie said to Timothy, who had quickly recovered from his initial scare, and was now looking over Eric’s shoulder. “Have you seen a computer before?” she asked. Timothy shook his head.

“The modem’s dialing,” Eric said. “That’s weird…no connection. Maybe there’s some interference.”

“Or maybe there’s no satellite for your computer to connect to,” Brewer said,
looking up at the night sky.

“Well, it’s easy enough to find out when we are,” Kat said. “If we walk to our left, we should find a wall and the little gate we came through, and the street outside.”

“Oh!” Timothy exclaimed suddenly, making them all jump. “I got to get Pa this lantern or he’s gonna tan my hide!” He ran down the porch steps.

“Wait!” Winnie called, but the boy had already disappeared into the smoke.

Eric closed his computer. “No luck,” he said. “But that doesn’t prove your theory, Brewer. Let’s go find the gate and try to get out of here. Everybody ready?”

“I don’t think any of us is prepared for this adventure,” Brewer said cryptically.

Kat poked him in the ribs. “Stop trying to freak us out,” she said with a laugh, though to Winnie she looked unsure of herself. Kat never looked like that. Now only Brewer looked calm.

The boys and girls of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. walked across the lawn, retracing their steps. “Just before we came out of the lemon trees, “Brewer said. “I hit my shin against one of those stupid coal pots. Maybe it will be in the same place in 1891.”

Sure enough, a few trees into the grove, they saw a coal bucket gushing smoke, just like a witch’s cauldron. Winnie coughed and held her sleeve over her nose. Past the bucket the smoke was so thick she could only see ten feet in front of her. Trees loomed in the haze like ghosts. She noticed that the branches didn’t hold as many lemons as they did when the group had first arrived at the Ranch.

After about twenty yards they encountered another smoke-factory, running at full blast. And twenty yards past that another one which looked like it needed more coal. Winnie didn’t remember seeing this many coal buckets when they came in.

“So, if we did travel back in time,” she asked, “You got any theories that would explain why?”

“Nope,” Brewer said. He was holding his vest over his nose, which muffled his voice. “Actually, right now I’m all out of ideas.”

“What if it was the ghost,” Kat said. Her voice was muffled too, but that was because she was still chewing on her hair. “Maybe the ghost was in the room when we were setting up our equipment, and it sent us back in time to solve the mystery of its murder.”
Eric gave Kat a look of disbelief that almost made Winnie laugh. Kat had given that same look to Brewer hundreds of times.

“Okay,” Eric said. “I’ll play along. Let’s pretend that we traveled back in time. The first thing we should do is find out if that Ben guy who sent us the letter is around. Maybe he wanted us to go to the ranch to investigate the ghost because he knew we would get sent back in time. He would have some answers.”

Winnie had to sidestep quickly to avoid a lemon tree. The smoke was so thick that you couldn’t see them until the very last second. Her flashlight didn’t help much because the beam just reflected off the smoke. “And we should find out how the ghost died,” she said. “Or maybe the ghost is still alive in 1891, and we were sent back so that this time he won’t die.”

“And while we’re doing our investigation,” Brewer said, we should make sure we —” Crunch! Before he could finish his sentence he ran right into a lemon tree, and they all stopped while he untangled himself. “Like I was saying,” Brewer continued, when they got moving again, “if we want to solve the mystery, we’ll have to blend in. No one will tell us anything if we say we’re from the future. They’ll probably lock us up in the…well, in wherever they keep crazy people in 1891.”

Winnie didn’t quite believe they’d time-traveled, but talking about it made her feel better. It was like a game. She was almost disappointed that it would all be over when they reached the gate, and Brewer’s mom was waiting for them.

“What did they have in 1891? Winnie wondered. Electricity? Telephones? They certainly didn’t have Nikkon 520’s. As she zipped her camera back into its carrying case she caught Brewer watching her.

“Winnie’s got a good idea,” he said. “Why don’t we all hide as much modern stuff as we can. Put away any watches. Kat, hide any jewelry that has a lot of plastic in it.” He paused when he caught Eric staring at him. “Oh come on, play along for now. Zip up your laptop case. If I’m wrong I’ll buy you lunch at school tomorrow.” When Eric still looked unsure Brewer added, “Tomorrow’s Friday, pizza and fries.”

The group kept walking while they tried to look more nineteenth-century. Winnie
was so busy checking herself for anything new-looking (she decided that, with the overalls, she looked most historical out of the group), and she was so occupied thinking about time travel, and ghosts, and keeping the smoke out of her nose with her sleeve that she didn’t see the man standing in front of them until they almost collided.

“Whoa there, strangers,” he said. “Ain’t a good night to be walking about without a light.”

He held a lantern and, by it, Winnie could see high boots, a shirt with suspenders, a round, bowler hat, and deep, dark eyes above a great, big walrus mustache.
Winnie recognized him right away from the photo that she’d seen hanging in the stairway. It had to be the same man.

“Timothy told me we had visitors,” he said, “though I tell you frankly, I didn’t expect children. What brings you to Carver Ranch?”

“Oh, uh, we’re…” Eric began.

Don’t stand out, Brewer had told her. Winnie tried to think of something that would explain their strange clothes, but it was hard to concentrate. Her mind just couldn’t get around the fact that they had traveled in time. It was like taking a huge bite of a sandwich, and realizing you were never going to be able to swallow all that bread and bologna.

Mr. Daniel Carver frowned as Eric fumbled for words.

“We’re from France!” Winnie said, and instantly regretted her choice. She didn’t know anything about France. And the only French words she knew were Merci beaucoup and fromage.

The rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. turned to stare at her. Eric mouthed France? like a question. Kat mouthed something that might have been Idiot! But Winnie was too frightened to care what the group thought. Anyway, there was no taking it back now. “We came to Sunnygrove to visit friends,” she continued, “And…uh...we got lost.”

“France, eh?” Carver lifted his lantern and peered at her. Winnie could see tiny wrinkles around his eyes, what her mom called crow’s feet. He had deeply tanned skin like he spent a lot of time outdoors. “And who might these friends be,” he asked, “that you were trying to find?”

“The Smiths,” Brewer said. He kept looking at the smoke-shrouded trees around him, as if he might make a run for it.
“Smiths…” Carver said, and then paused. Winnie felt like hours were passing as the tall man stared at them, as the black smoke around them muted all sound. She couldn’t hear anything but her own heartbeat, very loud, in her ears. Certainly her heart would explode while she waited—death by terror. Either that or she’d wake up in her bed and have a very scary dream to tell her sister about.

Finally Carver lowered the lantern. “You must mean old Willard and Beatrice Smith, up near Richland Dam. They’re about thirty miles out, give or take.” He tilted back his hat back and scratched his forehead. “And to save me, I can’t remember if the stagecoach even stops out there.”

“Well, then, we better get going,” Eric said, taking slow steps backwards. “I’m sure Willard and…uh…Beatrice are worried about us. Sorry to bother you.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Carver said, his voice a deep rumble. Eric froze in his tracks. “No moon out tonight,” he continued, in a lighter tone. “You’ll get lost again or, worse, wander yourselves right off the road right into Sunnygrove Creek. And that just wouldn’t sit right with my conscience.” He pushed his hat back into place and nodded at them. “I insist you enjoy our hospitality for now. I’m heading up north day after tomorrow. I’ll hitch up a team first thing Saturday mornin’ and drive you out myself.”

Winnie opened her mouth to refuse, to offer some excuse, but he didn’t give her a chance. “Where are my manners,” he said, smiling and holding out his hand. “Name’s Daniel Carver.”

Winnie didn’t know if she should shake or curtsey or do something else. How did girls introduce themselves in the 1890’s? She decided to try the handshake. “Winnie Ferris,” she said. Carver’s hand was dry and rough, like warm sandpaper against her fingers.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said.

Winnie then introduced Kat and Eric. “And this is…” She stopped when she got to Brewer. How should she introduce him? Would Mr. Carver think that three white kids and a black boy traveling together was strange? Could they be friends? Or had Carver already decided Brewer was their servant or carriage driver?

Winnie thought about her history class, and wished she’d studied harder on the
California unit. On Monday her teacher had talked about the Chinese and Japanese immigrants who worked on the citrus farms. Mr. Long actually spent a long time on race and discrimination. During some classes it made Winnie feel uncomfortable, but now she was glad he did. She remembered that, in Southern California, Asians were discriminated against during the late 1800’s. African-Americans were treated kinda okay. She made her decision:

“And this is my friend, Brewer Lyndon,” she said.

Winnie held her breath as Mr. Carver looked Brewer over. Finally Carver reached out his hand pumped Brewer’s arm up and down energetically. “Let’s get you kids inside where it’s warm,” he said. “Doesn’t that sound like a dandy of a plan?” The group nodded yes at the same time, and Carver began leading them back towards the house.

He seemed to know exactly where he was going, because every so often he would make a right or a left turn, even though Winnie couldn’t see any landmarks because of the smoke.

“Could be an actor.” Eric whispered, when Mr. Carver was a few paces ahead of them. “Maybe it’s one of those Historical Society people.”

“And I thought I was stubborn,” Kat mumbled. She didn’t jangle as much when she walked now because she had tucked away most of her charm necklaces. “Brewer,” she whispered, “man, you’re lucky there really is a Smith family around here.”

“Not really,” Brewer said, keeping his eye on Mr. Carver’s back as they walked. “Smith is a common name. I just went with the odds.”

Mr. Carver glanced back at them, once, and Eric said it was too risky to talk about time travel with him around. They’d try to figure out everything as soon as they got some time alone.

Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. walked the rest of the way through the sooty clouds in silence. Finally, they reached the house lawn. On the porch, waiting for them, stood a plump young woman in her twenties, whose clean white dress made her seem to glow in the darkness, like one of those ghosts from the haunted house ride at Disneyland.

Next to her stood an Asian man of about the same age. He wore a black head wrap and had his hair in a long pony tail. His clothes looked like black pajamas. Winnie recognized the outfit from historical-type movies—the man was probably Chinese.
“This is my eldest, Linda,” Mr. Carver said, introducing the girl as they stepped onto the porch. “Linda, these unfortunate youngsters are quite lost. I’d like to put them up for a couple nights.” He paused and scratched his forehead. “Why don’t you set the boys up in the guest bedroom, and the girls in Mary-Ellis’ room. Mary-Ellis can bunk with you.”

“Yes, father,” Linda said, giving him a small curtsey. Then she spotted Eric’s laptop carrying case. “Have they any other luggage?”

“It’s been sent ahead,” Brewer said, “to the Smiths.”

Good excuse, Winnie thought. It looked like Brewer’s fascination with conspiracies was going to help them out in 1891. Winnie didn’t know how much help she’d be. If they really went back in time…well, her hands got all sweaty just thinking about it.

“Linda will show you to your rooms,” Carver said, heading back out into the grove. “Sleep well. I reckon I’ll see you folks in the morning.”

If that man is an actor, Winnie thought, watching Carver disappear back into the smoke, then he should win an Oscar. But before she could say anything to Eric, Linda was leading the group inside. The Chinese man followed behind. Winnie kept waiting to be introduced to him, but Linda didn’t even look at the man. He was probably a servant.

“We’re from France,” Winnie said as they crossed the entrance hall. She wanted to give an excuse for what they were wearing.

“Oh, really?” Linda asked, putting on a friendly smile. “How exciting. I hope to hear all about it.” She crossed to the stairs. “Follow me please.”

Linda, however, seemed to be the type of person more interested in talking than in really listening, or really seeing. She probably didn’t even notice their strange clothes. As she led them upstairs, she went on about the dangers of traveling at night, and of mountain lions and bears. She told them how she once saw a bobcat sitting right in their garden, “As plain as the nose on my face!”

Even though Winnie couldn’t get her head around the whole time travel idea, she had to believe her eyes. And her nose—once they were inside and away from the smoke, there was no sign of the cold, dusty smell she remembered from her first trip through the house.
“Just about the whole family’s out working the coal buckets,” Linda said.

Inside the house the oil lamps had been lit, giving off a warm, yellow light. Now that she had a better look, Winnie realized Linda wasn’t as old as she first thought—probably not more than eighteen or nineteen. Behind Winnie, Brewer and Eric were studying the house, as if memorizing every detail. Every once in a while they’d whisper to each other in a tone too low for her to hear. She hoped they were making a plan to get home.

Kat walked ahead of her silently, staring at the ground and chewing her hair.

“And poor Raymond, God bless ‘im,” Linda continued, “just got back from school in Massachusetts, but he hardly had a chance to put his feet up before the weather turned. Father has him out in the orchards most of the time.”

At the top of the stairs Linda turned left, walking along the second story balcony past the “ghost room” and the other rooms that Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. had searched. At least, they’d searched them in their own time.

“Of course, with more of the family back under one roof,” Linda was saying, “the laundry piles up quicker than peanut shells on the floor of Forrester’s Tavern. Not that I’ve ever set foot in such a place, mind you. Though you can’t help but hear stories.”

Linda stopped in front of a small door and turned to face them. “The only thing worse than the laundry is the dishes. I swear, if the men in this family don’t eat enough to gag a buffalo. And, of course, with such meals comes the dirtied dishes. I spend hours with my hands in soapy water. Just look how red and raw they are.”

Linda held out her hands and Winnie had to admit that they looked pretty chapped. Winnie also noticed an old, tarnished silver ring with a cloverleaf design on Linda’s right ring finger.

“Dawn cuts grease fast,” Kat said, under her breath. “And is softer on hands.”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind her,” Brewer said quickly.

“If you say so,” Linda said, already forgetting Kat’s weird comment. “You ladies will bunk here.” She opened the door and revealed a small space with two beds—one of which looked rumpled and recently slept in. Dressers and wardrobes covered every inch of the wall and even partly blocked the window. Crochet doilies lay atop most of the
furniture, and a big, folded, sky blue quilt balanced precariously on the nearest dresser.

“There’s fresh water, if you’d care to wash up,” Linda said, pointing to a little table where a bowl and a clay jug sat. “Ping will bring in clean linens. Make yourselves at home. I’ll send someone up in the morning just as soon as breakfast is ready.” She gave the girls a motherly smile and then left with Brewer, Eric, and the servant Ping, shutting the door behind her.

“You know, this is kinda cool,” Kat said, as she sat down on the bed nearest the window and gave it an experimental bounce. A couple of white feathers drifted up. “I’m going to totally ace my next history paper.”

“We could be dreaming,” Winnie said, though it didn’t feel like a dream. Not even one of her weird, future-predicting ones.

“I don’t think so,” Kat said. She’d stopped chewing her hair and now combed her fingers through it. “When I have to pee this bad in a dream, I usually wake up. I should’ve asked where the bathroom was.”

Winnie looked into the corners of the room by the window until she found it. Luckily, it was empty.

“Bathroom,” Winnie said, pointing to a wooden bucket. “They used chamber pots in the 1890’s if they didn’t have plumbing. They’d also have an outhouse.”

“No way,” Kat said, “I’m not going in—”

There was a knock at the door.

“Room service?” Kat asked, getting up off the bed.

“Wait,” Winnie said. She didn’t want Kat to open the door. If time travel was possible, so were ghosts…and things that were even worse. All she wanted to do was curl up in one of the beds and go to sleep and wake up back at home. If I could just do that, she thought, I promise to always do my chores, and to never ever tease my little sister again.

But it was too late. Kat opened the door, revealing a figure dressed in black.
19. The Plan

It was the servant, Ping. Without saying a word, he entered and changed the sheets on the bed. He worked quickly, but Winnie felt a bit awkward in the silence.

“I like your hair,” Kat finally said, gesturing to his ponytail.

Ping’s eyes went wide with surprise. Winnie guessed that most visitors didn’t talk to him. “Thank you, miss,” he said, bowing to Kat. He had a little bit of an accent, just enough for Winnie to tell that English wasn’t his first language.

He began hanging fresh towels from a hook inside the door of the closet. Winnie could see that there weren’t any rods and hangers inside, like in her closet at home. There were only a few hooks. She remembered that most people didn’t own a lot of clothes a hundred years ago. Clothes were expensive and hard to wash. People just kept wearing the same outfit over and over, fixing it when it started to unravel. She wondered what clothes would smell like after all that time.

Kat sat back down on the newly made bed and watched Ping. “Pretty damn cold out there, huh? Bet you’re happy to be working in the house tonight.”

Ping looked surprised again, this time probably by Kat’s language. “Yes, very cold,” he said. “Unusually cold. If I were a superstitious man, I’d be worrying much about bad omens…” Then he gave them a wide, friendly smile. “But I am not superstitious, and I am glad to be inside. Please let me know if you desire anything else. There is a bell on the nightstand.” He bowed deeply to both of them and left the room.

Omens? More bad news? Winnie was about to ask Kat what Ping had been talking about when there came another knock on the door. The boys barged in; they smelled like smoke.

“We’re in a room down the hall,” Brewer said, as he quickly shut the door behind them.
Winnie searched their faces to see if anyone looked as worried as she felt. Brewer paced the floor, frowning. Eric pulled his baseball out of his laptop case and began playing one-handed catch with it. Again, it was Kat who broke the silence: “What’s happening?” she asked.

Everyone looked towards the group leader. Eric rolled his baseball between his hands and didn’t speak for a few moments. Finally, he said, “The best explanation right now, as hard as it is to believe, is that we have actually traveled back in time. And I think Kat’s idea is the best so far—it was the ghost, or something about that secret room, that sent us here.”

“So, all we do is go back through the door?” Kat asked. She was laying her tarot cards out on the bed next to her; she must have had them tucked in her pocket. “Climb through the window and we’re home, right?”

“We already tried that,” Brewer said, still pacing. “Eric and I checked out the ghost room. Outside the window there’s just smoke and lemon trees for as far as you can see. There aren’t city lights in the distance or nothing.”

“So, we’ll finish what we came here to do,” Eric said. He unzipped his carrying case, took out the laptop computer, and sat down on the floor with it. “Brewer has a theory.”

Brewer stopped pacing and leaned against a dresser. While he talked he picked more lemon tree leaves out of his hair and vest. “Well, it’s really Winnie’s theory. I think there’s a reason we got sent back to this time and this place. According to what I’ve read about haunted houses and ghosts, something really bad needs to happen to leave enough...’energy’ to create a ghost. So I think that whoever becomes the ghost of Carver Ranch dies tragically around this time. If we can figure out what happened, and maybe even stop it, then the ghost will be at peace and will let us go back home.”

Kat caught Winnie staring at her. “No, I don’t know any time travel spells,” Kat said. So right now Brewer’s plan is the best we got.” She got up off the bed, leaving the tarot cards face up in a cross pattern. “You guys keep talking, I’m gonna go find the outhouse.” She opened the door quietly and left the room.

“I asked Linda about her brothers and sisters,” Eric said, as his computer started up with loud, Star Wars sound effects. Everyone jumped at the noise and Eric quickly
lowered the volume with his keyboard. Winnie looked towards the door and wondered what one of the Carver kids would think if they happened to be walking by at that moment.

“Linda said there are five children all together,” Eric continued. “But, remember, the records for the Carver family only show four. And the Brittany girl Winnie and Brewer interviewed at school said something bad happened to one of the Carver kids.”

“So…one of the kids becomes the ghost?” Winnie asked. “And the family is so upset that they pretend the kid was never born. They even get rid of his birth certificate?”

“Exactly!” Eric said, studying his computer. Winnie guessed that the mystery was helping keep Eric’s mind off the what if question—what if they weren’t able to get home. And Brewer had his theories to keep him busy, and Kat had her tarot cards and her hair to chew. What could Winnie do to keep from totally freaking out? She pinched herself again, just in case she was dreaming.

Meanwhile, Eric had been typing up a list on his computer. “Here’s what we know so far.” He turned the laptop around so the rest of the group could see:

- Someone named Ben sent us a letter a long time ago. Maybe it was sent from 1891? Ben knew about our Club even though it didn’t exist in his time. How? We should try to find Ben.
- The letter he sent has raised “r”s. That will help us find the typewriter it was written on. It’s because of the letter that we even traveled to Carver Ranch in the first place. Did Ben send us back in time on purpose?
- We have a picture of a ghost. It was taken by a camera with a cracked lens. Maybe we can find the camera. (PS Some of us think the ghost looks familiar)
- According to Brittany carver, something very bad happened to one of Mr. Carver’s kids. Records showed that the family only had four kids, but we have proof that the Carvers started with five. Maybe one of the kids dies and becomes a ghost. We should talk to the kids and see if any of them are in danger.
Winnie asked Eric if she could add a couple of her own notes:

- Someone hung a lizard by its neck from a tree. That’s bizar.
- Ping, the servant, said something about the cold weather being a bad omen.

Eric looked at the list again and nodded. “Good work.” He yawned, and Winnie found herself suddenly tired. “It’s getting late,” Eric said. “I think we should start looking for clues and talking to people tomorrow. I don’t want to snoop around in the dark and make the family suspicious.” He began shutting down his computer. “I’ll leave my laptop in this room…” he glanced around, “on the dresser under that big, blue quilt. If anyone finds out something interesting they can come up here and type it into the database.”

“And remember,” Brewer said, pacing again, “we need to blend in. If the family starts wondering about us, it’ll be harder to get the answers we need.”

Winnie stared at Brewer’s Mission Impossible black-suit and wondered how he could ever blend in. “You know-oh,” she said, realizing her Dakota accent was coming back and not caring, “Mr. Carver didn’t ask us many questions about our clothes and stuff, or about what we were doing out at night. Isn’t that kinda weird?”

“Yeah,” Brewer said. “I was thinking about that too….”

As if on cue, the door opened and Kat came back in. “Man that outhouse stunk,” she said, rubbing her nose. “I’m never complaining about the school bathrooms again.”

Eric told her about the list they’d made, and what they had talked about.

“Actually, that Mr. Carver dude is wondering about us,” Kat said. She gathered up her tarot cards. “When I walked in through the kitchen, I heard him and another woman talking about us in the next room—‘They’ll tell their story when they’re good and ready,’” Kat said, standing up straight and trying to talk in a man’s voice. “‘Meanwhile I’ll ask around and see if I can dig up anything on missing children or runaways.’” Kat sat down on her bed. “I would’ve kept listening, except I heard the kitchen door open and the woman say, ‘Raymond, fetch us some tea while you’re in there.’” So I headed up
“Okay then, it’s decided,” Eric said. “We’ll pretend we’re kids from France, and we’ll look for clues. We want to work fast, though, because we don’t know when the Carver kid dies and—” Eric stopped.

The doorknob was turning.
20. Sleepwalker

In the suddenly quiet room, the doorknob turning was the only sound; that and the whir of the fan in Eric’s computer.

The doorknob returned to its original position and they could hear footsteps moving away. Winnie released the breath that she didn’t realize she was holding.

“We have to know who that was,” Brewer said, moving towards the door. “They might have overheard our conversation.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea…” Eric said.

“Don’t worry, I got it,” Brewer said. He turned the knob, pushed the door open, and then flattened himself against the wall next to the door, just like Winnie had seen cops do on TV. Brewer even held his hands together, index fingers pointed out, like he was carrying a gun.

He quickly leaned out the door, looked both ways, and then flattened himself against the wall again, “gun” still in his hands. “It’s a girl,” he said, “wearing a nightgown. She’s moving down the hall to the left.” Brewer then took a deep breath.

“Okay, gang, back me up, I’m going in.” He disappeared out the door.

“Awe, heck,” Eric said, and followed after him.

Kat stood up. “Back him up with what?” she asked, but she went through the door anyway.

Winnie hurried after them. The hall outside their room was dark now. Someone had put out the oil lamps. The rest of the group, just shapes in the darkness, crept ahead of her. And past them was another figure. Winnie could only tell it was a girl because of the white nightgown that she wore, which seemed to glow in the darkness.

As Winnie watched, the girl walked to the next room, turned the doorknob, let go, and then continued down the hall.
“She’s sleepwalking,” Brewer whispered. Winnie had to agree. There was something mechanical, almost zombie-like, in the way the girl went from door to door, repeating the same action.

Brewer snuck closer and the rest of the group followed. “Hey,” Kat hissed. “You’re not supposed to wake up a sleepwalker.”

Now that her eyes had had time to adjust, Winnie could see Brewer raising his hand—it looked like he was going to put it on the girl’s shoulder—but before he could do that she spun around. The girl was maybe ten or eleven. She had long black hair and pale skin that glowed in the dark hall like her gown. The girl stared at the group, but she didn’t seem to see them. Her face didn’t have any expression at all.

“Get out,” she said.

Everyone took a step back, even Brewer. A chill crept up Winnie’s spine.

“Get out, or you will pay…with your lives.”

Then the girl turned around, opened a door, disappeared into an unfamiliar room, then closed the door behind her.

“Dork,” Kat whispered, poking Brewer in the ribs. “Told you not to mess with a sleepwalker.”

“But, I never touched her.” Brewer said, staring at the closed door.

“Doesn’t matter,” Eric said, tugging on Brewer’s vest. “We don’t want to be seen in the hall like this. It would look weird.”

Brewer looked at the closed door one last time, and then he and the group tiptoed back to Winnie and Kat’s room.

“That was total Exorcist,” Kat said, jumping back onto the bed.

“Another strange coincidence,” Brewer said, pacing. “If she was sleepwalking, why would she say that?”

“It’s a clue to add to our notes,” Eric said, restarting his computer. “We might not have a lot of time left, but even with the weird sleepwalker and what she said I don’t think we should go exploring tonight: Mr. Carver would ask questions about our flashlights. We should try to get some sleep and get an early start tomorrow. It’s already…well, I don’t know what time it is. Computer’s clock is still thinks it’s the twenty-first century.”
Winnie tried to shake off the chill the girl had given her. It wasn’t so much what the girl had said…though that was bad. It was her voice, and the way her eyes stared off into nothing.

Eric finished typing, shut down his computer, and hid it in a fold of the blue quilt. “We should go over our cover stories for tomorrow,” he said.

The group agreed to tell the Carvers they were from France, since that’s what Winnie had already said. They’d say their parents were still in San Diego and would be joining them at the Smiths in a couple days.

They decided that blending in was important, so they took their flashlights, Winnie’s camera, watches, Kat’s jewelry, and anything else that looked modern, and tucked the stuff under the mattresses of Kat’s bed. Finally, Eric and Brewer said goodnight and left for their own room.

Kat blew out the oil lamp. Winnie dropped her smoky-smelling clothes on the floor and climbed into bed, surprised by how soft the mattress was. She could hear Kat in the other bed, making a little whistling noise through her nose that was not quite a snore. Kat was one of those girls who could sleep anywhere—car rides, math classes, different centuries.

Winnie lay awake and thought about Eric’s computer, hidden on the dresser under several layers of knitted owls and dogs and cats. Did he shut it off? Or just put it on sleep mode? She found the computer comforting—a little piece of home in a strange place. But, she wondered, how long did batteries last for a laptop? And how many years would they have to wait before computer batteries were invented again?
Interlude

21. The Dream

Smoke burnt her nose and tongue, and felt like dry cat’s claws scratching the back of her throat. The darkness of a moonless sky pressed down on her. She was crouched under a tree—she could feel it at her back, even though she couldn’t see it. Cold, rough bark pressed through her shirt.

To her right shone a single light that looked red and fuzzy through the smoke. She thought it came from a barn or stable. She could hear horses in that direction, snorting nervously. She felt nervous too.

Something was coming.

She wanted to run, to leave the smoke and the dark and the silent, reaching trees. But she couldn’t move. Whatever was coming—and it would be there soon, she could hear slow, dragging footsteps—was the reason she was hiding beneath the tree. And if it found her...

Thick black smoke swirled, as if stirred by the wind, and then parted. Three figures appeared. They wore heavy wool robes, grey as bone dust. Cowls were pulled forward, hiding faces. The figure on the right wore a silver ring on its hand. The one in the middle carried a bundle wrapped in horse blankets. The bundle moved, whimpered. It was a child!

She heard low chanting as the three approached, but the words she caught were in a language she didn’t know. Soon they would reach her tree, and she thought they’d see her, even in the dark and smoke. Surely they must hear her heart, which pounded in her ears like a drum.

A small noise, perhaps the breaking of a branch, sounded to her right. The
figures stopped. The one in the middle swung its hooded head in her direction. They’d found her! She wanted to run, but knew that her legs were asleep. She’d been crouched under the tree for a long time.

All three turned towards her. She would have screamed, if she had any breath.

Then a voice whispered inches away from her ear:

“Now!”
It was early, before sunrise. Winnie could tell without even opening her eyes. She loved the feeling of waking up before the alarm clock, knowing she had another half hour to sleep before getting ready for school.

She rolled over and put her head under the pillow. This morning she’d get to the bathroom first, and not worry about her little sister using up all the hot water. And she would make a big breakfast for Sam and her mom. That’d cheer them up. It might even help her mom forget about Dad for a little while.

She began to drift back to sleep when she heard a rooster crow. That’s funny, there weren’t any roosters in Sunnygrove. Suddenly Winnie sat bolt upright. She wasn’t in Sunnygrove. She wasn’t even in her own century!

Early, rose colored sunlight turned the room a soft, glowing pink. In the other bed Kat had buried herself in blankets, and apparently turned herself around. A bare foot resting on the pillow was all Winnie could see of her friend.

Now Winnie remembered the trip to the ranch and the search of the house. She remembered the secret room and the climb to the balcony. And, at the end, there was Mr. Daniel Carver, looking like he had walked right out of an old picture. It all felt like some strange dream. But it couldn’t be, because here she was, sitting on a feather bed in a house that would be a hundred years old by the time she was born. Her eyes burned, and she tried not to cry. Part of her had believed that when she woke up everything would be back to normal.

Bits of her real dream came back to her: smoke, figures in robes and…and she tried to hold on to it, but the dream drifted away from her like beach sand drifting through
her fingers. She did remember enough to know that it wasn’t an ordinary dream. For the second day in a row, what she’d seen while she slept would come true. Her future-predicting dreams never happened two nights in a row. Last night’s vision must be important.

But even if she could remember all of it, she wouldn’t tell her friends. What was the point of warning people about a future they couldn’t change? She hadn’t helped anything when she warned her friends about the principal’s visit yesterday. For the millionth time Winnie wished she was just a normal girl.

Her good morning mood gone, Winnie looked on the floor for her clothes. They weren’t where she’d left them. In fact, they weren’t in the room at all! Neither were Kat’s. Then Winnie noticed the two dresses that hung from a hook on the closet door.

She swung her legs off the bed. The wood beneath her feet was cool, but not nearly as cold as linoleum or tile after a chilly night. She crossed to the closet and examined the dresses. They were made of white wool, and looked clean. She held one of the sleeves up to her nose and inhaled deeply. She could smell a type of bitter soap that wasn’t like anything her mom used for laundry back home. Well, she had to wear something until she could ask about her own clothes.

Hung behind the dresses were starched, white apron-covers—pinafores. They had circle and flower designs that reminded Winnie of a whole bunch of her grandmother’s doilies sewn together. Behind the pinafores were undershirts, and what looked like puffy shorts, like something a horse jockey would wear. “1890’s underwear,” Winnie whispered to herself. Kat was going to hate this.

Winnie tried on both dresses and found that the larger one fit okay. It looked like something she’d wear to church, with tight cuffs and puffy shoulders. Actually, she kind of liked it. But the pinafore covered the entire dress except for the sleeves. What’s the point of a dress, she thought, if you’re just going to hide it? She had a hard time with the pinafore because it fastened in the back. Even using the little mirror that hung on the closet, it took Winnie several tries to get the buttons to match up.

She spotted shoes and socks under one of the dressers. The black socks were thick, and went all the way up past her knees. The ugly black shoes came up above her ankles.
Finally finished, Winnie turned slowly before the little mirror. She looked just like a picture from her American History book. She wondered if the people who had posed for those pictures felt as itchy as she did.

Breakfast smells—bacon and eggs and fresh bread—caught her attention and for a moment Winnie forgot about the odd clothes. Her stomach gurgled noisily. She checked Kat—still asleep—so she moved to the window to wait for her friend to wake up.

Outside perfect rows of lemon trees marched away from the house. Past the trees the land sloped up and formed dull brown hills. On the hills the only green plants were low bushes that crouched here and there like sleeping herd animals. In the distance rose the bumpy backs of chocolate-brown mountains.

She could see only a few other ranches dotting the countryside. Each one was like an oasis of “there-ness” in dull, dry California landscape.

“Looks a lot different, doesn’t it?”

Winnie spun around, hand over her mouth. Brewer stood in the doorway. Someone had taken his clothes, too. Now he wore brown pants that were too small, a white shirt that didn’t quite reach his wrists, and a brown vest. Perched on his head was the round, bowler style hat that made Winnie think of gangsters in Bugs Bunny cartoons. Brewer was smiling.

“You scared me,” she said.

“You look like you belong here,” he said. Then his smile vanished quickly as if he realized how ominous his words sounded. “Eric’s getting dressed,” he said, “but I’m starved. You want to head downstairs and scope out the kitchen?”

She looked at the bed one last time. Might as well let Kat sleep. “Sure,” she said. “Maybe we can find out what happened to our stuff.”

Before heading out Brewer paused at the door and listened. From downstairs Winnie could hear the clatter of dishes, the splash of water, and laughter. Brewer nodded, then stepped out and crept along the hall. Winnie followed.

“You’re up,” a voice called from the stairs. Winnie tried not to look as startled as she felt, and leaned over the railing. Linda Carver stood halfway up the steps, wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Or exact copies. “Your traveling companions haven’t come down yet,” she said. “But you needn’t wait. Breakfast is on the stove.” She turned
and disappeared back down the stairs.

Winnie glanced at Brewer. “People sure were friendlier one hundred years ago,” she said.

“Or,” Brewer whispered, “they’re just _acting_ friendly so that we don’t suspect they’re really brain-eating aliens.”

Winnie caught herself smiling just a little. Even though everything around her had changed, her friends hadn’t. For a moment she didn’t feel quite as homesick.

She followed Brewer downstairs, stopping briefly at the painting of cows—the painting that used to be an old photograph of Daniel B. Carver. She should have figured something strange was going on as soon as she saw that photograph. Winnie promised herself that she wouldn’t let clues slip by next time.

A dining room opened off to the left at the bottom of the stairs, and through a door she could see the kitchen. Linda was scraping dishes into a bucket and a woman, as tall and thin as Linda was short and plump, stirred a pot on a large, iron stove. This woman spotted them first.

“Linda, please stir for a while,” she said. “I will fix a plate for our guests. Come sit down.” She motioned to two seats at a little wooden table in the kitchen.

“I’m Mrs. Carver,” she said as Winnie and Brewer sat down. She began spooning large helpings of eggs, bacon, biscuits, and gravy out of pots on the stove and onto a plate. Winnie had never seen so much food in one kitchen before. Some of it, like the biscuits, looked familiar. But the eggs were a different, darker yellow than what she was used to. And the bacon was completely black, even though it didn’t look burned.

“I’m Winifred,” she said. “And this is my friend, Brewer.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Mrs. Carver said. “Winifred is a lovely name.” She set a plate down in front of each of them. Another plate soon followed, this one piled with ham, apple pie, and some sort of mush. Then Mrs. Carver asked what they would like to drink.

“Orange juice, please,” Winnie said, and both ladies turned to look at her. Brewer hissed something under his breath.

“Well, you’re a wonder,” Linda said, smiling. “Out that door we haven’t but lemon trees and a few avocado. Would lemonade suit you? We have tea and coffee as
well.”

“Oh, lemonade, thanks.” Winnie said. She guessed that the only people who
drank orange juice were orange growers. Darn it. She hadn’t been downstairs five
minutes and she was already getting weird looks. Pretending she was just a regular
1890’s girl was going to be hard.

Winnie concentrated on her food, eating the ham even though it was too salty, and
eating the mush even though it tasted like…well…mush. Brewer smelled each piece of
food before he put in his mouth, and only ate tiny bites. He’s probably checking for
poison, Winnie thought.

Mrs. Carver brought glasses of lemonade for Winnie and Brewer, and another for
herself, and sat down at a third seat at the table. Winnie guessed she was around her
mother’s age, forty or forty five. She wore a simple black dress and a white pinafore.
Her hair was done up in braids so tight that they looked painful.

“You paint your face,” Mrs. Carver said, and Winnie almost swallowed food the
wrong way.

“Pardon?”

“You were wearing rouge, and eye makeup of some sort,” Mrs. Carver said. “Is
that what young women do in France now?” She took another sip of lemonade.

Winnie had been wearing some lip gloss and eyeliner yesterday, and a little bit of
concealer. But she assumed that most of it would’ve rubbed off when she was sleeping.
She had even splashed water on her face this morning.

“Well, ma’am, we were dressed up to see the…the Smiths,” Winnie said. “It was
a special occasion, like a reunion.”

“Yes indeed,” Brewer chimed in, using his horrible English accent again.

“Dressed to the nines and all that.”

“Hmmm” Mrs. Carver said. Winnie waited, but there wasn’t anything else. The
lady finished her lemonade, but continued to sit and watch them eat.

Winnie looked over at the boiling pot. Maybe Linda would be easier to talk to.
Was Linda their ghost? She guessed the ghost in the photograph was too small to be
Linda, but maybe people looked different after they died.

That thought made her shiver.
“I fervently hope that you didn’t catch cold,” Mrs. Carver said. “When I was told you and your friends were wandering through the countryside at night, without proper attire…well, what’s done is done. But I must say it’s highly irregular.”

Winnie didn’t know how to respond, so she just nodded and tried to swallow more salty ham. Brewer wasn’t helping out with the conversation. He kept looking around the kitchen like he was taking mental notes. Winnie looked too. Pots and pans hung everywhere. Dried vegetables hung on ropes, and preserved fruit sat in jars. Yellow chickens were painted along the top of the wall, near the ceiling. Then she realized, with a start, that the wildlife painting that hung above their table wasn’t a painting at all; it was a little museum in a glass bubble. Real, dried flowers and leaves were trapped in there, along with a small dead bird.

Mrs. Carver kept staring at them, and that made each bite of food even harder to swallow. In the watchful quiet the sounds of Winnie crunching on bacon or toast seemed too loud. She felt like she was being judged.

Finally Winnie drained the last of her warm lemonade. Brewer, who had already given up on his food, looked relieved. “Thank you so much for breakfast,” he said, standing, “and these clothes.”

That’s right, the clothes. She was about to ask what had happened to their things when the figure strolling into the kitchen stopped that question in its tracks. The boy was dressed in plaid, knee-length pants, a white shirt and brown suspenders. A bow tie and a hat like a smushed baseball cap completed the outfit. He looked just like a munchkin from the *Wizard of Oz*. All he was missing was his lollipop.

“Eric?” Winnie asked. He looked so different.

“I see Raymond’s old clothes do right by you,” Linda said, leaving the boiling pot and walking over to Eric. “I know they’re not as fashionable as what’s worn over in France, but at least the fit is good.” As Linda re-knotted his bow tie, Eric caught Winnie’s eye. His expression reminded her of the embarrassed look that she got from her dog, Muttons, every time they stuffed her into her Christmas sweater.

“Would you care for breakfast?” Linda asked after finishing the tie and patting him on the head. “We haven’t put anything away.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Eric said, “but I’m not hungry just yet. Actually, I’d like
to borrow my friends for a moment.”

“Of course you may,” Mrs. Carver said. She was clearing dishes from the breakfast table, and Winnie thought she should offer to help, but Eric took Winnie’s hand and dragged her towards the door. Brewer followed right after.

“Thanks again,” Winnie called over her shoulder, and then stepped out in the hall and followed the boys up the stairs. Eric and Brewer climbed quickly, and she had to hustle to keep up with them.

“What’s wrong?” Brewer asked. “Did you discover something?”

“The clothes really don’t look that bad,” Winnie added.

Eric didn’t answer until he reached the top of the stairs. He right hand kept clenching into a fist, and Winnie guessed he was having a hard time kicking the habit of playing catch with his baseball.

“It is easier if I just show you,” Eric said, and walked down the hall towards a room Winnie recognized from last night. It was the room that would be sealed up in her own time. It was the ghost room.

He turned to her before reaching the door. “And, yes, the clothes are that bad.”

Winnie worried about what Eric had to show her—he looked like he was thinking harder than ever. But whatever it was, at least she wouldn’t have to face it alone. Her breakfast with the Carvers made her realize how much she needed her friends right now. Winnie didn’t know what she’d do if she was trapped in the past all by herself.
Eric glanced around before opening the door, then he ushered them in quickly. Kat was already inside, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She wore a nightgown that made her look like Wendy from *Peter Pan*, and she knelt on the ground in front of the window, where the bed used to be.

“I just found this,” Eric said, leading them across the room. “I was testing the window again, to see if the gateway back to our own time had appeared.” He looked at Brewer. “No, it’s not there. But I did notice a red mark on the floor, so I moved the bed. That’s when I went to get Kat.”

Winnie gasped and stepped back. It looked like someone had been finger-painting with blood.

“Chill, it’s just regular paint,” Kat said, from her position on the floor. “I already tasted it.”

Winnie tried to imagine putting that red stuff in her mouth and felt the big breakfast rumble in her stomach. Leave it to Kat to gross them out in any century.

“It’s the design they made that bugs us,” Eric said.

Winnie studied the floor. A big circle surrounded five triangles and an evil-looking face. There were smaller figures drawn in chalk, which could have been letters, but they weren’t from any alphabet Winnie had seen.
“What’s it mean?” she asked.

“Can’t be sure without my books,” Kat said, “It might just read ‘Happy Birthday’. But if I had to guess I’d say this is some bad mojo. Black magic. I think this circle is part of a ritual to send someone away.” She pointed to the letters drawn on the floor. “This here’s Greek. But this other language is even older. Maybe Sumerian.”

Eric laughed. “You know Sumerian?”

“Not really. But I’ve seen that alphabet on some Internet sites about magic. “Níg-ge-na-da,” Kat chanted, “a-ba in-da-di nam-ti i-ù-tu.” Eric just blinked at her. “Anyway,” Kat said, standing up and dusting off her hands, “you can be sure that someone’s in trouble. When you start messin’ around with powerful black magic, people get hurt. And since these marks were hidden under the bed, I’m guessing that whoever sleeps here is the person the witch wants to get rid of.”

Kat began chewing on her hair. Brewer poked his head out the door to make sure the coast was clear, and then shut it again and paced the room. Winnie tried to figure out how this new twist fit into the mystery.

“What?” Eric said, looking around at the group. “Are you telling me that you all believe in magic now? There has to be a rational explanation…”

“Yeah, magic is so much more unbelievable than time travel,” Kat said. Then she spit out her hair. “Anyways, it doesn’t matter if we believe it or not, ‘cause someone here
The paint’s fresh. I bet a person in the house drew this, and that’s bad ‘cause I don’t know what happens when you use “send away” magic. Does the victim just go away? Does he die?”

“So someone in this house is a witch,” Brewer said, “and maybe even a murderer.” He stopped pacing and touched the wall next to the bed. “At least we finally know who the ghost is.”

Winnie looked at the painted wall. She’d only seen a couple faded animals when she first visited this room, in her own time, but now the walls were green jungles filled with tigers and monkeys and elephants. There were other clues: A toy gun sat on top of the dresser, and the shelves were filled with wooden animals, model boats, and an Abraham Lincoln bank that looked just like the one Winnie had as a kid, though this bank wasn’t plastic. Yes, it was definitely a little boy’s room.

“You mean, Timothy?” Winnie asked. She thought of her dream again, and about the bundle that the robed figure carried. It was about the size of an eight-year-old child! Yet she still didn’t want to tell the group what she saw until she remembered more. At this point her dream wouldn’t help; it’d just freak everyone out. Or maybe they wouldn’t believe her and tell her she was crazy. Her mom was right—she should never mention those dreams again.

“I’m not sure,” Eric muttered in what was almost a whisper. He pulled the yellow envelope from Ben out of a pocket in his plaid pants. He’d probably slept with the letter under his pillow, Winnie thought. “I still think the ghost in the picture looked familiar,” Eric said. “And that was before I even met Timothy.”

“Tough break, kid,” Kat said, patting Timothy’s bed. “You woulda been a cute seventh-grader.”

“Maybe it’s not too late,” Brewer said. He began pacing again. “We’re thinking the ghost sent us back in time to solve the mystery of its death. But what if we’re meant to save him so he never becomes a ghost?”

The room was quiet as Eric stared at Ben’s letter, and the picture. Then, as if making a decision, he shoved the letter back in his pocket.

“Okay, let’s give it a try,” he said, and suddenly their smart, confident group leader was back. “Winnie, have you talked to any of the Carvers today?” She nodded.
“Good, go to your room and jot down your impressions on my computer. Use the workbook. I want to have a database with all of the Carver family in it. We’ll examine our suspects one by one.”

“After that,” Eric continued, “I want you to go back downstairs and talk to as many people as possible. Kat will stay up here and see if she can learn anything more about the magic symbols on the floor. Brewer and I will split up and search the ranch for clues.”

“Splitting up again?” Kat said. “Haven’t you ever seen *Friday the 13th*?”

Thank goodness, Winnie thought, that Kat brought it up. She’d been thinking the exact same thing. How could they split up now, when there was a witch/murderer on the loose? The group was her only tie to home. Without them, she felt like she’d just float away, lost in the 1890’s.

Eric put a hand on Kat’s shoulder but she shrugged it off. “The paint here is fresh,” he said, “which means that whatever is going to happen to Timothy will probably happen today or tonight. We have a lot of people to talk to before that. Splitting up is the only way.” Besides,” he added, “we’re not the ones in danger, Timothy is.” He smiled at them, but Winnie noticed the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

He gave Winnie a little push towards the door. “Time’s running out. If Brewer’s right, then we probably only have a day to solve the mystery. Past that I…I don’t know what will happen.”

“Okay, okay,” Winnie said as Eric scooted her outside. She didn’t trust herself to say more. She was afraid her voice would shake.

She walked back down the hall to her own room and shut the door hard behind her. Then she began searching through folds in the blue, handmade quilt, until Eric’s computer was revealed in its hiding place. She hit the power button, and as she waited for the computer to boot up, she thought about Eric saying that they weren’t in danger. Didn’t the girl last night say that they should all get out of the house, or they’d die? Brewer said the girl had been sleepwalking, but that warning was still a strange coincidence. What if the person who drew the magic circle already knew what Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. was up to? And what if this person was going to do everything he could to stop them?
24. Everyone’s a Suspect

After typing for a few minutes, Winnie re-read her notes:

Daniel B. Carver
- He looks like a scary movie villain.
- He did let us stay in his house. But maybe he’s being too nice. Why isn’t he asking us more questions?
- He bought our France story awfully quick.
- He’s probably the one that told Linda to set out clothes for us. So he wants us to feel comfortable and at home. Then again, maybe he wanted us to change clothes so he could have a chance to examine the clothes we arrived in?!?
- He’s tall, and looks strong.

Linda Carver
- Daughter of Daniel Carver. Probably 17 or 18 years old.
- She seems nice. She invited us to breakfast.
- She wears a clover ring on her finger. Is it a good luck charm? Would people with good luck charms believe in black magic?
- She didn’t even seem to notice our strange clothes.
Well, that was a big help. Winnie couldn’t say for sure if any of them were suspects or if all of them were. At least she used the database format like Eric wanted. Maybe the other S.P.E.C.T.E.R. members would be able to put their notes together with hers and decide which people looked most suspicious.

Winnie saved her information and checked the battery indicator at the bottom of the screen. Three bars showed out of four, and they’d hardly been using the laptop. How much time did they have left? She turned off the computer and carefully hid it under the blue quilt. Then she stepped outside.

The hallway was empty. The door to the ghost room stood open, but the bed was back in place and Kat had disappeared. Where did everyone go? Winnie headed downstairs into the kitchen, where Linda was still cooking. The air was hot, and smelled of onions and peppers.

“Oh, there you are,” Linda said. “Papa was looking for you.”

Looking for her? Why? She thought of a million reasons and all of them were

Mrs. Carver
• Mr. Carver’s wife.
• She asked some questions, but was more interested in thinking bad things about us.
• She stared at me and Brewer for a long time.
• She thinks girls shouldn’t wear makeup, but maybe that’s normal for the time.

Ping
• The family’s servant.
• He’s kinda quiet. Is that how servants are supposed to be?
• He doesn’t believe in omens, but he knows about them. Maybe he knows about magic too?
• Is he the one who took our clothes? Did he notice anything suspishous?
bad. Maybe he changed his mind and was going to take them to the Smiths today? Or maybe he found out who they really were? Or maybe he was the witch and was going to kill them one by—

“He’s going to the People’s Store,” Linda said, “and wanted to know if he could get you kids anything…” She stopped cutting vegetables. “My, but you do look pale. Are you feeling gouty?” Linda came over and with the cutting knife in her hand.

Winnie backed up a step. “I’m okay.”

“Okay? Sorry, dear, I don’t speak French.” Linda placed her free hand on Winnie’s forehead. She smelled like onions. “Well, you don’t feel warm,” she said. “But I wouldn’t exert myself overmuch today if I were you.”

“I’ll do that, ma’am,” Winnie said. Okay was a word they didn’t know in 1891? What other normal words hadn’t been invented yet? She’d have to be careful what she said, but it was hard to think straight, staring at Linda’s large cutting knife.

“And if you do get laid up,” Linda was saying, “we have plenty of Castor Oil and cough syrup here.” She returned to her cutting board and tossed an entire garlic clove into the pot on the stove. “In fact, just the other day I was gathering up some green onion, and you know what they say about the healing properties of onion. Mr. Hughes, who’s always been gouty, swears by…”

Suddenly, Winnie had an idea. “Yeah, Castor Oil is great stuff, works almost like magic.” She tried to say the last word a little louder, but after it was out of her mouth, she was afraid she was being too obvious.

“Yup, it’s pretty fair,” Linda said. She began pealing a potato over the pot. “But myself, I prefer using what I can gather from the woods or the garden. I think anything that sits in a bottle…”

Winnie had watched carefully, but Linda didn’t seem to react any differently when she said the word “magic”. Even if Linda did draw those patterns on the floor—which Winnie could hardly believe was possible—that didn’t mean she’d jump whenever someone said “magic”. Maybe Winnie had watched too many cop shows on TV.

Linda, meanwhile, was stirring her pot and going on about the benefits of mushrooms. Perhaps Winnie would have better luck with a different mystery.

“Linda,” she said, “I was wondering where we would find the clothes we came in
“Oh, your things just reeked of smoke,” Linda said, smiling, “from being out in the orchard last night. I’ve always been taught that you have to treat smoke stains right away, if you don’t want clothes to be damaged. Mary-Ellis is outside boiling everything —”

“Boiling?”

Linda motioned to the small kitchen door. “You can lend her a hand if you wish.”

Winnie thanked Linda, and stepped through the door. Outside she found a side yard she hadn’t explored last night. Clotheslines ran between wooden poles. Metal tubs filled with soapy water sat on the bare ground. Chickens pecked at the dirt. The sun was already burning away last night’s chill, and Winnie knew she would soon be sweating under all her layers of borrowed clothing. But at least the sun made the ghost, and the magic circle, feel a little less spooky.

A few paces away a large black cauldron rested on bricks above a fire. A girl about her own age stirred the pot, which bubbled and smoking like a witch’s brew. As Winnie got closer, she saw jeans and tee shirts floating in the gray water, along with her overalls. She hadn’t read the instruction tag on her overalls in a while, but she was pretty sure it didn’t say, “Boil Slowly Over Fire and Hang Dry.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Winnie asked. She tried not to look as nervous as she felt. She hated Eric for splitting them up.

“Oh, hi,” the girl said. “You must be one of our visitors.” She looked Winnie over in a critical way, like she was sizing up a potential rival. But when she finally met Winnie’s eyes, the girl smiled. Apparently, she didn’t consider her much of a threat.

“I’m Mary-Ellis, pleased to meet you.” She took one hand off the stirring stick and extended it.

“I’m Winifred, but my friends call me Winnie,” Winnie said, and shook the girl’s hand. Now that she was staring straight at her, Winnie realized this was the same girl from last night—the one that told them they had to leave, or else. Mary-Ellis looked older out of her nightgown. Her long, black hair was tucked up under a handkerchief, except for one curl that rested on her forehead. (Winnie suspected Mary-Ellis worked on that “accidental”-looking curl for a while to get it just right.) She wore an outfit like
Winnie’s—white dress and apron, black socks and shoes. Except Mary-Ellis managed to look pretty in the clothes, instead of plain and antique-y like Winnie did.

“You can stir, if you’d like,” Mary-Ellis said, handing Winnie the stick. Winnie took it and tried to stir the large pot, but it felt like mixing concrete. It took all her effort simply to make the stick—a broom handle from the looks of it—go around once. At least the water didn’t smell too strongly. She wondered what kind of soap they were using.

“Where are your friends this morning?” Mary-Ellis asked.

“I’m not sure,” Winnie said, which was the truth. The broom handle slipped and some gray water splashed over the pot, and Winnie realized why everyone wore aprons.

“Where is Tay-waan?” Mary-Ellis asked, watching her stir. Winnie must have given the girl a blank look, because she said, “Your ready-made clothes came from Tay-waan.”

What in the world was the girl talking about? Winnie tried to think of something quickly as the girl stared at her. “Oh, Taiwan!” Winnie said finally, almost laughing. Mary-Ellis must have read one of the labels. “It’s…uh, it’s near China.” Or, at least, it would be a place near China in the future. “You know, we kinda met already,” she said, trying to change the subject. “You were sleepwalking last night, and you came to our room.”

“I should think not,” Mary-Ellis said. “I never sleepwalk. Linda would know if I did, since she’s a light sleeper herself.” Mary-Ellis had started to remove clean clothes from one of the lines, but was now playing with a cloth napkin, folding it into some sort of design.

Winnie studied Mary-Ellis closely. She didn’t look like she was lying. But if she didn’t normally sleepwalk, then the strange warning she gave the group last night was an even bigger coincidence.

After a couple more folds, the cloth napkin in Mary-Ellis’ hands started to resemble a bird. “Do they all wear it that short in France,” she asked, motioning with the napkin to Winnie’s hair.

“Oh, this?” Winnie said, “Uhm, yeah, short is the fashion right now.” She found that once she got the laundry soup going, it was much easier to stir. You just couldn’t change directions unless you were willing to make a mess.
“The boys take to it, then?"

“Uh…sure.”

“Hmmm.” Mary-Ellis spun the bird in a circle, so that its cloth wings fluttered in the breeze. “Maybe I should have my own hair cut in this fashion. Do you think it would suit me? Perhaps I should ask that friend of yours his opinion…the blonde boy.”

Now Mary-Ellis looked closely at Winnie, and it took just a moment for Winnie to realize why. Mary-Ellis already had a crush on the “blonde-haired boy”. She liked Eric!

“Yeah, you should go ask Eric,” Winnie said.

Mary-Ellis smiled. “You don’t mind, then? That’s grand. He’s a mark, that one.” She set the cloth bird on top of a basket of clean clothes and headed towards the kitchen door. “I won’t be but a moment,” she said over her shoulder, and disappeared inside the house.

Winnie hadn’t meant for her to go talk to Eric now. She was just trying to be friendly. She looked around the empty side yard. Her uncle’s farm had clotheslines and washtubs, so this place shouldn’t seem so strange to her. But the clothes hanging on the line were completely different than what she was used to. Even the chickens here seemed to be a different variety—an aggressive kind that kept wandering close to give the hem of her dress a peck. “Shoo, you,” she said, and the chickens hopped away in a ruffle of feathers.

After a few minutes, Winnie’s arms began to ache. And staring at the boiling water reminded her that she needed to pee. She hadn’t gone since she used the chamber pot last night. Where was Mary-Ellis? Was it okay to leave the laundry for a moment? She also wanted to add some new notes to Eric’s computer. Mary-Ellis seemed to be more interested in boys than black magic, but she claimed that she never sleepwalked. And she stirred the laundry cauldron like a practiced witch.

After what seemed like an hour, Winnie decided that she’d have to risk leaving the laundry. It wasn’t boiling as much now anyway. She left the stick in the cauldron and crossed the side yard towards the back of the house, which is where she guessed the restrooms would be. It didn’t take her long to find the two, small, green-painted buildings. They were both perfect squares, only about five feet wide, and they each had a
crescent moon carved into the door—just like in the old Westerns her father used to watch. She opened the first one and wrinkled her nose, ready for the horrible smell. But it wasn’t *that* bad. It smelled like public restroom, but also like bleach and like some sort of spice. The spice smell was coming from a rosemary branch hanging from the ceiling. And the bleach smell was coming from the bucket of white powder on the floor. That was lye. Winnie remembered her grandfather telling her how people used to dump lye in outhouse toilets to help with the smell, but she couldn’t remember if you were supposed to use the lye before or afterwards. To be safe, she took the scoop and dumped a bunch of the powder down a hole that was cut into the outhouse seat. Too bad they didn’t have seat liners. Did people get splinters when they used outhouses?

She added more lye after she was finished, and out of habit looked for the flusher. Of course, there wasn’t any. Winnie stepped back out into the sunlight, and that’s when it hit her hard. She might not see a flush toilet again for many, many years.
25. The Horse and His Boy

Winnie leaned against a lemon tree near the outhouse and hid her face with her apron. I will not cry, she told herself. Everybody else was doing okay. Brewer even seemed to be enjoying himself. She couldn’t stand there and bawl like a baby. There was too much to do, and people were counting on her.

She sniffed, and wiped her eyes with the apron. These things were really handy, she thought. When she got home she’d have to start wearing an apron around the house. That made her smile. Sam would copy her, of course, and start wearing a miniature apron herself.

Well, crying wasn’t going to help her see her sister any sooner. Winnie smoothed out her dress and started walking towards the side yard. There she saw Mary-Ellis back at the laundry pot, stirring and whistling. Winnie decided she didn’t want to get stuck in another conversation about boys, so she kept the lemon trees between them. She’d just go around to the front of the house.

Winnie walked through the trees, keeping the ranch house to her right so she wouldn’t get lost. The lemons looked round and healthy. She guessed the coal buckets had done their job last night after all. She was about to turn and head back towards the house when, off in the distance, she saw a beautiful, dappled-gray horse. Winnie had always loved horses—she used to have an Appaloosa when she lived in North Dakota. It couldn’t hurt to go take a closer look, she thought. Maybe the horses’ owner would be a suspect in the mystery.

She approached the horse slowly. Even though it was tethered to a tree, it might get spooked if it smelled a stranger. “Hey, boy,” she said, holding out her hand. “You’re a pretty one, ain’tcha?” The horse flared its nostrils, and pawed one hoof against the ground, but didn’t back away. Winnie guessed he was only a year old, and might not
have been broken yet. He didn’t look like the type that would let someone ride him.

“T’m not going to hurt you,” Winnie said. Moving cautiously, she got close enough for the horse to sniff her hand. He shook his mane, and Winnie was worried he might rear up, but instead the horse licked her hand. She laughed. “Sorry, I don’t have any treats for yah.”

“Smokey like you.” The voice came from behind Winnie, and this time the horse did rear up.

“Whoa, Smokey!” A young man stepped forward and grabbed the horse’s tether. “Be good,” he said. Winnie guessed it would take at least two men to handle a horse as spirited as Smokey. But the stranger was able to hold the rope tight enough to keep the horse from bucking.

Now that she wasn’t in danger of being trampled, Winnie took a better look at the man. He was tall and broad and built like a mountain. He wore brown pants and a dirty white shirt that had come untucked. She had a hard time guessing his age—he could’ve been anywhere between sixteen and twenty-two. His short, sandy-blonde hair needed combing. Winnie realized this was the first male from the 1890’s that she’d seen without a hat on. Even in the old library pictures back at school of people from this time period, every boy and man wore a hat.

“Hi, I’m Winnie,” she said, sticking out her hand.

The young man looked down at her offered hand for a moment or two. He had a wide-eyed expression that Winnie usually saw on little kids.

“Carl,” he said, finally, and a broad smile lit up his face, but he kept his head down, like he didn’t want to make eye contact with her. “Can’t shake. Dirty.” He showed her both sides of his hands, which were caked with mud and grime.

“That’s okay,” Winnie said. “Is this your horse?”

“Oh, no,” Carl said, wiping the hand that didn’t hold the rope on his pants. “It’s Papa’s. But I help him with Smokey. Smokey gets excited sometimes, and likes to run and break fences.”

Winnie laughed. “I can imagine.” Smokey tugged on his tether, but he wasn’t really trying anymore. It seemed to Winnie that this was a fight the horse was used to losing.
Carl stared at the ground without saying anything. This time the pause was longer, and Winnie began to wonder if he might have a learning disability of some sort. “You’re different,” he said, finally, risking a quick glance at her. “Short hair.”

“Uhm…I’m from France,” she said. “Short is the style over there.”

Carl just frowned at the ground and was quiet again. He reminded her of Eric working on one of his inventions in his head.

“Carl, leave the girl alone!” Another male voice, this one full of authority. A young man of twenty-three or four approached quickly. He wore a black suit, and his jacket was slung over his arm.

“Carl, step back,” he said, putting a hand on Carl’s shoulder. Winnie noticed that the new boy made sure to keep Carl in between himself and the horse. Smokey flared his nostrils.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he said, turning to Winnie. “My brother sometimes needs looking after.”

“Oh, no problem,” Winnie said. “Carl and I were talking about horses and—”

“Carl,” he said, interrupting Winnie, “time to put Smokey back in the barn.” Carl looked sad, but didn’t say anything. Instead, he untied Smokey’s rope from the tree and began leading the horse away.

How rude, Winnie thought, shocked by his interruption, and his treatment of Carl. She knew she should be worried about blowing her cover, but she couldn’t help herself. “You know, Carl and I were getting along just fine, thank you,” she said. “He was telling me about Smokey. I don’t see what’s the big deal.”

The new boy looked surprised, but then offered her a quick and easy smile. “Where are my manners,” he said. “My name’s Raymond.” He bowed and took off his hat. He had black hair, slicked back with some sort of gel—Winnie didn’t want to think about what they used for mousse in 1891. His skin was rather pale.

She remembered what Linda had said the night before. “You’re the one that goes to school in Massachusetts.”

“Well, you’re a regular sharp,” Raymond said. “That would be me all right. I just finished school, actually.” He replaced his hat and began walking after Carl. “Would you mind a quick stroll? I could show you the stables.”
“Okay—I mean, sure, I’d like that,” Winnie said, joining him.

“You must be Winifred. My father told me we had visitors, from France no less. I’ve spent some time in Paris myself.”

Winnie caught her breath. If he asked her anything specific about France, especially 1890’s France, she’d be in trouble. But instead he said, “I hear you have a Negro with you. We don’t get many of those out in the country, but with the housing boom, San Diego’s filling up with them. And the unions in San Francisco are driving Negroes and Chinese and other undesirables down south. I hate to think what our poor city will look like in a few years.” Raymond smiled, and he talked as if people put down other races every day. He could have been discussing the weather or the Padres chance at the pennant.

All Winnie could do was nod. She knew people used to have attitudes like this—heck, there were people in her own time who were racist—but she’d never heard someone speak their mind so openly about it. She hoped Eric would appreciate her putting up with this guy.

“Well, here we are,” Raymond said. They stood in front of a long, low wooden stable that sat next to a small, fenced-in dirt yard. The yard was the largest clear spot in the lemon grove that Winnie had seen so far.

Carl was trying to undo the latch on the stable door, while at the same time holding on to Smokey’s tether. Smokey looked like he didn’t want to go back home, because he bucked and pulled against the rope even harder than before.

“Let me help,” Winnie said, hurrying over to Carl. Raymond told her to stop, but Smokey looked like he was about to drag Carl away. She quickly undid the simple, metal latch—it wasn’t even locked—and opened the stable doors. Smokey immediately stopped pulling at the rope, and instead planted his feet wide apart, like a toddler refusing to go to bed.

Carl gave the rope a mighty heave and dragged the horse into the barn. Smokey bumped into her as he went by, and Winnie smashed her finger between the animal and the stable door: not bad, just enough to pinch the nail and make her finger bleed. Finally, Carl pulled Smokey all the way inside and locked him in one of the stalls.

“That was pretty good,” Winnie said. “You should be on a wrestling team.”
Carl didn’t respond. At first Winnie thought he was just tired from fighting the horse, but then she realized he was staring at her finger.

“B-blood,” Carl said. He blinked rapidly, and his large fists clenched and unclenched. “Bad.”

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” Winnie said, putting her finger in her mouth.

“Bad!” Carl said, loudly, and the man-mountain took a step towards her.
Winnie stepped back, but Carl stepped closer and reached his hand out. His whole body was shaking now. Suddenly, Winnie felt very claustrophobic in the low-ceilinged stable. Smells of hay and old horse manure stung her nostrils.

“Carl,” Raymond said, in a soft voice. He stood directly behind Winnie. “Carl, look here.” Carl looked over her shoulder and seemed to relax immediately. He lowered his hand.

“Carl, I want you to take a deep breath,” Raymond said. His voice was slow and even. He stepped around Winnie, towards his brother, and Winnie saw that Raymond was swinging a gold pocket watch back and forth on its chain. “That’s just fine,” Raymond said. “Now take another breath, and close your eyes. We’re going to travel to your special place. You’d like that, wouldn’t you Carl?”

“Yes,” Carl muttered. He closed his eyes.

“Carl, I will count backwards from ten to one,” Raymond said, stepping even closer. “When I reach one, you will be in your special place.” He swung the watch directly in front of Carl’s face, though Winnie wondered what good it did if Carl’s eyes were already closed.

Raymond counted backwards from ten to one, and when he finished, he said, “Carl, open your eyes.”

Carl did, but he was staring off into space. His eyes didn’t focus on anything. It was an expression that seemed familiar to Winnie, but she couldn’t remember where she’d seen it before.

“You hypnotized him?” she asked.

“Some people in America call it that,” Raymond said, putting his watch away, “But I prefer ‘magnetic sleep’, as that more accurately reflects what transpires.”
Winnie must have looked confused, because Raymond smiled and said, “Yes, it is fundamentally the same thing. Carl won’t hurt you now.”

“Uh-huh,” Winnie said. She took her finger out of her mouth. It had already stopped bleeding, but she put it behind her back just in case. Her mouth tasted like copper. “What happened to him?”

“Carl sometimes has fits,” Raymond said. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead with a white silk handkerchief. “This is why I need to watch him around strangers. It’s a good thing I was close enough to help. You could have been in danger.”

Winnie had been scared, sure, but she didn’t think Carl would have really hurt her. Even if he was having a “fit”. Still, she said, “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” Raymond said. “My sister, Linda, will be able to look after that cut for you. I believe you can find her in the kitchen.”

“Thanks, I’ll go see her,” Winnie said, even though she had other plans in mind. “It was…uh…nice meeting you.”

“Likewise,” Raymond said, turning his attention back to Carl. “And please don’t be put off by this little incident. My brother’s really a stand-up fellow.”

Winnie nodded as she backed up out of the stable. She needed to get to Eric’s computer and write down everything that happened. The group wasn’t going to believe this.

Halfway to the house she turned and looked over her shoulder. Raymond headed out of the stables and his brother followed. Carl was walking with the stiff-legged gait of a zombie.

Once inside Winnie hurried up the stairs. Other than the now-familiar kitchen noises the house appeared empty. The door to the ghost-room was closed, but a door to the left of it stood open. That door led to another room Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R had explored in her time—the one with seashells and a globe and the red baseball. She thought about the night before (could it have been just last night?) when Eric cornered her between the globe and the window, and she felt a warm flush of embarrassment. Normally he didn’t like to be close to people. She shook her head; just when you thought you finally knew somebody, they’d go and do something completely random like that.
She wanted to write down her notes about Raymond, but she paused for a moment to see what the room looked like in this time. It appeared to be an office—Mr. Carver’s, she guessed. A large, heavy wooden desk sat against the far wall, in front of the window, and on it was a green duck made out of quilting with a square base—it reminded her of a larger version of her grandmother’s toaster cover. Bookshelves lined the other walls. Two comfy chairs sat next to the fireplace, with a small table between them. She could smell books and ink and a hint of pipe tobacco.

But what held her attention were all the old cameras scattered on different shelves. She’d been interested in photography since she was little, and for her seventh birthday her grandfather had given her his first camera. It was the type that she’d only seen before in Looney Tunes cartoons, usually in the hands of Elmer Fudd. It popped open and the lens pulled out like an accordion. The cameras here in Mr. Carver’s office were the same kind, only most of them looked brand-new. She wanted to check them out and see if they worked the same way her camera did. But she didn’t want to get caught messing around with Mr. Carver’s stuff. Plus, this wasn’t a sightseeing tour. She had a job to do.

Back in her own room Winnie uncovered the computer, and was disappointed to see only two out of four bars showing on the battery meter. Next time she saw Eric she’d suggest hand-writing their notes from now on, in case the computer shut down for good.

She typed up her opinions on the new Carvers, trying to remember any detail that might be important to the mystery:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mary-Ellis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• This girl is the sleepwalker from last night. But she says that she doesn’t ever sleepwalk. She said Linda would know if she did. Does Linda share a room with her? Should we double-check with Linda about Mary-Ellis’s sleepwalking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• She daydreams and is into boys. (She likes Eric!) Actually, she reminds me of losts of the girls from school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• She stirred the cauldron outside (on side porch) just like a witch. But the only thing in the pot was laundry. But that means she had a chance to really look at our clothes. Do our clothes look suspishous to her? (Suspiscious? Suspicious? Eric, I can’t find the spellcheck for this notebook program! =o)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Winnie saved the file, then debated adding one more thing. It wasn’t very scientific, but Brewer always said science is only half of a paranormal investigation. You had to trust your instincts too. So at the bottom of Raymond’s page she typed:

Carl

• He’s really strong. He was strong enough to pull Smokey (the horse) into the barn, even though the horse didn’t want to go.
• He has fits. Or are they seizures? (sp?) It sounds like it happens pretty often. Raymond is able to stop the fit with hypnotism (magnetic sleep).
• The sight of blood might bring on a fit???
• He pauses a lot when he talks. I don’t know if that means he’s a little “slow” or if he’s jus shy.
• But he’s observant. He said that I was “a different girl”. I don’t know if he meant “different from his sisters” or “different from other 1890’s girls”. He may suspect something.

Raymond

• He’s the brother who goes to school in Massachusetts.
• He knows hypnotism.
• He seems to look after Carl. But who takes care of Carl when Raymond’s at school? (Does Carl really need someone to take care of him???)
• He’s racist. he doesn’t like Chinese people or black people.
• Why is he going to school in Massachusetts anyway? Isn’t that expensive? Don’t they have colleges in california in 1890?
• He’s pale, especially as compared to his brothers and sisters. It doesn’t look like he gets out a lot. (bookworm?)
• He’s slimy. I don’t trust him.

Eric wouldn’t like it. He’d want “hard evidence”. But, heck, it was his computer. He could erase her notes if he wanted to.

Winnie saved the file again and shut down the computer. She tried to look at her watch to find out what time it was but, after staring at her wrist for a moment, she remembered that they had hidden all their modern stuff under Kat’s bed. Was it close to noon already? Without a watch’s second hand to stare at, time seemed to race by.

She left the room and softly shut the door behind her. The house stood perfectly still. The kitchen noises were gone. She didn’t remember it ever being so quiet in her own time, even when she was home alone. Maybe she was missing the sounds of traffic and of airplanes far overhead. Or maybe electricity itself, running through the walls, made a small noise that people from her own time were so used to, they only noticed it when it was missing.
27. Catch

Winnie made it down the stairs and to the front door without seeing anybody. They were probably all out in the groves doing whatever lemon farmers did. The house appeared to be empty. She paused with her hand on the cool, brass doorknob, wondering whether this would be a good time to do some snooping upstairs. Before she could make a decision the big front door swung open away from her, jerking the doorknob out of her hand. She was startled, but quickly arranged a smile on her face for whomever might be on the other side.

The bloody figure that appeared chased her smile away.

Linda stood there, panting, her apron splattered with lines of blood; it looked like someone had flicked red paintbrushes at her. More blood dripped down a long, sharp knife she held in her hand and splattered on the porch. Winnie took two steps back.

“You,” Linda said. “Just the young lady I was looking for.”

“I…but I.” Winnie couldn’t think of anything to do except keep walking backwards. She’d run out of room eventually—the staircase was behind her. She thought about calling out, but who would come? If the house was as empty as it appeared then she was all on her own.

“Don’t suppose you’ve seen a chicken, have you?” Linda laughed. Then she glanced down at her apron. “Oh my, I’m in quite a state, aren’t I?”

Winnie could only nod.

“Listen dear,” Linda said. “It seems that our dinner has gotten away from me, and I need someone to remind Papa that Well’s Fargo will be stopping by the People’s Store today.” She looked down at the porch where the blood had dripped, made a “tisk tisk” sound, and folded her knife into her apron. “Would you be a darling and find Father and let him know?”
“Sure,” Winnie said. She thought she sounded out of breath or afraid, and hoped Linda didn’t notice. The warm, metal smell coming from the blood on Linda made Winnie’s big breakfast flip-flop in her stomach. “Uhm, Where is Mr. Carver?” she asked.

Linda frowned and held her chin with her free hand, smudging a bit of blood onto her face. “Well, he should be at the back twenty—the grove at the end of our property. She nodded behind her. “But since it’s almost noon he might’ve snuck himself into the garden.”

Linda stepped to the side so that Winnie could get by. “Thank you, deary,” Linda said. “And don’t worry, supper will be ready on time. No chicken’s ever gotten the better of Linda Carver.”

Winnie just smiled as best she could and walked across the porch and down to the grass lawn. Now that her heart was returning to a normal speed, she was more annoyed then afraid. There was a mystery to solve, and she was stuck running errands. Was the rest of the gang stuck doing the same kind of stuff? Would they be trapped in the past forever, because they were too busy delivering mail to stop a murder?

She looked around to try and orient herself. Although the day had been blue and clear earlier, the sky now held bunches of white, fluffy clouds. The cool breeze smelled clean, with just a hint of ocean salt and coal bucket smoke, and it quickly cleared the scent of blood from her nose. If she was going to miss anything about 1891, it would be how clean everything smelled, and how clear everything looked. It seemed things far away were easier to see than in her time. The stables where Smokey lived looked close enough to hit with a rock, even though she knew they were a long walk from the house.

Lemon trees stretched off into the horizon in every direction except one. To her right, past a grassy front lawn and carriage path, were tall leafy trees and what looked like flowers—the garden? Should she head there first?

She heard a scuffling noise behind her, and turned in time to see a chicken, headless, it’s dirty-white feathers speckled with blood, run onto the lawn and stumble in her direction. That decided it for her. She sprinted towards the garden.

As she got closer she realized this was a bigger garden than any she’d seen at a friend or neighbor’s house. It covered an acre or more, and was dotted with pine trees,
palm trees, eucalyptus trees, and big bushy trees with silvery leaves that she hadn’t seen before. Growing on the ground, where the trees were far enough apart to let in sunlight, were roses, pansies, poppies and other colorful flowers in reds, yellows and blues. Ferns and berry bushes shared space with the flowers, and made the place feel wild and natural, not like a museum garden. Brick paths wound through the plants, and the air, which was cooler here, smelled green.

She chose the middle path and began walking at an easy pace, keeping an eye out for Mr. Carver. Soon the plants thickened, crowding the narrow path. Deeper in, the garden somehow didn’t seem as friendly as it did a moment ago. She began looking nervously into the thick leaves on her left and right. That’s when a hand reached out of the green and grabbed her shoulder.

After the chicken, Winnie was beginning to think that she was simply too tired to be afraid anymore. She was wrong. She let loose a scream that’d been building in her ever since she’d arrived at this Ranch.

“Ouch,” Eric said, stepping through the bush and into the path. He was still dressed in his plaid pants and bow tie. “You’re even louder than Kat.”

“Don’t do that,” Winnie said, hitting him in the arm. She wavered in between being mad at him, and hugging him because she so wanted to see a familiar face.

“Sorry,” Eric said, taking a step back and holding up his hands. “I saw you crossing the lawn and tried to catch up.” He looked at the trees around them. “This place is a maze.”

“Well, I’m looking for Mr. Carver,” Winnie said. “Wanna come along?”

“Sure, we need to talk.”

As they headed deeper into the garden, Eric told her about Kat’s trouble figuring out the magic circle, and about his encounter with some Chinese laborers working in the groves. Winnie told him about Mary-Ellis and Raymond, and Carl and Smokey.

“Raymond knows hypnotism, huh?” Eric said. He had picked up a pinecone and was playing one hand catch with it. “Did he say which school in Massachusetts he’s from?”

“Nope. But it was really weird how Carl walked, not like when I’ve seen hypnotized people on T.V. Kinda like he was sleep…” Winnie suddenly remembered
the vacant look on Mary-Ellis’ face when she gave them the strange warning last night. She remembered how the girl walked stiffly from door to door, checking every room.

“You know, Carl walked just like the sleeping girl from last night!”

“Really?” Eric said. He stopped walking and looked at her. “I guess that makes Raymond our number one suspect. Darn it.” He squeezed his pinecone. “If we could talk to that Ben guy who sent us the letter, we could ask him all our questions.”

Just then something crashed down into the bushes to Winnie’s left. They both jumped.

“What in the…” Eric reached through the leaves of a plant that grew poisonous-looking berries. “Something red in here.”

Winnie thought of the chicken.

“Hey,” Eric said, standing back up. “It’s a baseball; like the one we saw back in our own—”

“In our own town, in France,” Winnie said quickly, because she saw Timothy walking down the path towards her. He wore the same Tom Sawyer outfit from last night.

“Thanks, mister,” he said, taking the ball from Eric. “I thought I lost it this time for sure. Papa said I’ll haveta learn to play with lemons if I keep losing baseballs.” He looked them both up and down. “You look different in regular clothes. Wanna play catch? I’m cleaning out coal buckets but Papa said I could take a break for a little bit while he read so I don’t have too much time but we could play a while and I know this great spot yonder a ways.”

Winnie smiled at the mile-a-minute talking speed that seemed to be the language of all seven-year-olds. Timothy reminded her of her sister.

“Sure,” Eric said. “I’ll even show you how to throw a curve ball. Just as long as we can ask you a few questions while we play.”

Timothy quickly agreed, and led them through the garden to a grassy mound surrounded by broad-leafed maple trees. In the middle of the grass a bronze disc with numbers, like a clock on its back, sat on top of a short stone pedestal. The clock had a fin sticking up, which meant it was a sundial. But Winnie couldn’t figure out the time because the fluffy white clouds were directly above her, blocking the sun. A sundial was
no good without its shadow. How did people in the 1890’s tell time on a rainy day?

She watched Eric and Timothy play catch. Eric would show him how to throw a curve ball, and he’d catch the boy’s attempts. With every throw he praised Timothy, telling him “Good job” or “Wow, that was fast”. Eric had a gentle way with kids. To Winnie, it seemed like he almost had a third personality, different from his “Inventor” and his “Jock” modes.

Between throws, Eric asked Timothy if anything weird was going on at the Ranch. At first Winnie thought Eric was nuts—didn’t he care about blowing their cover? But then she realized that out of all the Carvers, little Timothy would be least suspicious of strangers. Nothing fazed seven-year-olds.

The boy told them about Eliza Tanner trying to kiss him in Sunday school, which he thought was weird and plenty gross. He talked about Ian Crowell being the pitcher for their junior baseball team, even though he didn’t throw well at all. (Timothy suspected that Mr. Crowell owning the newspaper had something to do with it.) He reminded them of how Spikey, his lizard, disappeared and was later discovered in a tree. Finally he said that his father sometimes got up in the middle of the night, and then later a light in the tool shed would go on. He wasn’t ever allowed to go in the tool shed.

As she listened Winnie tried a couple of times to put her hands in her pockets, before remembering that she was wearing a dress now. The pinafore-cover did have pockets, but the angle was all wrong for hooking your thumbs into them.

After one last toss, Timothy caught his ball and said, “I gotta go find Papa maybe we can play later goodbye for now it was fun.” He took off down a brick path and disappeared around a corner of green.

“That was…interesting,” Winnie said. For a moment, the sun broke through the clouds. The sundial now read one o’clock.

“I wonder what Mr. Carver does in that workshop,” Eric said. He picked his pinecone back up. “We should check it out.”

“I don’t know,” she said, “Could a father use black magic on his own son? I still think Raymond’s at the top of my suspect list.” The thought of something bad happening to Timothy, something bad done by his own family, made Winnie forget about her own problems for a moment. He seemed like such a nice kid. She tried to tell herself not to
get too attached to Timothy in case…in case Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. wasn’t able to save him in the end.

Winnie snapped herself out of her melancholy thoughts and reminded Eric of her errand for Linda—to deliver the message about Wells Fargo pickup—and together she and Eric headed back into the heart of the garden. Winnie would have liked some conversation to keep her mind off magic and sleepwalkers and a little boy who might become a ghost by tonight if Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. didn’t figure out the mystery. But Eric, deep in thought, mumbled short answers to her questions and tossed the pinecone as he walked.

After a couple minutes, Winnie realized they were lost. The path wound back and forth, branched off, and hit a dead end. They tried another path, which led to a small, dirt clearing. Dozens of crosses stuck out of the ground, and each had a small piece of wood nailed to it with names and dates. She and Eric read a few: Derek Carver, 1884-1887. Derek only lived to be three years old? Lucy Carver, 1881-1883. Reggie Carver, 1885-1890. Winnie shivered and looked around. Were they in some sort of children’s cemetery? Had these kids all died of diseases, or something else? The names and dates were written in charcoal, in sloppy handwriting—like a child’s writing. Why were kids marking other children’s graves? Shouldn’t a minister or some adult have that job? Were these graves a secret?

She thought about Timmy: he was a neat kid. She didn’t want him to be just another crude cross in a dirty clearing. But what if he wasn’t going to be the first ghost of Carver Ranch? What if the house was already haunted by all these children?

A footstep sounded behind them—boot heel on cobblestone. A deep voice followed: “I see you’ve found our graveyard.”
Winnie spun around. Mr. Carver stood there, wearing a brown suit and hat. He held a black, leather-bound book in his left hand—forefinger holding a place between pages—and a glass of lemonade in his right.

“Oh…I was just…we got lost,” Eric said, looking around.

Or, Winnie thought, had they just discovered the Carver’s horrible secret? And was Mr. Carver here to make sure they didn’t tell anyone? He blocked the only path away from the clearing. If they had to get away, they could charge through the bushes, but with his long legs Mr. Carver would catch up as soon as they ran into a thick patch.

“Honor bright, I can’t take all the credit for it,” Carver said, smiling. “Kid’s idea. They have little ceremonies and such out here.”

“There’s…so many of them,” Winnie said.

“Yes indeed. But that’s what comes from naming everything on a farm.” He tipped his hat back and scratched his head. “If it were just the dogs and cats, there’d only be a handful of crosses. But the children insisted on transforming every goat, donkey and horse into pet. I keep saying they’re just setting themselves up for heartache. A working animal, a field animal, won’t be around for the longest duration. Still, they’ll name any four-legged beastie I bring back from town.” Carver walked over and touched one of the crosses with his foot. “This here was a sheep.”

“It’s a pet cemetery?” Winnie asked. She felt relieved, then foolish. What was she thinking? That Mr. Carver was chopping up his own kids and burying them here?

“That it be, missy. I draw the line at chickens though. If I let them name the chickens, my whole farm would be covered by crosses.” Carver laughed heartily, and lemonade sloshed over the sides of his glass. He moved his book away to keep it dry. Winnie noticed it had *Holy Bible* written in gold letters on the front cover. “Enjoying the
“garden are you?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s awesome,” Eric said, and when Carver frowned he added, “I mean, it’s great, sir.” He gave Winnie a sheepish look. She wasn’t the only one having problems with the language.

Mr. Carver nodded. “I swan, this is my favorite place to come out and do some reading or photographing, especially on hot days. But you musn’t tell the Missus that I’m taking a short break from the fieldwork. If she knew she’d be in a fearful temper.” He chuckled.

“Speaking of fieldwork…uh, sir,” Eric said, “I noticed you need a lot of machines and tools to keep the lemon trees healthy.” He hid his pinecone behind his back, and fidgeted with it while he talked. “We’ve never been to a lemon grove. What happens when the machines break? Do you fix them yourself?”

Ah, Winnie thought, he’s trying to find out about the tool shed. Mr. Carver seemed happy to chat, and he began telling them about all sorts of machines that were used on the ranch, but he never mentioned the tool shed. He also asked her and Eric a bunch of questions about themselves and their home. Winnie knew this should make her happy—Mr. Carver seemed less suspicious now that he was curious about them and their strange clothes and strange way of talking. But, standing amid the crosses of animal graves, she found herself running out of things to say that wouldn’t give them away. Whenever she could, she’d try to steer the conversation towards stuff that existed in both their centuries, like cameras—she told him that she was an amateur photographer herself. Eric used the same tactic and talked about baseball whenever he could.

Finally, Mr. Carver tipped his hat back into place and said, “Well, it’s been a real pleasure talking to you both; you’re smart as whips. I can tell they have tip-top schools out there in France. But I must be back to work.” He downed the last of his lemonade. “Come fetch me if there’s anything you need; no request is too strange. Heck, I got friends who owe me favors, even the sheriff.”

“Thanks,” Eric said, “We’ll keep that in mind.”

Why in the world would he mention the sheriff? Winnie thought. He was smiling, but that remark almost sounded like a threat. She was so busy mulling it over that she hardly noticed Eric poking her and nodding in Mr. Carver’s direction.
“Oh-oh yeah,” Winnie said, her Dakota accent creeping back up. “Linda wanted me to remind you about the Wells Fargo wagon.”

Mr. Carver actually slapped himself on his forehead. “Goodnight!” he said. “I nearabout forgot.” He asked Winnie if she wouldn’t mind giving Linda a small package. She could find it on the desk in his study. Then he said goodbye to them both, and headed off into the garden. Before he was out of sight, though, he shouted back, “Mind the weather! I know it’s a chore to be cooped up inside, but it won’t do to get caught outdoors if the sky turns foul.” Then he disappeared.

When he was out of earshot, Eric said, “Sheriff?”

Winnie nodded. “I know. I was thinking the same thing.”

Eric tossed his pinecone into the air. “Okay, let’s head out of this jungle. Then you can go to the house and get that package. While you’re there use my computer and put down as much as you can remember from our talks with Timothy and Mr. Carver. I’m going to try and find Brewer.”

Winnie agreed and waited while Eric watched the trees above him. The pinecone never came back down.

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After walking for a short while, Winnie and Eric broke free of the garden and found themselves in a part of the lemon grove neither of them had seen before. The trees here were spaced farther apart, and the ground seemed dryer, with the kind of dirt a playground has at the end of summer. Narrow ditches cut through the soil left and right and up and down, turning the grove into a checkers board. There was mud at the bottom of most of the ditches, so Winnie guessed that they were for watering the lemon trees.

The land rose up to a little hill on their left, where the irrigation ditches came together at a big concrete tube with a manhole cover and metal wheel at the top. A barrel-sized machine lay on the ground close by, and next to the machine sat Brewer. He waved them over.

Winnie shivered. A cool wind that the garden had protected her from earlier now tugged at her dress. The puffy white clouds she’d noticed before had turned dark and
sick-looking. Carver was right, it was going to rain. Hard.

Eric looked at the sky. “Let’s see what Brewer’s got real quick,” he said. “Then you can head back and get that package.” He began marching across the lemon grove.

Winnie hurried to join him, jumping over ditches as she went, noticing that jumping was harder to do in a dress. As she got closer, the machine Brewer sat next to looked more and more familiar. It was a big, metal contraption with gears and springs and pulleys. The parts looked like leftover bits from other machines: there were rusty chains and green-painted wheels and large, sharp hooks. It was so ugly, it reminded her of one of Eric’s inventions.

Brewer stood up when they arrived. He nodded at Eric: “It’s, like, Frankenstein-awesome, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, if it actually works,” Eric said, kneeling down in Brewer’s spot next to the machine.

“Some kind of hydro-mechanics,” Brewer said, and began pacing back and forth. “It looks pretty advanced for the time period. It makes use of capillary action.”

Futuristic inventions? Winnie sighed inwardly. Everything they found seemed to add another mystery. It was as if, despite all their investigating, they were now further away from solving the riddle of the ghost than when they started.

“Look here,” Eric said, rocking back on his heels. “These pipes are probably designed to channel water up to this bucket. When the bucket gets heavy enough, it pulls this lever and turns these gears. Based on how the whole thing is shaped, I’m guessing it’s meant to fit over that concrete pipe.”

“Uh-huh,” Winnie said. “But what’s it do?”

Eric frowned. “Well, it might—”

“It saves time, of course!”

Winnie looked up and saw Raymond and Carl standing behind them, just a few yards away. The wind blowing through the lemon trees must have covered up the sounds of their footsteps. How long had they been standing there?

“I must say I didn’t expect to bump into you again so soon,” Raymond continued, touching his black hat and nodding at Winnie like they were old friends. Carl smiled at her briefly, and then shoved his hands in his pockets and studied his feet.
Winnie tried to think: had the boys met yet? “Uhm, Eric, Brewer, this is Raymond and Carl.”

“Hi,” Eric said, getting to his feet and shaking hands with Raymond.

The two boys stared at each other for a moment, and Winnie remembered how Mary-Ellis had stared at her earlier that day. They were sizing each other up.

Then Raymond shook hands with Brewer. She waited for him to make some racist comment, so the rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. could see what a villain he was, but instead he just smiled broadly and said, “Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Carl kept his hands in his pockets and refused to shake. As soon as introductions were over, he retreated to a nearby lemon tree and began plucking off dead leaves and branches.

“Begging your pardon, but I couldn’t help overhearing,” Raymond said to Eric. “You seem to have a working knowledge of applied physics.”

“It’s just a hobby,” Eric said. “I’m probably not as good as you. He knelt and pointed to the side of the machine. “I noticed the ratchets for the bottom gears. If the bucket fills slowly enough, then I’d guess this machine is a water timer.”

Raymond’s face lit up with what Winnie thought might be a genuine smile. “Excellent observation!” he said, and actually clapped Eric on the back. “You’re a regular sharp.”

Raymond bent down and gently ran his pale, white hands over the machine. “This is a project I began before I left for school. It’s designed to aid in irrigation. If it works as it ought, then we won’t need someone to venture to the upper groves every half hour to turn the standpipe wheel and switch the flow. My device would ensure that all the trees in this area get just the right amount of water.”

Winnie looked at the wheel and the concrete tube. So, they did have plumbing?

If they had running water, why weren’t there flush toilets? “Where does the water come from?” she asked.

“From Sunnygrove River,” he said. “Not directly, of course, but we’re close. This short culvert leads to the….”

Sunnygrove River? Why did that sound familiar? Wasn’t her history teacher talking about a Richland-something? It seemed like years ago, but it was just yesterday.
Richland Dam maybe? It was in that boring old movie, with the black and white pictures and the narrator with the nasal voice. Something about the Richland Dam was important to the farmers near the River….

The three boys were now kneeling in front of the machine, pointing to different pipes and pulleys, and talking about “capillary action” and “coefficients of gravity”. This might take a while, she thought.

She considered striking up a conversation with Carl, but he was still busy pulling dead wood off the lemon tree—reaching for branches that most boys could only get to with a stepladder. There was also the blood on her apron from her cut finger to think about; it might make Carl have another fit. Maybe she should just head back to the house on her own and look in the study for the Wells Fargo package. The boys would be okay here—Raymond seemed like a regular 1890’s guy now. Was she wrong to be so suspicious of him earlier?

She was about to excuse herself when she heard Eric say, “The whole overflow problem could be solved with a little nine-volt battery. If you just used electricity instead of—”

Eric stopped in mid-sentence and his eyes widened. Brewer stood up and opened his mouth, but nothing came out and he just ended up looking like a goldfish that had jumped out of its tank.

Winnie began looking around for the danger before realizing it wasn’t anything the boys had seen. They were freaked out by something Eric said: “electricity”. Did Eric just blow their cover? Did people have electricity in 1890? She tried to remember when Benjamin Franklin flew his kite.

She looked between Brewer and Raymond. If Brewer didn’t think of something fast, the game might be over. The Carvers wouldn’t be as friendly towards a bunch of kids that acted crazy, and talked about strange forces from the future. Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. could find themselves kicked out of the house, unable to solve the mystery of the ghost, and stuck in the 1890’s forever.
Winnie held her breath. Eric knelt there with his hands over his mouth. Even Carl seemed to realize something was up, because he had stopped picking at dead leaves and was watching them.

If Raymond was the villain that she originally thought he might be, then he was the worst person to blow their cover in front of. Any other Carver would simply go tell Papa if the new visitors were acting weird. But if Raymond was the one responsible for the magic circle, and he suspected Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. was investigating the ranch, then he could just cast a spell on them and end the whole thing right here.

Raymond shook his head. “Not sure what a ‘nine-volt’ is. I guess we could lug out a zinc-carbon dry cell to power the timer, though that might be more trouble than it’s worth. Of course a city line would solve everything.” He glanced at Winnie and smiled, though Winnie noticed the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Electricity might be plentiful where you come from, but that doesn’t hold true for us out in the country. San Diego proper is wired, sure, and it’s got arc-lights that turn night into day. It’s quite a sight.”

Winnie tried not to exhale too loudly. So they did have batteries and electricity in 1890. That was a close call. Raymond kept going—talking about electric cable cars in the city and other “modern conveniences”. Eric nodded in the right places in the conversation, and looked like he was keeping his cool, though he managed to shoot Winnie an “oops!” glance. Carl turned his attention back to his lemon tree.

Winnie felt a couple heavy raindrops on her head, and saw a few more land on the dry soil, kicking up dust. She remembered Mr. Carver’s errand. “Excuse me,” she said. “I’ve got to go give Linda a package.”

“That’s okay,” Eric said, quickly. “We’ll probably be going in in just a few
minutes.” Brewer nodded in agreement.

Raymond tipped his hat at her. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again soon.”

“I’m sure,” Winnie said, then added, “See you later, Carl.”

Carl waved to her with a little lemon tree branch he was holding.

She was about to ask Raymond for directions back to the house, but then spotted the Carver-house roof through the trees, and decided to find the way back on her own.

As she walked she looked back several times, very aware of the size difference between the boys—Brewer might be tall, but Carl and Raymond both outweighed him. If Raymond had anything nasty planned there wouldn’t be much Eric or Brewer could do. But if she understood Brewer’s nod correctly, then he wanted her to go in on her own.

What did the boys have in mind? She just hoped they both had a chance to read her notes on the computer about Raymond.

The rain had stopped falling for the moment and the sun was even peeking through the clouds, but Winnie knew the day was gearing up for a big storm. She could tell by the weird, yellow pre-storm light that made everything look like an old photograph. The fat raindrops were just a practice run.

Winnie picked up the pace, jogging through the lemon trees, occasionally darting around taco-leafed bushes that grew here and there in the middle of the rows as if they were planted on purpose. A couple times along the way she caught sight of Chinese men working in the grove—pulling weeds, refilling coal buckets, and tying blue ribbons around some lemon trees—and she was reminded that regular, nineteenth century life was going on all around her. To most people it wouldn’t matter if Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. saved Timothy, or if they got caught in the past forever. She felt suddenly small and wished, not for the first time, that grown-ups would come and rescue her.

Soon she arrived at the packed-dirt carriage path that circled the front lawn. A window on the second floor of the Carver house—the window of the ghost room, actually—reflected a sun that was dimmed by a passing cloud. For a moment the window looked like a yellow eye, staring back at her.

She crossed the lawn to the porch. The front door was open just a crack and Winnie hoped she wasn’t the one that had been careless enough not to shut it properly. Stepping inside she braced herself for another blood-drenched surprise, but judging by
the chopping sounds, Linda was busy in the kitchen. The poor chicken was probably in
the oven already.

Winnie hurried upstairs and headed straight for Mr. Carver’s office. The door
was still open, but now Mary-Ellis was standing at her father’s desk. She hadn’t seen
Winnie yet since her back was towards her, and Winnie decided that she didn’t want to
be slowed down by another dull conversation with the girl. She was about to head over
to her own room when she noticed something wrong with the girl’s pinafore. Most of the
buttons in back weren’t buttoned, and the ones that had been were lined up all wrong.

“Kat?” Winnie asked?

It was Kat after all. She turned around and Winnie laughed out loud. Her friend
had put a twenty-first century twist on the Carver family uniform. Kat wore the heavy
black shoes, but not the socks. And she had tied the white dress in a knot at the back—
like some girls did with their t-shirts in gym class. The knot made it so that the bottom of
the dress only reached down to Kat’s pale knees. Traces of black eye-shadow from the
day before completed her farmer-Goth look.

“I should be the one laughing,” Kat said with a frown. “You’re the girl who looks
like a history book picture.”

“Well, we’re supposed to blend in,” Winnie said. She crossed the room to the
desk. The top drawer was open. “Whatcha doing?”

“I found a bunch of mail,” Kat said. “Maybe we can find out who Ben is.”

Winnie glanced nervously at the hall outside. They would have a hard time
explaining their snooping to any Carvers who walked by. She crossed the room, shut the
door, and returned to the desk. That’s when she noticed a small package the size of a
book, wrapped in brown paper, sitting next to the large, green quilted duck.

“This is it,” Winnie said.

“This is it!” Kat said, at about the same time.

They looked at each other and Kat cried “Jinx!”

“Shhh!” Winnie whispered.

“Nope,” Kat said, putting her finger to her lips. “No talking till I say your name.
But check it out, I found our Ben.” She held up a handwritten letter for Winnie to see. It
was short and formal, like something from the government. The top of the letter read: To
Mr. Daniel Ben Carver.

So, Winnie thought, “Papa” was the one who brought them here. Her wish was granted; there was an adult that could help them. Of course, that was assuming Mr. Carver was the Ben they were looking for. It could be a coincidence. Ben was a common name. If only she could find the typewriter with the high “r”…

She turned from the beaming Kat and looked at the desk. Again she smelled old cigars and pipes…and ink. Suddenly she was struck with the memory of weekends at her grandmothers. She and Sam would often pass a sleepy Sunday afternoon up in the attic, typing love-letters to imaginary princes or ship captains on her grandmother’s old Smith Corona typewriter. With all the typing they did, the attic would end up smelling like ink. Just like this study.

She reached over and gave the quilted duck a tug. Underneath was the largest typewriter she’d ever seen.

Without saying a word (she was jinxed after all) she pulled the letter from Kat’s hand and rolled it, backwards, through the typewriter. She figured no one would notice a bit of typing on the back of the paper.

She took a deep breath and tried to tell herself to not be disappointed if this wasn’t the typewriter they were looking for. Then, as practice, she typed:

cat

The keys striking the paper sounded like small firecrackers and Winnie glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see the study door burst open and all the Carvers come pouring in. But she and Kat were alone. So, she typed:

rat

She rolled the paper out of typewriter and held it up to the yellowish light coming in through the window. The “r” in rat was higher than the other letters.

Her fingertips tingled with adrenaline. This was it! Mr. Carver had used this exact typewriter to send a letter to the future. But how? Why?
“Winnie!” Kat said, looking at the letters. “We did it! We found—”

This time Kat shut herself up. The study door was creaking open. Winnie glanced around but couldn’t see any closets to hide in. And the room’s only window was two stories up!

Then Kat’s hand was closing around her own, and she was being pulled under the desk. Lucky for them, the heavy, wooden desk was huge, and open underneath, so they were both able to squeeze all the way back against the wall. They were also lucky that Kat thought quick on her feet.

“Had practice hiding from the lunch monitors,” Kat whispered, as if reading her mind.

The desk chair blocked much of Winnie’s view, but she could see the study door swing open, revealing long legs clad in heavy black boots—Daniel Carver. He’s looking for the package, Winnie thought. Hopefully he’ll just grab that and not wonder why the typewriter cover is off. She realized that she was mashing the letter she’d just typed on, and forced her hand to relax.

Kat pulled a length of her hair into her mouth and began chewing on it.

The black boots crossed the room to the desk, and paused. Winnie heard paper shift on the desk above them—the package? Now go, she mentally commanded. But instead the boots moved in front of the desk and the chair creaked. She heard a desk drawer being opened.

Winnie tried to press further against the wall. She knew she was squishing Kat but she didn’t care. Mr. Carver couldn’t see them now, but if he scooted his chair in, his boots would bump into two seventh-graders.

Kat produced the big silver penguin from a pocket in her pinafore and clutched it in both hands. She looked scared, but also determined. Winnie hoped her friend wouldn’t try to put a spell on Mr. Carver.

The rollers on the desk chair squeaked. He was scooting in! Just then a voice sounded from the door:

“Papa, sir, can I come in?”

“Of course, Timothy,” Mr. Carver said. The chair swiveled to face the door.

“What brings you out of the field?”

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“Raymond wanted me to tell you that he’s nearing done with his grove-watering machine but he needs to do wads more work on it today to finish and so he’ll be out on the back twenty for a spell if that’s okay.” She heard Timothy pause to take a big breath. “He’s going to be a famous inventor isn’t he?”

“I reckon he is,” Mr. Carver said, though Winnie thought she heard doubt and concern in his voice. “Come here and sit with your father. How fairs that baseball team of yours?” Two small, chubby legs with little black shoes crossed the room and joined Mr. Carver’s in the chair.

Talking a mile-a-minute, Timothy told Mr. Carver all about his team. Winnie had heard most of this news in the garden with Eric. She wiggled her toes to keep her foot from falling asleep, but her feet were bent under her uncomfortably. She tried to stretch her leg out over Kat’s, and that’s when she saw tears dripping soundlessly from her friend’s eyes. This shocked Winnie as much as any of the weird events of the last two days. Kat was one of those girls who Just Didn’t Cry.

“What’s wrong?” Winnie whispered, as quietly as she could.

Kat just waved her away, which alarmed Winnie even more. And worse yet, her friend was beginning to sob out loud! Winnie put her finger to her lips and made a “shush” sound. But Kat kept crying, and the crying got louder.

Timothy continued to ramble: “And David tries to always be catcher but I think that somebody who—”

“Just a minute, son,” Mr. Carver interrupted. “You’ve got young ears. Did you just hear something?”

Timothy stopped talking and Winnie clamped her hand over Kat’s mouth.

“Hear what, Papa?”

“I thought I heard crying,” Mr. Carver said. The chair creaked and Timothy’s feet landed on the floor. The chair creaked again, and Mr. Carver’s boots shifted. He’d stood up.

Kat bit Winnie’s hand, but she hardly felt it. She watched as Mr. Carver grabbed the edge of the desk. He was about to bend over and look underneath!
Winnie watched Mr. Carver’s knees bend. She pressed against the wall behind her, wishing she could go tumbling right through it. Kat stopped sobbing against her hand.

“Excuse me, sir.” This voice came from the doorway. It had a Chinese accent. “You wished me to notify you when Mr. Greeves arrived.”

Mr. Carver’s hand left the desk edge. “Yes, thank you, Ping. Tell him I’ll be right down.”

“Sir,” Ping said. Then Winnie heard him retreat down the hallway.

“I’ve got some business,” Mr. Carver said. His knees straightened, and then his feet crossed the room towards the door. Timothy’s feet kept pace with his. “And you need to get on back to the orchard. But you’ll be taking a trip soon, Timothy. Would you like that?”

“Sure, papa, that’d be swell. Where am I going?”

“It’ll be a surprise,” Mr. Carver said. “And it’s a secret. So you musn’t tell any of your brothers or sisters. By tomorrow you’ll know…”

Winnie strained to hear more, but Carver and Timothy had left the room and their voices soon blended with noises floating up from the kitchen.

“Lehm meh gah,” Kat said.

“Oh-okay, sorry,” Winnie said. She removed her hand from Kat’s mouth and wiped it on her pinafore. It was wet with Kat’s tears.

“You better not tell anyone about me getting all gushy,” Kat said, sniffing. She wiped her face with her sleeve and erased the last traces of her Goth makeup.

“No-oh, course not,” Winnie said, glad that Kat was threatening her. It meant her friend was almost back to normal. “But why were you—”
“Timothy,” Kat said. She picked at a couple wood splinters on the underside of the desk. “He’s, like, a cool kid and stuff. He’d make a good little brother.” She yanked a sliver of wood from the desk and looked at Winnie. She was almost nose-to-nose with her. “But Timothy’s real. He’s not just a name in a newspaper. He’s a person that I know, and he’s going to die.”

Winnie was speechless for a second—she’d never guess that Kat would be crying for someone else. She wished Eric were here. He’d know just what to say. “Listen,” she said, grabbing Kat’s shoulders. “We’re going to save him. We discovered who sent the letter, didn’t we? Eric will come up with a plan. Brewer will use that huge library of a brain of his. You know all about magic. And I…I’m super farm girl. If anyone can solve the mystery of Carver Ranch and save Timothy, it’s Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. So there’s nothing to cry about, ‘kay?”

Kat smiled. “Super farm girl? That’s, like, the worst super hero ever.” She sniffed one more time. “Anyways, it wasn’t just Timothy. It was everything all together. So much is happening…my brain feels full. And I want to go home. And I had to pee in a bucket!”

Winnie felt the same way herself, about her brain being full that is. There were so many clues to keep track of. Which reminded her—she still needed to type notes into Eric’s computer.

She gave Kat a quick hug—something Kat would normally squirm away from, although she couldn’t now in the close space under the desk. Then Winnie carefully crawled out and stood up, stretching her legs. Kat did the same. Winnie didn’t hear anyone out in the hall. The only noises came from the kitchen. She guessed that the cooking for a farm family went on all day.

Winnie folded the letter she’d typed “rat” on in half and tucked it in her pinafore pocket, then she and Kat returned to their room. Kat volunteered to keep lookout at the door while Winnie wrote her observations.

Winnie dug the computer out from the folds of the fluffy, blue quilt. The laptop was warm, as if somebody had just used it. And when she opened it up she saw it was only in sleep mode. What a waste of battery power, she thought. Eric would freak.

More had been written in the workbook, especially on the Daniel Carver and
That’s strange. Another S.P.E.C.T.E.R. member got a completely different impression of him. She thought about adding a few points of her own, about how they should be careful around Raymond. Though now that she tried she couldn’t come up with anything super-suspicious that he’d done. Sure, he’d sounded like a racist before, but he was nice to Brewer when the boys checked out the irrigation machine. Winnie still felt that he knew more than he let on. And sometimes he seemed to almost be laughing at them, like they were a big joke. But she didn’t have any proof.

She glanced at the door where Kat was keeping watch on the hallway. Kat hummed quietly—some tune by Brittany Spears.

Winnie scrolled down to Mr. Carver’s entry:

Daniel B. Carver
- I saw him wandering around the tool-shed with a large sack. He kept looking over his shoulder.
- He’s not asking enough questions about us.
- I also spotted him with a rifle. Why would he need a gun in an orange grove?
- I’ll tell you frankly, he should be watched.

That was a strange entry, too. Mr. Carver couldn’t be a suspect. If he’s the one
that somehow sent a letter to Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. in the future, then he was on their side. Wasn’t he?

Maybe Winnie was letting her emotions get in the way of her detective work. She wanted so badly to have someone in this strange house, and strange time, that she could trust and talk to. She wanted a good grown-up, like a dad or a policeman, that would save the day and send them home and make everything all right. They were just kids. How could they do it all on their own?

She added a couple lines on the Mr. Carver page about the “B” standing for “Ben”, about the typewriter with the high “r”, and about the pet cemetery and the way Mr. Carver mentioned that he was good friends with the sheriff. Then she shut down the computer. The battery meter only showed one bar.

“Kat,” she said, closing the laptop. “Who used this last?”

“Wasn’t me,” she said, turning from the doorway. “I’ve been either trying to decipher that stupid magic circle, or been listening to Linda complain about housework. I guess the guys could’ve come in.”

“We should ask Eric and Brewer about these—” Winnie stopped when an arm wrapped around Kat from behind and a brown hand covered her mouth. Kat must have bit down, much harder than she’d bit Winnie earlier, because the hand and arm quickly disappeared back into the hall.

“She’s got teeth like a shark,” Brewer muttered from the hallway.

Eric entered the room, smiling apologetically. “Sorry Kat. Brewer was just trying to teach you a lesson about being on guard.”

“It was for her own good,” Brewer called from outside the room.

Eric looked less like a munchkin now. He still wore the plaid pants, but he’d undone the suspenders and tucked his smushed-baseball-cap-style hat into his back pocket.

“I was out helping Raymond with his invention while Brewer climbed some lemon trees,” he said to Winnie. “We got back as quick as we could.”

Brewer stepped into the doorway, holding his hand and eyeing Kat warily. Green leaves and dark stains covered his shirt and vest. Twigs were sticking out of the band of his bowler hat. He smelled like lemons.
“Actually, I was watching the grove from my hidden observation post,” Brewer corrected. He sat down on Kat’s bed, scattering a few leaves. “And I saw some very interesting things. For a half hour I watched members of the family and some Chinese farm workers pretend to do regular chores. They weeded around the trees and watered the trees and cleared leaves out of irrigation ditches. It was a pretty good act. It would’ve fooled anyone who didn’t—”

“Maybe they were doing regular chores, you think of that?” Kat said. She spit into the chamber pot in the corner and wiped her mouth. “That’s twice in one day,” she muttered.

Winnie felt a smile forming at her lips. Sure, they might fight and bicker, but they were her gang and she was glad everyone was back together. She would have hugged Eric if she wasn’t worried that Kat would make a big deal out of it.

“Did you find out anything new, Winnie?” Eric asked. He walked over to the dresser and uncovered his laptop.

“Kat and I found out who sent us the letter,” she said. “Hey, the battery’s low. You might not want to keep turning—.”

“You found out what?” Brewer shouted. He stood up, creating another shower of leaves.
As the boys sat listening on the two small beds, Winnie told them about the package she was supposed to give to Linda, and about the old typewriter and the high “r”s. She took the page she’d typed on out of her pocket and handed it to Eric. He took out the envelope with their original letter from Ben. The “r”s matched.

Dear Sirs and Ladies of S.P.E.C.T.E.R.

It has come to my attention that your organization has an interest in events and phenomena not readily explained by the methods of modern science. If this is true, then may I humbly suggest an investigation into the so-called Ghost of Cañever Ranch. (A picture is included.) This apparition, or hoax, as the case may be, most often appears two hours past sundown. Happy hunting.

Since’ely,

Ben
Kat told them about finding the letter addressed to Daniel B. Carver, and about almost being discovered. Kat told the story well, Winnie thought, with lots of suspense, but she never mentioned that her crying is what almost got them caught.

“So-oh, we should tell Mr. Carver everything, right?” Winnie said when Kat was finished. “He’ll help us, won’t he?”

No one answered. Eric tucked the “Ben” letter back in his pocket, then drummed his fingers on his laptop. Brewer stood up and paced the floor. Kat pulled her tarot cards from a pocket of her pinafore and laid them out on her bed. Big raindrops began hitting the window like stones thrown by scared kids on a dare.

Eric spoke first. “We can’t really know if it’s him. I agree that the typewriter is where the letter came from. It makes sense, the letter being as old as it is.” He took his baseball out of the laptop case and tossed it in the air. It came down in his hand with a “smack”. “But even if his middle name is Ben we still can’t be sure. What if the letter is written by one of his sons or grandsons? Do we know what all of their names will be?

“And even if it is the same guy,” Brewer said, running his hands through his hair, “how do we know he’s on our side? Maybe he wants us stuck in the past, or maybe he wants us to help him with his evil plan. Kat did say that he was taking Timothy on a trip. What if that trip is through the black magic circle?”

“And what if it’s just a trip into town,” Kat said. She had half the tarot cards laid out and didn’t seem to like what she saw. “Jeeze, Brewer, doesn’t the paranoid-thing ever get boring?”

Winnie couldn’t believe what she was hearing from the boys. “But isn’t it worth taking a chance?” Winnie said. “We’ve been looking for a Ben all this time. We gotta tell him.”

“And convince him that we’re all crazy?” Brewer asked. “What are we going to say? ‘Excuse me, sir, we’re seventh-graders from the future, sent back into history to save your—’”

“History! That’s it!” Winnie grabbed the computer from Eric’s lap and set it next to her on the bed. “You keep all your notes for class on here, right?”

“Yes, but, the battery…”
“This will only take a second.” Winnie turned on the computer and waited impatiently through the muted Star Wars sound effects. Finally she got to the main screen, and from there she clicked through documents until she found Eric’s history notes. Kat and Brewer came and looked over her shoulder.

“I knew I’d heard of Richland Dam before,” she said. “That’s the dam that breaks in the flood of 1916… January 1916, heavy rains wash out most of San Diego’s bridges and break the Richland Dam. Several farms are lost.”

“Well, so?” Kat said, sitting back on her bed.

“So this farm might be one of the ones that is lost. Raymond said Sunnygrove River is nearby. We need to warn Mr. Carver. We can’t just—”

“We can’t worry about what will happen decades from now,” Eric said. “We’ve got to concentrate on getting home tonight.” He took the computer back from Winnie and brought up their notes on the Carvers.

“According to what we’ve all written,” Brewer said, looking over Eric’s shoulder now, “Mr. Carver is the top suspect. And I gotta agree. This afternoon I did see him bite into one of the lemons. No normal non-magic-using person eats a lemon!”

Eric tossed his ball into the air and caught it a couple times. Finally he said, “We’ll put it to a vote. All in favor of telling Mr. Carver our entire story, raise your hands.”

Winnie put her hand up, Kat did too, then she waited, watching her friends. The boys suddenly found interesting things to look at on the ceiling or on the floor. Did that mean finding a solution to the letter mystery didn’t matter? Wouldn’t knowing why they were sent to Carver Ranch help them unravel the bigger mystery of the ghost and Timothy, and help them get home? She felt betrayed.

Eric met her gaze for a moment, but then he looked away. “All opposed?” he said.

Brewer, still pacing, raised his hand. “Trust no one,” he whispered.

“I gotta go with Brewer,” Eric said, raising his own hand. “We’ve been figuring out things on our own so far. I think S.P.E.C.T.E.R. can do this if we work together.”

“Yeah, and what have you two figured out?” Kat snapped, springing off the bed and sending tarot cards scattering everywhere. Eric shrunk away from her. “It was me
and Winnie who—”

A knock sounded at their door.

“Game faces, everyone,” Brewer said. Whatever that meant. He opened the door.

Linda Carver, wearing a fresh pinafore, stood at the threshold.

“Well there,” Linda said, “how are you all faring this afternoon? No ill affects from your adventures last night, I trust?”

“We’re tip top,” Brewer said in his horrible English accent. The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

“Swell, swell. Then you’ll be joining us at the table.” Linda smiled broadly at them. “Just wanted to let you know supper will be served in ten minutes, in case you wanted to wash up.” She stood smiling at them a moment more, apparently seeing the scattered tarot cards and not caring—Eric had been quick enough to put the computer behind his back. Then she turned and shut the door behind her.

“Supper?” Kat said, “And it’s not even two o’clock yet. The eighteen hundreds are really creeping me out.”

“Okay, everyone,” Eric said, “we’ll figure out what to do about ‘Ben’ later.” He hid his laptop in its spot under the big, blue quilt. “For right now keep your eyes and ears peeled. The whole family probably gathers for supper. Watch everyone carefully but don’t draw attention to yourselves.” He looked at Kat and Brewer.

“Hey, no problems, boss,” Brewer said. “Sneaky is my middle name.”

As soon as the boys left for their room, Kat let lose a string of swear words, including a few Winnie hadn’t heard before. “I can’t believe those two,” she said, kneeling and picking up her tarot cards. “I expect it from Brewer, him being paranoid and all. But what about Eric? Sure, he’s smart, but just ‘cause you’re a genius doesn’t mean you can’t ask for help.” She fished a card out from under her bed.

Winnie could only nod. She hated the thought of S.P.E.C.T.E.R. arguing. It gave her a sour feeling in her stomach, and brought back unpleasant memories of her parents’ fights before the divorce.

“I guess we should go downstairs,” Kat said, standing and shoving her cards back in her pinafore pocket. She looked at herself in the little closet mirror. “I just wish I had some makeup with me.”
Kat opened the door, and Winnie followed. On the way out Winnie glanced back at the room and saw one of Kat’s tarot cards propped up against the foot of the dresser. It was the Death card.

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Supper was served in the dining room. Leaves had been added to the large table to fit all four S.P.E.C.T.E.R. members as well as seven family members. Mr. and Mrs. Carver sat at the heads of the table. Winnie, Kat, Timothy and Linda sat on one side of the table—to Mr. Carver’s right—and Mary-Ellis, Eric, Brewer, Raymond and Carl sat on the other side. It looked like Eric was originally supposed to sit next to Mr. Carver, but Mary-Ellis squeezed in between them at the last second.

All the wood in the room had a reddish color—Winnie thought it might be cherry. Oil paintings of people, probably relatives, decorated the walls. A chandelier with real candles hung above them. Even though it was only mid afternoon half of the candles in it were already lit. Crickets chirped outside, tricked into singing by the rain-darkened sky.

Linda and the servant, Ping, brought plates from the kitchen. Some of the food Winnie had already seen—biscuits and gravy, pears and apples, even bacon. But there was also roast chicken, lamb chops, green beans, and corn. Everyone except Mr. Carver drank lemonade or water. Mr. Carver had a cup that he filled from a short, dark bottle that didn’t have a label. Mrs. Carver would give the dark bottle a dirty look every once in a while.

At first everything went okay. They talked about the weather, and the lemon crop, and even Women’s Suffrage, which Winnie knew had something to do with voting. The Carver kids asked questions about school in France, and Winnie found it easier to answer as if she were just being asked about her real school. She told them about her teachers and about the other kids in her classes. Brewer did his impression of Mr. Long, the history teacher, and his nasal voice and flapping arms made Timothy laugh. Raymond was the only Carver who didn’t talk much. He smiled and nodded in the right places, and every once in a while would make eye contact with Winnie and toss her a wink.
Mr. Carver laughed hard at anything even the least bit funny. It was a big belly-laugh, like a department store Santa Claus. The more Winnie watched him, the more she liked him. What if he had already sent the letter to the future? What if he really needed help? How could she prove that he was on their side?

Mr. Carver handed her a wooden serving tray of roasted chicken, but Winnie couldn’t think about eating just now. She passed the tray to Kat on her right. Kat was about to take a slice of chicken when Timothy pulled out his toy gun and said, “I’m Black Bart. Gimme your chicken or else!”

Mr. Carver slapped the table with his free hand, almost knocking over his bottle, and let loose another belly-laugh.

“Daniel!” Mrs. Carver said, putting down her fork. Her face was red, and she scowled as if someone had just pinched her on the bottom. “You shouldn’t encourage that type of behavior at the table.”

Mr. Carver mopped his forehead with a handkerchief as his chuckles subsided. “No, no, dear. Sorry. I’m just tickled that Timothy has picked one of the softest, friendliest gunmen to rob a chicken plate with.”

“Nuh-uh...I mean, no sir,” Timothy said. “Black Bart was mean.” He took a few pretend shots at the chandelier, “pow” “pow”, before Linda confiscated his gun.

Brewer frowned and stared off into space for second. “Charles E. Bolton, or Black Bart as the papers called him,” Brewer intoned, “was as much a poet as a gunman. He would often leave verse, or thank you notes, at the scene of the crime. He was last spotted at his Nevada residence in 1888.”

“Very good, Mr. Brewer,” Raymond said, clapping politely. “You have us at a disadvantage—you know so much about our little corner of the world, and we know so little about yours.” He gave Winnie a knowing wink. “I’m sure my family would be delighted to hear some stories about Europe. And I, for one, would like to practice my French. Cultivent-ils des agrumes en France? Quand a-t-elle lieu la saison de croissance?”

So S.P.E.C.T.E.R. had just been lucky in not having to speak French so far! Or Raymond had been toying with them. Either way, they were caught.
Winnie had a piece of pear in her mouth but she couldn’t chew it (which was too bad, because it was good pear). Eric looked like he’d suddenly discovered something interesting in the bottom of his lemonade glass. Brewer appeared to be choking on a grape.

Only Kat didn’t look worried. She finished whatever it was she was chewing, took a sip of water, and said, “Certains. Nous cultivons des raisins, naturellement. Les prunes sont populaires, bien que je ne sois pas sûr si elles sont des agrumes. Et je ne sais pas des saisons de croissance. Nous ne sommes pas des fermiers.”

“Of course not,” Raymond said. He smiled, but Winnie noticed it was the type of smile that didn’t reach his eyes. Other family members looked surprised, especially Mr. Carver. Did Kat just throw them a curve ball? More importantly, where did Kat learn French, and could she keep this up?

Eric kicked Winnie under the table, and gave her an ohmygawd eyebrow raise. Winnie shrugged back.

Kat and Raymond continued to talk in French, and the rest of the family returned to their own conversations. Timothy asked some more questions about Europe, but they were general ones like, “Have you met the King of England?” and Winnie could easily answer them. Ping cleared the table and brought dessert—apple fritter with fresh ice cream. And it might have been the best fritter Winnie ever had. She just wished she could have had it under other circumstances. How could she enjoy food when her friend might run out of French at any second? And when the little boy across the table might not live to see another supper?

“Mother,” Raymond whined, interrupting Winnie’s thoughts. “Timothy has him at the table again.”
She looked to her right and saw Spikey, the horny-toed lizard, perched at the edge of Timothy’s desert tray, investigating the melted ice cream with his tongue.

“Timothy, we have guests!” Mrs. Carver declared, throwing down her napkin and pushing her chair back.

“Don’t trouble yourself, ma’am,” Ping said, appearing at Timothy’s shoulder. “I return the creature to its cage in the basement.”

“Bye-bye Spikey,” Timothy said. “I’ll be down to see you in a little bit and I’ll bring you some supper if I can find some crickets ‘cause I know you’re keen on those but if not I’ll bring you some worms sorry you’ll be cooped up but it won’t be for long.”

Timothy waved until Spikey and Ping disappeared into the kitchen.

Raymond watched the lizard go as well, a hateful expression on his face. As soon as the kitchen door shut he leaned across the table to Timothy. He was whispering, so Winnie couldn’t make out all the words. She caught something like, “If I find that lizard wandering…. .” She wished Brewer had been paying attention. Brewer claimed he could read lips.

Raymond leaned back in his chair and smiled, as if nothing had happened.

Winnie glanced around the table to see if anyone else had noticed the ugly expression that’d just crossed Raymond’s face. To her left, Mr. Carver was making a cigarette out of a small square of paper and a pouch of tobacco. Kat watched Mr. Carver closely, chewing on her hair the entire time. She’s probably wishing for a cigarette of her own, Winnie thought.

Across the table, Eric listened patiently as Mary-Ellis droned on about the boys at school who fancied her. Brewer and Timothy made faces at each other. Raymond tried to talk Carl out of his dessert. And Linda and Mrs. Carver chatted about shopping in San Diego. As Linda spoke she gestured wildly with her hands and the silver, clover-leaf ring on her finger reflected light from the candle chandelier.

Suddenly, though she didn’t know why, Winnie thought about her dream from last night. She tried to remember the details. In the dream it had been dark out, and cold. There were three people in robes, carrying a child—Timothy? could it be Timothy?—and there was fog, trees, and a stable in the distance with horses. She’d been leaning against a tree and the spooky people had spotted her. Then, right before she woke up, a
voice next to her had said “Now!”

She hadn’t mentioned the dream to the rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. because there was nothing they could do. Her dreams came true no matter what. Plus, her friends might not believe her, and end up calling her crazy. That’s what her mother said people would do.

Winnie shook her head and smiled at Mr. Carver, who was looking at her with concern on his face. “Sorry,” Winnie said. “Just daydreaming. I must be tired.”

“You had quite a night,” Mr. Carver said. He took a drag on his cigarette and Winnie tried not to cough in front of him. Thank goodness restaurants were non-smoking in her time. “Why don’t you go take a nap?” he said. “Nothing like being in a nice warm bed when it’s storming outside.”

But Winnie didn’t want to take a nap. There’d been something at the table that made her think of the dream just now. What was it? No one was wearing a robe. It wasn’t foggy…Winnie blinked away spots as a light flashed in her eyes. Linda’s silver ring reflected the candlelight above.

Winnie banged her knees against the table she sat up so fast. That’s it! she thought. That’s the same ring the robed figure in the dream wore! Linda Carver was the one they were looking for. She’s the one who had drawn the magic circle, and she’s the one who was planning on killing her own brother.
BOOK IV: The Storm

33. Visions

The rest of dinner seemed to move in slow-motion, kind of like a dream itself. Afterwards, to be polite, Winnie and Kat offered to help clean the dishes, which ended up taking a long time with Linda being so chatty. The only good thing about all the talking, and little listening, that Linda did was that it allowed Winnie to whisper the question to Kat that’d been bugging her.

“The French?” Winnie whispered as she dunked another serving tray into a sink-full of cold, soapy water. “Where’d yah learn it?”

“My grandmother’s from France,” Kat whispered, taking the serving tray from Winnie and drying it with an orange-checkered towel. “She and my mom speak in French sometimes…not so much now, but a lot when I was little.”

“How come you never told us about your grandma?”

“No one ever asked.”

“Oh….” Winnie said. Well, that was one mystery solved. She wanted to tell Kat about the ring, and the bigger mystery of the identity of the witch, but it was too risky with Linda right there. Winnie kept glancing at the Carver girl, half-expecting her to put on a pointed hat and jump on a broom.

Finally she and Kat were able to retreat upstairs. The boys were gathered in the girls’ room again, talking about suspects. Eric had his computer on his lap.

“I know who the mur—I know who person who hurts Timothy is,” Winnie said, out of breath from taking the stairs two at a time. “I know who makes the ghost.”

Eric and Brewer looked at her, mouths open.

“Not yet,” Brewer said. He stood up, quickly crossed the room, and shut the door. He stood with his back towards it and held the handle—his version of guard duty.

“First the typewriter and now the murder suspect,” Kat said, shaking her head. She jumped onto her bed, next to Eric, and made his computer bounce and blink. “Maybe Winnie’s Sherlock Holmes instead of Super Farm Girl.”

Eric moved his laptop away from Kat. “Who is it, Winnie? And how did you find out?”

Winnie stood in the middle of the room and bit her lip. After her sister’s accident, she hadn’t told anyone about her dreams. She didn’t know how to begin. It didn’t help that all of the members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. were staring at her, waiting.

“Oh-okay, but you better not laugh,” Winnie said. She sat down on her bed facing them. “When I was four I had a dream that my dog ran away, and then she did. She came back home a couple days later, sure, but I dreamt about the exact moment I found out she was missing. It was so real, yah know? I dreamt about searching through the house, and through the backyard. I dreamt about going out to the street and calling Bessie’s name. And I remember running to my mom, crying. And the very next day, all of that really happened.”

“Coincidences happen a lot,” Eric said, closing the laptop. “Just because there was one time that—”

“But it wasn’t one time,” Winnie said, hitting the bed with her fist. This was the response she feared the most from her friends—sympathy and patient disbelief. “It happened a bunch of times. Sometimes the dreams would be about little things, like what I was getting for my birthday. Other times they’d be about important stuff. Like yesterday, I dreamt that the principal would come and close down S.P.E.C.T.E.R. And he did. That’s why I wanted to hurry back to Headquarters when we were investigating Ashley’s haunted locker.” She tried again, and failed, to shove her hands in her pinafore pockets. “The problem is, no matter what the dream’s about, no matter what I do, they always come true.”

“Wicked,” Kat said in a whisper.

“Sounds like precognition,” Brewer said. He took off his bowler hat and ran his fingers through his curly hair.
“Why didn’t you mention this before?” Eric asked. He still sounded doubtful, like he was talking to a senile old aunt.

“Haven’t you been listening?” Winnie said. “I can’t change what I see, and sometimes what I see is people getting hurt….” And, suddenly, the tears were there. The same thing happened every time she thought about the accident. She rubbed her eyes with the edge of her apron and smelled chicken grease and soap from the kitchen.

“Three years before we moved,” she said, “I dreamt that my little sister, Sam, would get burned in the fireplace. I told my mom and dad to put out the fire, and to let me stay home and help keep an eye on her. I begged and cried a lot, but they wouldn’t listen to—”

“Had you told your parents about your special dreams before that day?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, I had but—”

“But they didn’t want to believe you,” Brewer said, still leaning against the door, “Lots of kids, when they’re little, think what they imagine or wish for will come true. Your parents probably thought you were just taking longer to grow out of that phase than other children.”

Winnie stared at him. She still felt tears hot on her cheeks, but now it was her turn to look shocked. “That’s it exactly. How did you know?”

“Books,” Brewer muttered. He replaced his hat. “Go on.”

She took a deep breath. “My parents made me go to school anyways,” she said. “So as soon as my mom dropped me off—I was in fourth grade—and I couldn’t see her car anymore, I ran through the snow all the way home. It took, like, an hour. By the time I got back, the fire engines and cops were already at the house…” This was going to be harder than she thought. She sniffled a couple times, but didn’t want to use her apron for a tissue. Rain thumped down on the roof. The room itself was quiet.

“They took her to the hospital,” she continued. “Sam ended up with third degree burns over…over some of her face. She’s still got the scars.” Winnie squeezed her apron between her hands, twisting it. Along with the tears, a pain would appear in her stomach whenever she thought about the dream—it was like paper cuts in her belly.

“I told my mother and father that I was sorry. That I should have tried harder to
save Sam. My mom told me I was being silly. But…but I think she blamed me. I think they never forgot about my dreams. I think that my dreams are one of the reasons why my parents split up.”

“That’s horrible,” Eric said, moving the laptop and standing up. Now he didn’t sound doubtful; he sounded mad. “How can your parents blame you? You tried to tell them. And they can’t even pretend that you were making things up. You’d told them about your dreams before. They had evidence that your dreams came true.”

“Winnie….” Brewer said. He left the door, crossed to the bed, and took her hand. “Listen to me. Everything I’ve read about precognitive dreams and visions says that they can’t be changed. If you see that something’s going to happen, it will happen. There’s nothing you could’ve done.”

“I agree,” Kat said. She got up off her own bed and came to sit next to Winnie. “I’ve done a lot of reading about witches, and so I’ve also read about clairvoyance and ESP and stuff, ’cause some writers think witches were just people with ESP. And everything I’ve seen says that Brewer is right.” She looked Brewer in the eye, and Winnie could tell it wasn’t easy for her to admit that Brewer might be right about something.

Winnie dried her eyes with the arm of her dress. It was nice of her friends to say those things, but in her mind she knew the truth. She knew it was her fault Sam was scarred.

“Anyways,” Winnie said. “That night I wished on every falling star I could find that my special dreams would go away. I didn’t want to see things if I couldn’t change them. The dreams stopped after that until—”

“Until two days ago,” Eric said. He’d pulled his baseball out of the laptop case and now he rolled it between his fingers.


Brewer let go of her hand quickly, as if he just realized he was holding it. He paced the room. “So, how do you know who drew the magic circle? What did you dream last night?”

“Well, it’s dark, and I’m sitting against a tree…” She told them about the fog, which was probably just smoke from the smudge pots. She told them about the three
figures in robes and the one that was carrying a small child. She told them about being spotted, and about the voice that came from behind her which said “Now!” Finally she told them about the ring that one of the robed people wore, the ring that matched Linda’s.”

“You couldn’t see any faces?” Eric asked.

“Nope,” Winnie said. “But I’m sure the ring is the same one Linda wears.”

“It looks like Linda has some help,” Brewer said. He stood up, walked over to the door, and pressed his ear against it. Then he opened the door quickly and said, “Gotcha!” But nobody was outside. There were just the usual kitchen noises, and the sound of hard rain on the roof.

“Just in case,” he said, sitting back down on a bed.

“Brewer, you wouldn’t know what to do if there was someone out there,” Kat said, then laughed. “You’d and the bad guy would end up scaring each other.”

“Winnie,” Eric said, “you think you could find the same spot in the lemon grove from your dream?”

“Yeah,” she said. “But why would I want to? They find me! And not just the ones in the robes. Someone sneaks up behind me too.”

“Yes,” Eric said. “But you’re assuming that the person behind you was one of the bad guys. What if it’s one of us? What if the reason you’re hiding under a lemon tree is because we’ve set a trap for Linda and her friends in gray?”

“You mean her dream is about us getting them?” Kat asked. “Not the other way around?” She stood up and touched the window. It was only four or five in the afternoon, but it was black as night outside.

“We know the set-up,” Eric said. He walked over and buried the laptop under the blue quilt. He didn’t even bother turning it off. “To be honest, I’m still not sure Winnie’s dreams are really visions, but if they are then we’re going to use them to help us, just like Winnie used her other dream to warn us about Principal Latham. We’re going to grab Linda before she can hurt anybody.”
The gang stood shivering underneath the lemon trees. After Winnie had told her story, Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. had come downstairs and snuck right out the front door of the house without being seen. Winnie guessed that since it was raining, the Carvers were either in the kitchen, the study, or shut up in other parts of the house. Hopefully the family thought that their visitors were still in their rooms.

The lemon trees were keeping off most of the rain, but a cold wind was blowing. For once Winnie was glad that her 1890’s outfit had so many layers. Now and then thunder would roar in from the distance and lightning would light up the lemon grove like a picture on a black-and-white TV. She could smell rain and mud and earthworms.

“At least it won’t be raining for long,” Winnie said.

Eric and Brewer, who were carefully studying one particular lemon tree, looked over at her.

“My dream,” Winnie said. “It’s not raining in my dream.”

The boys nodded and went back to their tree. Brewer would hold up their borrowed covered lantern once in a while and point to the higher branches.

“I’m actually a little jealous,” Kat said. She had finally put her apron/pinafore on, just to have another layer, though she still refused to wear the socks. “I’ve pretended to be a witch for a while now, but it looks like you’re the real thing; the ESP-type of witch, that is.”

Winnie didn’t feel like a witch. She didn’t feel anything except cold and scared and homesick. “Sam has called me a witch a couple times,” she said. “I guess she was right.”

“Gather around, people,” Eric said. “I’ve got a plan.” Winnie and Kat joined the boys underneath their tree.
“We think we can use the trees and some farm equipment to build a trap,” Brewer said. He set the lantern on the ground.

Eric squatted down in the mud and grabbed a dead tree branch. It could have been the same branch that Carl used to wave to her earlier that day, though that seemed like ages ago now. And Winnie had thought the Raymond/Carl team was suspicious. People weren’t always what they seemed.

“We’re going to use the trees as fulcrums,” Eric said, using the stick to draw in the mud. “Two ropes will be attached to a net…well, not really a net. It’s a big piece of canvas cloth that I saw against the tool shed earlier today. Then we’ll cross the ropes over each other, and loop them over the highest branches on these two trees on either side of the path. The other end of the ropes will be attached to a weight—probably a heavy piece of farm equipment. The ropes will be tied off here.” Eric pointed to a couple lines drawn in the mud. “When Linda and her friends walk by, we’ll cut the ropes and catch everyone in the net.”
Winnie looked at the mud-drawings as they were slowly being erased by water dripping from the tree above. Eric had drawn plans for lots of inventions back at school, though most stayed on the paper. Could he make this one real?

Kat pulled a length of wet hair into her mouth and chewed. “Okay,” she said, “maybe I’m missing the point, but this looks really complicated. Why don’t we just tell Mr. Carver that Linda is planning to black-magic little Timothy?”

“’Cause she’d deny it,” Brewer said. “We need to have proof. Otherwise we’ll sound crazy and paranoid. And I know all about sounding crazy and paranoid.” He smiled, but to Winnie he still looked a bit doubtful.

Eric stood up and wiped his hands on his checkered pants; Winnie noticed that the plaid pattern hid mud stains pretty well. “Kat and Brewer will bring over the farm equipment we need,” Eric said. “Brewer saw a couple lawnmower-sized machines with wheels he thinks he could push pretty easily. Winnie, you and I will go to the tool shed by the stables and get that big piece of canvas, along with as much rope as we can find. If the rain keeps up, the Carvers will stay inside. They won’t know what we’re doing.”

“Roger,” Brewer said.

“You don’t have a walkie-talkie, doofus,” Kat said, then she and Brewer headed off through the mud to the upper grove where that afternoon Winnie had run into Raymond and Carl and Raymond’s irrigation invention.

“I think the tool shed and stables are this way,” Eric said after the others left. He began walking at a brisk pace and Winnie hurried to catch up with him.

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Winnie and Eric walked through the rain in silence. Conversation would have been difficult anyway, with the thunder that rolled through every minute or so. Brewer had taken the only lantern, so they used the lightning to change their direction if they started straying off course. Eric didn’t want to use flashlights yet in case one of the Carvers came outside.

Finally Winnie saw the stables from earlier that day, where Carl had his fit, and
Raymond had used hypnotism to calm him down. Past the stables was a building she hadn’t noticed before. It looked like a small barn. Light shone from underneath the wide double-doors.

“We might have company,” Eric said.

Winnie pressed her ear against the tool shed door, like she’d seen Brewer do so many times before, but all she heard was the rain behind her. Did Brewer ever really hear anything when he listened at doors?

“I’m going to peek inside,” Eric said. “Stand back.”

She stepped away from the door as he pulled his baseball from the pocket of his pants. His borrowed clothes were drenched and his blonde hair was plastered to his head. He looked like a baseball pitcher playing a game that should have been rain-delayed.

Holding the baseball behind his back, he used his other hand to pull the barn door open just a crack and poke his head inside. “Coast is clear,” he whispered after a moment, and he stepped in. Winnie followed close behind him.

She didn’t know what to expect in an 1890’s tool shed, but she wouldn’t have guessed it would look like the workshop in front of them. Two covered lanterns hanging from the rafters above lit a room full of regular farm stuff—saws, hammers, picks, shovels, rakes, screwdrivers, nails, wrenches, knives, and some other tools that looked like fireplace bellows and small, pirate ship sails. All these tools were arranged neatly along the wall. There were also larger tools on the floor: drill presses and table saws.

But what really surprised Winnie were all the toys. Some were finished, like a doll cradle and a tricycle, but most were only halfway made. There were wooden soldiers and boats, dolls and ducks. There were toy guns and lions and trains. Kites hung from the ceiling, and most of a miniature carriage, complete with wooden horses, sat in one corner. It looked like Santa’s workshop. She breathed in the comforting smells of cold sawdust and oil, smells that reminded her of her dad’s farm back in North Dakota.

“This canvas will make a better net,” Eric said, walking over to the tool that looked like a ship’s sail.

Winnie picked up an unfinished toy train. “Mr. Carver can’t be a bad guy if he makes toys like these. I think we should trust him.”

“You may be right,” Eric said. He had lifted the sail/canvas off the wall, and was
trying to get it unhooked from the pole it was attached to. “Actually, I didn’t write anything suspicious about him in the computer. It must have been Brewer who made those notes.”

“Yeah, guess so,” Winnie said. She remembered the other part of their job, and spotted some coils of thick rope in one corner. But they were too heavy for her to lift on her own. So she wheeled over a red wheelbarrow that had been sitting near the workshop doors.

Working together, she and Eric got the canvas unhooked, and managed to load two long coils of rope into the wheelbarrow. Eric said he would push it while she carried the canvas.

“And I was just starting to dry off, doncha know,” Winnie said. “Now it’s right back into the wet.”

But Eric wasn’t moving. He stood in front of the door, one hand on it and one hand on the wheelbarrow. The rain on the roof sounded like hundreds of people tapping a bass drum with their fingers.

“So…this might be our only chance to stop Linda and save Timothy and get back to our own time,” Eric said. He faced the door, back towards her.

“Yeah-ah, I guess. But it looks like a good plan. You always have good plans.”

Eric was quiet again. Finally he said, “I just wanted to tell you…you know, in case things don’t work out and we…” He looked up at the roof as if searching for the end of his sentence. “I just wanted you to know why I first thought of asking you to join S.P.E.C.T.E.R.”

“Really?” Winnie asked. “Why?” This was certainly an evening for revelations. Winnie set the canvas down on the worktable. It was getting heavy.

Back still towards her, he said, “I mean, now I’m really glad I asked you because you’re smart and you pay attention to things and—,” he barked a short laugh, “and, with your dreams, you might be living proof of the supernatural.” He turned around and finally looked at her. “But I first asked you to join the Club because I liked you.”
Winnie felt her skin get warm. It was like the opposite of goose bumps. “What?”
“I like you,” Eric said. “I have since I saw you at the beginning of the semester. I...I don’t get it. I mean, you’re really cool, and you’re cute....” He looked down at the wheel-barrow and kicked it gently with his feet. “But I didn’t know when I first saw you that you’d be fun to hang out with, that you wouldn’t be like a typical seventh-grader chick. It was just...kinda weird. I didn’t know what to do. I was too nervous to ask you out.”
She couldn’t have heard him right. “Too nervous to ask me out?”
“Well...”
“But you’ve had girlfriends before.” Winnie remembered he had dated a couple of the cheerleaders.
“Yeah, they were okay. But I could ask them out because it wouldn’t matter if they said no. It wouldn’t be a big deal. With you, though....” He glanced at her quickly, but then turned back to the wheelbarrow.
Winnie didn’t know what to say. She never imagined he’d feel that way about her. He went for the skinny cheerleader chicks. Not that she was really heavy or anything. She was just average, with average, frizzy brown hair that never did what she wanted. She got the average amount of pimples. She had a bad habit of biting her nails. And she had a bit of a Dakota accent that she worried made her sound dumb. What made her special?
“You’re a cool person to talk to,” he said, as if reading her mind. “You talk about interesting stuff. You’re smart. You’ve got an awesome accent. And you actually follow baseball.” He smiled at his shoes. “Go Padres.”

At school, Winnie would’ve been totally freaked out. She would’ve giggled and
run from the room to go to tell Kat what just happened. Or she would’ve hid under her bed for a month out of sheer embarrassment. But she wasn’t at school. She was trapped in a different time with a murderer on the loose; she was a member of S.P.E.C.T.E.R. with a mystery to solve. She could be embarrassed later.

“Let’s talk about this when we get back to school,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah, of course. Got work to do.” Eric picked up the wheelbarrow. Winnie picked up the big sheet of canvas cloth and joined him at the door. “Ready?” he said.

“Ready,” she said. And in that moment before he opened the door, when she was too busy worrying about how to hold the heavy canvas, and about the cold rain outside. When she was thinking about home and magic and a poor little boy whose life might be in their hands. When for a moment she had her guard down, he kissed her.

It was her first.
They didn’t talk much on the way back, even though the storm seemed to be letting up and the thunder was only a distant growl—the sound of a housecat trying to be a lion.

Back at the ambush spot, they found that Brewer and Kat had already brought over two “weights”. One was a machine that reminded Winnie of the seed sprayers back on her dad’s farm. It had two wheels, like it was meant to be pushed by hand or pulled by a horse, and it had a big bucket to put seeds in. The other weight for the trap, Winnie realized to her surprise, would be Raymond’s irrigation-timer invention.

“Good job,” Eric said. “These should work. Let’s throw a rope over the tree and begin hoisting them up.”

Winnie tried to visualize Eric’s mud-drawing of his plan. “When yah spring the trap, isn’t Raymond’s invention gonna go smashing into the ground?” she asked. “Won’t he be mad?”

Eric pulled a coil of rope out of the wheelbarrow while Brewer shone the lantern at the top of the nearest lemon tree. Winnie noticed that Eric wouldn’t meet her eyes. “I think we’d get in trouble no matter what,” he said. “We are building a trap after all. Let’s just hope the storm lasts a little longer ‘cause when it clears, the temperature is going to drop fast, and then the family will be coming out to light the coal buckets.”

Kat had been messing around with the gears and ratchets on Raymond’s invention—didn’t matter if she broke something since they were going to smash it anyways—but now she stopped and gave Winnie a long, serious look. Finally she said, “Winnie, we need to talk.” Then she smiled mysteriously and turned her attention back to the irrigation machine.

“Brewer, I’m going to try tossing the rope,” Eric said, taking a few coils of rope
in his right hand. “Watch with the lantern and see if I make it over the branch we picked out.” Still looking at the rope he said, “Winnie, you want to head back to the house? See if the Carvers have noticed we’re gone. If they look suspicious then…well, make up something.” He gave the rope a toss, but didn’t nearly get enough height. The coils fell back into the mud. “Damn,” he muttered. Then, “Winnie, if you get a chance, also find out where our clothes are. I think we’d all feel better, and drier, in our regular stuff. We need to be ready to go home once we stop Linda.”

“Okay,” Winnie said. She didn’t like being off on her own again, but she was also annoyed at Eric for acting all embarrassed about a kiss. Boys! She left them to build their trap and headed for the house. A moment later she heard Eric curse under his breath as tree branches snapped under the weight of the rope. She glanced back several times as she walked; her friends looked wet and miserable, and somehow smaller.

Catching Linda in a net seemed like a good plan. But what if it didn’t work? These weren’t school bullies who would stick the gang’s heads in a toilet if the trap failed. Losing this battle would have much more serious consequences. If Linda was the reason Timmy would become a ghost, then Linda was willing to kill…

They needed help, Winnie decided.

She looked back once more, and when she saw her three friends struggling in the mud and rain, she knew she made the right decision.

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Warm, inviting yellow light flowed from the windows like popcorn butter, and still, Winnie paused at the front door. She didn’t like stepping into someone else’s house without knocking even if she was a guest. Plus, she was afraid of running into Linda. What if Linda could figure out what Winnie knew, just by looking at her? Linda used black magic after all.

Winnie wiped her muddy boots on the doormat several times, and tried to wring out as much water as she could from her dress and pinafore. Finally she took a deep breath and opened the door. Smells of coffee and hot cider greeted her in the entryway. She wiped her feet again and poked her head into the kitchen. Linda stood near the stove,
stirring a large pot. Mary-Ellis sat at the kitchen table, reading a book.

Through the archway to the left, where the living room would be in her own time, Winnie spotted Mrs. Carver sitting in front of a fireplace, darning a rather large sock. It was probably for Carl.

“Excuse me,” Winnie said, quietly.

Mrs. Carver looked up. “Good night!” she exclaimed and set down her knitting. “You must be soaked to the bone.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Winnie said. “I was hoping to get my old clothes, so I could change into something dry.”

“No proper for a young lady to be out in such weather,” Mrs. Carver said. She stood and led Winnie down the hall, towards the back of the house. “What got into your head?”

“We, uh…we don’t get many thunderstorms in France,” Winnie said as she followed Mrs. Carver deeper into the house. “We all wanted to see what one looked like.”

“Well, there’s nothing to see. The only thing you’d gain by watching a storm is a chest cold and early rheumatism.” Mrs. Carver stopped at a room Winnie had never been in. She remembered Eric saying that the Historical Society had an office in this part of the house—back in their own time, that was.

In this time it was a storage room, with crates stacked along the wall, and odds and ends of furniture, most in need of repair, sitting about. Hanging from a beam near the ceiling were Brewer’s black-suit, Eric’s Lakers jersey, Kat’s dark sweater, and Winnie’s overalls. The clothes looked like they were in good shape, Winnie thought, despite the fact that Mary-Ellis had been boiling them that morning.

“This is the driest room in the house,” Mrs. Carver said, “since chimneys run through two walls. Your clothes didn’t finish drying today but Linda got them inside before the storm hit. They should be superior to what you’re wearing now.”

“Thank you,” Winnie said. “I’ll just change in here if that’s all right.”

“Fine, fine. I do hope the rest of your friends aren’t strolling about in this weather, taking sick. May heaven forfend that we don’t get another illness running through my family.” She gave Winnie a rather stern look and left the room.
Winnie changed quickly. The clothes were damp, but they were better than her dress and pinafore. Besides, it felt good to be in her overalls and shirt again. She didn’t think she’d ever get used to wearing dresses.

Winnie rolled Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R.’s clothes into a bundle, which she held at her side as she peeked out the door. The coast was clear—no Linda or Mrs. Carver. Winnie crept down the hall and up the stairs without being noticed. All the doors upstairs were open, probably so the heat from downstairs could warm the rooms. Her and Kat’s room was empty, so was the ghost room. And Timothy’s bed still covered the magic circle on the ground. The red paint had dried—the circle was probably ready for whatever dark magic Linda had in mind.

Winnie set her friend’s clothes on Kat’s bed. Then she reached under the mattress and found the boy’s flashlights, her watch, and all of Kat’s charms. She stared at their modern items for a moment, before wrapping them up in the clothes bundle and pulling a blanket over the whole thing—a bit of camouflage in case someone walked by.

It’s now or never, she told herself. She checked the hallway, then crept over to Mr. Carver’s office. This was the one room she hoped and prayed wouldn’t be empty. Sure enough, Mr. Carver sat at the desk with his back towards her, smoking a cigar and typing on the heavy old typewriter.

She stood in the doorway. “Mr. Carver,” she said. He didn’t respond, and she thought he might not have heard her, but then he finished a line of type, pulled the paper out of the machine, and set it on the desk next to him.

“What can I do for you, missy?” he asked, turning around in his chair.

“Well, sir, if you have a moment I’d…I’d like to talk to you.” Suddenly, Winnie wasn’t so sure about her decision. She hated to betray the group this way. If she was wrong, and telling him ruined their chances of stopping Linda—

“Sure thing,” he said, setting his cigar down in a lumpy clay ashtray that was probably made by a child. It looked like elementary school art projects hadn’t changed in the last hundred years. “What’s on your mind?” he asked.

Winnie realized she was chewing her thumbnail, and forced her hands behind her back. “Sir, I want to tell you the real reason we’re here.”
Winnie sat in a soft leather chair near the room’s big blue globe, and told Mr. Carver everything. She told him about S.P.E.C.T.E.R. and described what the Club did. She told him about the mysterious letter and the picture of the ghost taken by a camera with a cracked lens. She told him about the trip to the Ranch, followed by their trip through time. She told him about her dream and about Linda’s black magic. She even talked about her sister, her parents’ divorce, and adjusting to a new school. Finally, she described the history filmstrip she saw, and the flood that would hit the area in 1916. The only thing she didn’t mention was the trap that her friends were building out in the grove.

Mr. Carver listened patiently. He only spoke once: to ask Winnie’s permission to light up another cigar.

One and a half cigars later, Winnie finished her story. She even added a “The End” so that Mr. Carver would know she was done.

“That’s a corking good yarn,” Mr. Carver said. The end of his cigar disappeared beneath his mustache as he took a couple puffs.

Winnie had imagined a whole bunch of reactions: he might be angry or afraid or think she was just plain nuts. But this kind of amused, gentle disbelief was the worst.

“I guess I should feel honored,” he said. “It’s no easy thing to go on your own hook like this. Your friends won’t be happy you let me in on your ‘secret.’”

“But I had to,” Winnie said, leaning forward in her chair. “I needed to tell you all about S.P.E.C.T.E.R. so that you’d have enough information to write the letter that gets delivered to us a hundred years from now. Yah see? In my time we’ve already had this conversation. If we didn’t, there’d be no letter, because you wouldn’t know the Club existed.”

Mr. Carver let loose a loud belly-laugh and nearly dropped his cigar. “I know
what you’ve been up to! You must’ve been reading some H. G. Wells and Mark Twain.” He sat back in his chair, still chuckling. “You know, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and *The Time Machine*. To your credit, you’ve certainly given the whole time-travel business a new twist, adding dreams and ghosts and what-not. You’re no slouch.”

“I can prove it,” she said. “I have the letter…” But, no, Eric had the letter. “Wait, the circle. I can show you the magic circle.” She got up, grabbed Mr. Carver’s hand, and tried to pull him out of the chair. He was much too heavy, of course.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on there buckaroo. I’m coming.” Mr. Carver stood and set the cigar down in the ashtray. “Let’s go look at this here magic.”

Winnie led him to Timothy’s room, nervously glancing down the stairs on her way. She didn’t want Linda to see them. Once in the room she knelt down next to the bed. For a terrifying moment she was sure the circle would be gone, that witchcraft would hide it somehow. But it was there—just hard to see because she only had the light coming through the door to guide her. She showed Mr. Carver the edge of the circle that she could just make out underneath Timothy’s bed.

Mr. Carver got on his hands and knees and looked under the bed. Then he stood and moved the bed aside with one, strong pull. He studied at the circle in its entirety for a bit. Then he went out into the hall and returned with an oil lamp.

“So, what do you think?” Winnie asked after he looked some more.

Mr. Carver stroked his long mustache. “I think there’s a little boy who’s getting a spanking for painting on his bedroom floor.”

“But he didn’t do it.” Winnie actually stomped her foot, then forced herself to calm down. “It was Linda because—”

“Because you had a dream about a silver ring,” Mr. Carver said. “Yes, yes, you told me.” He laughed again. “Come here, I think I got something that might help you.”

He moved the bed back and set the lamp on Timothy’s dresser. Then he returned to his office. Winnie followed close behind.

“Let’s see, which will do…” Mr. Carver studied the shelves that held the old-fashioned cameras. Finally, he picked one. “Here you go,” he said, handing it to Winnie. “This ol’ camera has a cracked lens. Maybe you can take a picture of a ghost with it.”
Winnie stared at the camera in disbelief. She’d taken such a big chance with Mr. Carver, but he thought she was just a silly girl, making up stories because she was bored. “Uh…thanks,” Winnie said, and let him place the heavy camera in her hands.

She paused for a moment, waiting for Carver to say, “Just kidding, let’s go save Timothy.” But he only stood and smiled. Winnie felt ten times guiltier than she had earlier. She betrayed her friends, had risked their chances of stopping Linda, and all she got out of it was a smiling man with a mustache, staring at her like she was the cleverest puppy in the litter.

She hurried out of the room to go retrieve her friends’ clothes. Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. wasn’t going to have help after all. She felt like crying.

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When she arrived back at the ambush site, the group was glad to see her. They were also glad to get their clothes back. Winnie handed everything over except the old-fashioned camera, which she had left back in her room. She tried to smile and look positive when Eric showed off his trap, though it wasn’t easy—at any moment she expected someone to read the guilt on her face and call her a traitor.

The trap was almost complete. Raymond’s irrigation-timing machine hung from the tree on the left. Across the row, working by the light of the hooded lantern, Brewer and Kat were using ropes to hoist the seed-planter machine into another tree.

The storm had moved on, leaving muddy ground and wet leaves. Above, the stars shown coldly, like needle pricks in the sky. Winnie shivered. It would definitely drop below freezing tonight.

“Nobody look,” Kat said, after Eric had tied off the seed-planter. She took her clothes with her and stepped behind a tree down the row.

“Everything all right back at the house?” Eric asked. He must’ve gotten over his embarrassment about the kiss, because he could meet Winnie’s eyes. He was looking at her curiously.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Now she didn’t want to make eye contact. Instead, she looked at the path that Linda would walk down. “Where’s the net?”
“We buried it under some mud and leaves,” Eric said. He walked over and showed her one edge of the canvas. “They won’t be able to see it, though. And you can barely see our ropes without the lantern. It’ll be better once the coal buckets start going.”

Brewer finished tying the rope from the seed-planter to the opposite side of the canvas. All they needed to do was cut both tie-off ropes at the same time, and the weights would lift the canvas cloth up off the ground, trapping Linda and her friends.

Kat came back in her regular clothes, charms and pendants jingling musically.

“Shhh,” Brewer said. “Can’t you mute those things?”

“You won’t be complaining once the silver penguin saves the day,” Kat said, holding up her largest charm.

“Don’t underestimate the power of the flightless bird,” Brewer said, and laughed nervously. Then he and Eric took their clothes and went to different trees to get changed.

“So,” Kat said, when they were alone. “Got something to tell me?”

Winnie’s heart sped up. How could Kat know about her meeting with Mr. Carver? Could she read it on her face? Or did someone see her?


“Oh…that. How did you know?”

“Yes, that. What else would I be talking about?” Kat frowned at her for a moment, as if trying to read her mind, then she shook her head and smiled again. “I could totally tell by the way you two were looking at each other. Jeeeeeze, I’m not blind.”

“It wasn’t anything, really, I just—” But Winnie was interrupted by Brewer appearing in his all-black stealth-suit. He gave a nearby tree a couple practice karate kicks. Then Eric came over in his jeans, jacket, and baseball cap, looking very relieved to be out of the horrible plaid pants.

“I saw smoke a few rows down,” Eric said. “They’re lighting the smudge pots. We should get into position.”

They decided to put Kat and Eric on one side, and Brewer and Winnie on the other (Kat was about to suggest a trade, so Winnie and Eric could be together no doubt, but Winnie motioned for her to be quiet). All they would have to do is stay hidden, and
cut the ropes when Linda and her friends walked over the net.

After getting into position next to the tree, Winnie stood for a long while, but then her feet got tired so she crouched down and leaned her back against the tree. She felt the cold bark through her shirt, just like in her dream. Brewer crouched next to her with his hands resting on the small hatchet he’d use to cut the rope.

“You don’t know when they come, do you,” Brewer said. It was more of a statement than a question.

“No, but it felt like it was very late at night.”

“Then we have a long wait.”

Winnie switched between standing and crouching, so that her legs wouldn’t fall asleep. She even tried sitting on the ground, but it was too cold and wet. Finally, after what seemed like hours, smoke began to wind between the trees near them. It coiled around the trunks slowly, like a black serpent.

She played her dream over and over again in her head. The robed figures would come into view, Timothy would cry, the figure in the middle would spot them. And then somebody, probably Brewer, would say “Now!” That’s where her dream stopped. No way to know if the trap would end up working.

She made a decision. If this was their last night together, she didn’t want to go out as a liar. “Brewer,” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“About Mr. Carver. I think he can be trusted. In fact, I—”

“Yeah, I think he can be trusted too,” Brewer whispered. “But other people didn’t think so. I just looked over all the evidence on the computer. Plus, he ate that lemon…."

“You mean you didn’t make notes about him being suspicious?”

She could sense him shaking his head in the darkness. “No, Winnie, I thought you did.”

“I didn’t,” Winnie said. “And Eric didn’t either.” Winnie began to understand what had happened. They’d been played! “And I don’t think Kat ever used the computer,” she said.

Brewer inhaled sharply. “Someone tampered with the computer? Linda?”

“I don’t think so,” Winnie said. “She was in the kitchen all day.”
Then, suddenly, all the pieces that’d been floating around in her head came together. They’d found Spikey, the lizard, hanging from the tree, and Raymond was the one who hated lizards. Mary-Ellis looked hypnotized when she warned them to leave the house, and Raymond knew how to hypnotize people. The notes in the computer, with “fellow” and “I’ll tell you frankly”—Raymond talked just like that! And it was Raymond who went to school all the way over in Massachusetts. She remembered Timothy asking his father if Raymond would be a famous inventor, and his father had seemed worried when he answered. What had Raymond been studying in college?

“It’s Raymond!” Winnie said, a little too loudly. She lowered her voice. “It has to be him. You said his invention looked kinda…high-tech for this century? Maybe he somehow knows about computers too. I think he typed in his own notes about himself and his dad.”

“Well…” Brewer said, squatting next to her. “That might be possible. Eric said that there were some really advanced mechanics in his invention. Do you think Raymond’s an alien? Or maybe he’s a time-traveler that—”

“The computer!” Winnie said, cursing herself. “It was warm when I found it and I didn’t say anything.”

“We’re in trouble,” Brewer said. “If Raymond’s seen our computer, than he knows we’re not from around here. He might even know what we’re up to. We should call off the ambush until we…” He trailed off into silence.

“What?” Winnie asked. “What’s wrong?” She looked between the trees. Thick black smoke swirled, as if stirred by the wind, and then parted. Three figures appeared. They wore heavy wool robes, gray as bone dust. Cowls were pulled forward, hiding faces. The person on the right wore a silver ring on her finger.

The three moved forward slowly, appearing to drift through the smoke. The one in the middle carried a bundle. The bundle whimpered, and Winnie felt sure the whimper came from Timothy.

Her heart pounded in her ears. The cold, rough bark of the tree pressed against her back. Smoke from the coal buckets clawed at her throat and she tried not to cough. Surely it must be time to spring the trap. Linda would see them if she got any closer. Or she’d hear the hammering of Winnie’s heart. Winnie tried to pick Brewer’s eyes out of
the shadow to her right. *Cut the rope,* she mentally commanded.

The figures moved closer, ever so slowly. Suddenly Winnie’s feet hurt and her legs were cramping. Just her luck, she thought, she’d been sitting in the same position for over an hour and *now’s* when her body decided to complain. She had a horrible image of not being able to stand up when Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. needed her, so she tried to switch out of a kneeling position and get her blood flowing again. She began to move but, with her feet asleep, she was having a hard time keeping her balance. She put her hand on the ground to steady herself and she felt something snap. A twig had broken under her hand! The sound seemed to echo through the lemon grove.

The figure in the middle swung its cowled head in her direction. And that’s when the voice sounded next to her: the voice from her dream that was also the voice of her friend.

“*Now!***” Brewer shouted.
After all that waiting, after watching the figures ever-so-slowly approach, Winnie had thought things couldn’t move fast enough. She was wrong.

The word was hardly out of Brewer’s mouth when she heard a whirring sound and a crashing of metal. Part of the large tarp, from the side of the path nearest her, rose out of the ground like a ghost. The three figures lost their footing and tilted sideways. The one on the left actually fell. But this was only slowing them down. They’d all recover soon enough if the entire net didn’t go up.

Next to her, Brewer cursed under his breath. The first swing of the hatchet hadn’t cut the rope all the way through. He swung again, using all his strength. That’s when his feet slipped on the muddy ground and he tumbled forward.

Winnie gasped. If he fell on the hatchet, Timothy wouldn’t be the only ghost they had to worry about. But, no, she saw a glint of metal as something landed next to her.

“Ugh,” Brewer said as he hit the ground.

She picked up the hatchet and risked a glance at their trap. The person in the middle was busy trying to stop the bundle—Timothy—from struggling. But the robed figure on the left was already getting to its feet. And the one on the right—Linda—pointed her ringed finger directly at Winnie.

“Get them!” she hissed.

Winnie had just one chance. She roughly rolled Brewer over with her foot, because he was lying too close to the rope. As soon as he was clear she brought the hatchet down as hard as she could, and hoped her aim was true.

For the longest second of her life, nothing happened…

Then Linda’s hiss turned into a cry of alarm. She toppled sideways against the other two robed figures. Timothy fell out of the middle one’s grasp. Then all four
disappeared from view as the large canvas lifted off the ground.

Winnie jumped when the seed-planter that had been used as a weight on her side of the trap crashed into the mud.

The canvas net and its prisoners rose off the ground one foot, two…then stopped and swayed slightly.

“We did it!” Kat cried from across the way. She ran up to the trap and poked at a lump in the canvas. And “ugh” sounded from within. “How do you like that, Linda?” Kat asked. “Just wait till Mr. Carver sees what you’ve been up to. You’re sooooo busted.”

Eric stepped forward and turned on his flashlight. No point in being sneaky now, Winnie guessed. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “It worked.”

Kat spun around. “Can’t believe it? But you told us that it was a great plan.”

“Well….” Eric said, smiling.

A groan sounded from behind Winnie. Brewer walked up and stood next to her, bathing the trap in his own flashlight beam. He was caked in mud, and was probably bruised, but he was smiling. “We did it,” he said, sounding as surprised as Eric had.


“Conspiracies beware!” Brewer shouted as he spun with her.

Then Kat seemed to realize what she was doing and pushed Brewer away. She wiped her hands on her pants and looked around at the group. Winnie couldn’t help smiling at her. “You’ll speak of that to no one,” Kat warned.

“Don’t mean to be a buzz kill,” Eric said. He watched the moving bulges in the canvas warily. “But I don’t know how long this will hold. We’ve got to go get Mr. Carver and—”

“I’ll do it,” Winnie said. She grabbed Eric’s flashlight and began jogging towards the house before anyone else could volunteer. She wanted to ask Carver to not tell her friends about their conversation up in his study.

But she hadn’t jogged ten paces before she heard a long, tearing sound behind her. This was followed quickly by a thud and a grunt. She spun around. The net had been cut open and the robed figures were pouring out. The first one’s hood fell back as he landed
on the ground. It was Carl!

Raymond stood next to the canvas net. Where did he come from? He wore a long, black robe and held a large, wicked-looking knife in his hand. Eric lay at his feet, not moving.

Brewer aimed a karate kick at Raymond, but it never landed because Carl, still lying on the ground, had grabbed his other foot. For the second time in the space of a minute, Brewer went crashing into the mud.

Then Kat launched herself at Raymond’s back, hitting him on the shoulders with her fists. Raymond stumbled but didn’t go down. By this time, Linda had freed herself from the net. She easily pulled Kat off her brother and held her with her feet kicking in mid air. “Get off me you nineteenth-century rejects,” Kat screeched.

Mary-Ellis, her gray cowl all askew, tumbled out of the canvas last. Winnie couldn’t believe her eyes. Was the whole family working with Raymond?

“Get her,” Raymond said, pointing his knife in Winnie’s direction. Mary-Ellis surprised her with how fast she moved, and Winnie had to duck to the side to avoid being grabbed. She turned down the next row of lemon trees and began running across the muddy soil. She looked back and saw Mary-Ellis hot on her heels. She turned left down another row of lemon trees and then turned right. But each time she looked back, Mary-Ellis was just a few paces away.

If I live through this, Winnie thought, I promise to exercise every day and never watch TV again. She dodged between trees and around smoking coal buckets, and still the Carver girl followed.

Winnie began panting, her throat burning from the smoke. Her flashlight beam occasionally bounced off wet lemon trees ahead of her, but mostly it just reflected off the smoke and shone back in her eyes….

That’s it! she thought. The flashlight was giving her away.

At the next intersection between rows of lemon trees, Winnie chucked the flashlight down the row to her left and then dodged to her right and ran as fast as she could. She risked a quick glance over her shoulder—no Mary-Ellis. The sound of the other girl’s panting drew farther away.

After another minute of running Winnie felt sure she wasn’t being followed. She
stopped, leaned against a lemon tree, and tried to catch her breath. What should she do? Raymond needed the magic circle, which meant he was heading towards the house. But there was now way she’d beat him there to warn Mr. Carver. Heck, she didn’t even know where she was at the moment. Plus, after what she saw, she wasn’t sure if any of the Carvers were trustworthy.

As her heart returned to its normal speed, she looked around: black sky, black mud, black smoke, and the ghosts of trees for as far as she could see; except in one direction. Off in the distance a fuzzy, red light shone through the smoke. She remembered it from her dream—the stables! Maybe she could find a horse and ride to the next farm. Neighbors would know how to get a hold of the police.

She headed towards the stables, stopping now and again to listen for sounds from Raymond’s group. Once she thought she heard shouting but it was too far away to make out the words.

After a seemingly endless journey through the smoke she arrived at the stables. As she searched for the main doors, she tried to remember everything she could about riding a horse. She hadn’t been on one in over a year. Hopefully it was just like riding a bike—it’d come back to her.

She undid the simple latch on the stable doors and crept inside. A glass lamp burned low at the far end of the building, throwing the stable into shadows. She waited for a moment, squinting into the darkness, but couldn’t see anyone else. Finally she crept forward. The lamp sat on a table that held a plate of bread and a jug of water. Maybe, she thought, farm hands came here for a snack when they were out all night working the coal buckets.

She was happy to see well-oiled leather saddles hanging on one wall, along with bits and bridles. She had everything she needed to saddle up a horse. Now to pick one. She lifted the lamp and walked along the stalls. The door to the first stood open, and the stall itself was empty. The second was empty too, as was the one after that and the one after that. They’d let all the horses out, Winnie realized. Raymond didn’t want anyone going for help.

What could she do? She was about to give up looking, and just start walking to a neighbors’, when she heard a snort from the last stall. The door to it stood open, just like
all the others, but there was definitely a horse inside.

She raised the lamp. “Smokey?”

Smokey pawed at the ground with one hoof. He was tethered to the back of his stall. Raymond had probably been too chicken to undo the rope.

“Hey boy,” she whispered. “It’s okay, it’s just me.” She stepped slowly into the stall. “Heya, I’m just going to untie you and….” Untie him and what? He wasn’t broken. Sure, she was good with animals, but it’d take time and patience to handle a horse like this. Time was something she didn’t have. The horse pawed the ground again and shook his mane.

Then she remembered how Carl had handled him. Smokey seemed to respect strength.

“Listen,” Winnie said, raising her voice—something she’d normally never do when handling an animal. “You and I are going to go for a ride. I don’t like it any more than you do, but that’s what’s happening.”

She risked a step forward and tried not to show fear. Smokey eyed her and snorted once.

“I’m going to untie you now and you’re going to be good.” Winnie grabbed the rope and Smokey tried rising up on his hind legs. She guessed he would do this, so she quickly yanked down on the rope with all her strength. Smokey snorted, but kept all four hooves on the ground.

“There you go,” she said in her normal speaking voice. “I think we’ll get along just fine.”

She was able to get him out of the stall. But when she set down her lantern, and tried to approach him with a saddle he went nuts—bucking and pawing at the ground.

“Okay, okay,” she said, grabbing his tether and yanking again. “No saddle for you.” When she yanked bank on the tether, she knocked the table and tipped over the lantern. The flame went out. She didn’t have any matches.

She walked Smokey out of the stables and then looked around at the dark lemon grove. The carriage-path would lead away from the ranch, and hopefully to a main road and a neighbor’s house, but where was the path? And even if she found it, how far away would the nearest ranch be?
She thought of her friends at the mercy of Raymond and the other Carvers. How long had she been in the stables? Raymond could already be at his magic circle and be casting whatever evil spell he planned on using Timothy for. She didn’t have enough time to go for help.

She patted Smokey. “I’m climbing up now, and you’re going to be good.” He offered a snort of protest, but let her climb up on his back. Without a saddle, she had to brace herself against the stable to climb aboard.

She walked Smokey around in a circle until she spotted lights from the Carver house in the distance, then she straightened the horse out and began trotting him in that direction. She didn’t know what help she’d be when she got there, but she decided she’d rather meet the same fate as her friends than be trapped in the past all alone.
Travel on a horse was much quicker than walking. Even in the pitch black, Smokey was able to find his way through the lemon trees and around the billowing coal buckets. It didn’t take long for Winnie to reach the house.

The front door was open, and warm, yellow light poured out. To her surprise, she saw four robed figures—three in gray and one in black—filling the entrance hall and heading towards the stairs. She’d somehow caught up with them! She brought the horse to a stop. What should she do now?

If Eric were here, she thought, he’d come up with some elaborate plan to rescue everyone. Brewer, on the other hand, would choose to sneak through the house and catch everyone by surprise. Kat would probably challenge Raymond to a magic duel. But the rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. wasn’t here…it was only Winnie. What would a Winnie do?

She looked at the large front door. It stood wide open, and she remembered thinking the night before that the door looked big enough to ride a horse through. Then she remembered her first meeting with Raymond and Carl, and how Raymond had acted around Smokey—he’d made sure to keep his brother between himself and the horse.

She made her decision and gave Smokey a quick kick in the flanks. He began to trot. She urged him on: “You can do it, boy. Faster now.” She kicked him again and soon Smokey was racing across the front lawn. As she approached the porch she leaned down and grabbed Smokey around the mane. This wasn’t a show horse; she couldn’t force through the small space. It was up to him now.

“He-yah,” Winnie said. “Go, Smokey, go!” She felt his muscles flex, felt his hooves leave the ground. Suddenly the frame of the doorway was passing just inches above her head and she and the horse were landing in the front foyer amid a jumble of robes, cowls, and flailing arms.
“What? No!” She heard Raymond scream.

She raised her head in time to see Raymond put Timothy down and pull his knife from his robes. He pointed it at her, but didn’t dare approach the horse. Smokey snorted and pawed the air.

“Get her,” Raymond commanded.

Winnie spun the horse in a circle. She was surrounded by Carvers, and they each had a prisoner. Mary-Ellis held a groggy Eric around the neck. He had a large bump on his head and his hair was matted with blood. Carl gripped Brewer around the waist, holding his feet off the ground. And Linda had Kat in a big bear hug. That’s why the Carvers took so long to reach the house, Winnie realized. They had prisoners. And now they couldn’t go after her without releasing her friends. They were at a standoff.

Or so she’d thought. Mary-Ellis let go of Eric, and he slumped to the ground. Then she ran at Winnie. Smokey spooked and bucked. Winnie held on to his mane as hard as she could, but knew she wouldn’t be able stay on long. Even bucking bronco riders had saddles, and she was riding bareback. She tried to judge her dismount, and the next time Smokey set all four hooves back on the floor, she let go. She hit the floor and rolled away from the horse, avoiding the slashing hooves. As soon as he was rider-less Smokey bolted for the door and disappeared into the night.

“I was right, you are a daisy,” Raymond said, laughing. “Or…one crazy chick, as they’d say where you come from.”

From her spot on the floor Winnie could see him waving his knife through the air. He approached slowly, wearing a smile that, for once, reached all the way to his eyes. “You’ll regret coming back,” he said. But before he could get to her, Eric groaned.

“Damn,” Raymond said, watching Eric as he tried to struggle to his feet. “So much to do, so little time. I feel like the white rabbit.” He walked towards Eric, then called over his shoulder: “Mary-Ellis, take her!”

Winnie managed to stand up just before Mary-Ellis got to her. The Carver girl charged, hands in fists, uttering a high-pitched shriek. But despite all the emotion in her body, her eyes were dead. Winnie remembered Mary-Ellis wearing the same expression last night when she was sleepwalking.

Winnie ducked the girl’s first swing, then took a fist in the shoulder. Her left arm
throbbed and her fingers tingled like they were going numb. What was she doing? Winnie had never fought in her life; she didn’t even have brothers to wrestle with. She backed away from Mary-Ellis and thought about her day spent with the girl—Mary-Ellis leaving her to stir the laundry, Mary-Ellis trying to flirt with Eric—and Winnie realized she really didn’t like this particular Carver.

Mary-Ellis rushed her again, fists flying. This time Winnie stepped forward and slapped her full in the face. “That’s for leaving me with the laundry,” Winnie said under her breath. Mary-Ellis’ head rocked back and she stumbled. She blinked several times and when she looked at Winnie again, her eyes had gone back to normal.

“What…what’s happening?” the girl asked.

Winnie stared at Mary-Ellis. Her confusion didn’t seem like an act. “They’re hypnotized!” she shouted. “Just slap them!”

Raymond had been leaning over Eric with his knife, but now he looked up. “No! You don’t know what you’re doing!”

Kat, still struggling in Linda’s arms, said, “You’re not supposed to wake a sleepwalker, but….” She stomped down on Linda’s left foot as hard as she could. Linda loosened her bear hug just a fraction and Kat spun in her arms to face her. “This is for all those boring stories about cooking,” she screamed, and slapped her across the face. Linda blinked and let go. Kat fell to the floor.

Brewer tried to follow Kat’s moves. He stomped down on Carl’s foot with all his might, and when Carl let go he turned around and slapped him. Carl’s expression didn’t change! He reached out for Brewer, but Brewer managed to duck under his arms.

“Sorry ol’ chap,” Raymond said. He approached Brewer, knife held high. “I’ve been conditioning Carl for years. No one but me snaps him awake.”

Brewer dropped into a karate stance, and Winnie hoped that all his practice would pay off. She also hoped that Kat was wrong about him—Kat said that he never took a karate class in his life; that everything he knew he got from Bruce Lee movies.

Before Raymond could reach Brewer, a baseball whizzed through the air and knocked the knife from his hand. The knife went skittering across the hardwood floor and into the dining room. The baseball rolled right out the front door and onto the porch.

“You shouldn’t play with knives,” Eric said. He was holding his head and
swaying on his feet, but he looked like he’d be all right if they could get him to a doctor.

“No!” Raymond yelled. “I don’t have time for this.” He dropped his robes—he was wearing his regular, black farm suit underneath—and picked up Timothy. The boy had been bundled up in a horse blanket that was cinched tight with a rope. “Carl, guard the stairs. I’ve got some magic to do.” He slung Timothy over his shoulder.

Carl placed himself at the foot of the stairs, between Brewer and Raymond, and Raymond was able to scoot behind his brother and begin climbing to the second floor.

“Someone’s gotta to stop him!” Winnie shouted.

“Yeah,” Eric said, “but coach just sent me back to the dugout.” He sat down hard on the floor. “I don’t feel so good.”

Winnie looked at Mary-Ellis and Linda. Both had confused, sleepy expressions on their faces. They wouldn’t be any help right now. And Eric was really hurt. “Kat,” she said, watching as Raymond reached the second floor landing, “can you cast a spell on him or something?”

Kat watched Brewer and Carl square off against each other at the base of the stairs. “Uhm…crap. I don’t know. Until yesterday I didn’t think magic actually worked. I don’t know if the spells I learned are, like, real spells, or if they’re just fun Wiccan rituals for holidays.”

Brewer jumped and spun and aimed a kick at Carl’s knee, which missed completely. Then Brewer tumbled forward and tried a karate chop to the neck, and missed again. Winnie realized Kat was right—Brewer didn’t know real karate. Lucky for their friend, though, all of Brewer’s movie-style jumps and spins and tumbles were confusing to follow, and made it nearly impossible for Carl to hit him back. It was a standoff.

Winnie hurried over to Eric and looked at his head. She tried to ignore Carl and Brewer and the retreating Raymond for a moment and thought back to the first aid she’d learned on her father’s farm. Sure, the first aid she’d learned had been for animals, but hopefully most of it applied to people too. Since the bump on Eric’s head was small and round, she guessed that Raymond had hit him with the handle of his knife. She knew scalp wounds usually looked worse than they actually were because they tended to bleed a lot. “Kat, come over here and put pressure on Eric’s head, but not too hard. We need
to stop the bleeding.”

Kat watched Brewer for a moment more, than joined Winnie at Eric’s side. She pulled the sleeve of her sweater over her hand and held it on Eric’s head.

“Ouch dat hurds,” Eric mumbled.

“What are you going to do?” Kat asked, but Winnie hardly heard her. She was looking at the blood she’d got on her hand from examining Eric’s head.


“What are you doing?” Brewer shouted, glancing back at her. “He’s dangerous.”

As if proving his point, Carl used the moment when Brewer was distracted to attack. He caught the sleeve of Brewer’s black-suit in one hand and began pulling him closer. Brewer tried to plant his feet, but Carl was much stronger and Brewer’s shoes simply slid across the hardwood floor.


Carl’s eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open. “Bad,” he whispered, and reached for Winnie. Maybe this wasn’t such a good plan after all, she thought.

Then, suddenly, Brewer’s feet were in the air as he completed an overly-complicated summersault scissor-kick. He caught Carl around the neck with his legs, and both boys went crashing to the ground.

“Go,” Brewer shouted from underneath Carl’s shoulder. “Save Timothy.”

Winnie looked at the tangle of arms and legs that was Carl and Brewer, and then at Kat with her sleeve pressed to Eric’s head. If all of them worked together, they could probably hold Carl off until help arrived, or until Mary-Ellis and Linda came to their senses. If she left them now Brewer could get hurt.

“I’ll be okay,” Brewer said, trying to hold Carl’s hand away from his face. “Find Raymond.”

“Go,” Kat said. “It’s what we came here to do.”

“We’ll...we’ll be okay,” Eric said, wincing under the pressure Kat was applying. Winnie nodded at her friends, and then raced up the stairs two at a time.
A single oil lamp burned on top of a knick-knack table in second-floor hallway. There was no sign of Raymond, and the doors to all the rooms here were closed. But that didn’t matter. Winnie didn’t waste time searching; she knew where Raymond had to go.

A weak light shone under the door to the ghost room. Winnie closed her hand around the cool metal of the doorknob, then pressed her ear against the door and listened. This time she did hear something—low chanting in a language she didn’t understand. She remembered when, earlier that day, Kat had read some of the words on the magic circle. This was the same language. Raymond was casting his spell!

Winnie turned the knob and threw the door open. Timothy’s room was cast in shadow. The gas lamp Mr. Carver had brought in earlier was lit, though the wick had been turned down and lamp shone only as bright as a candle.

Timothy’s bed had been moved aside. Timothy himself, still bundled in blanket and rope, sat in the middle of the painted magic circle. Raymond stood just outside the circle, with his back towards the open window. “Ge-na-di,” he chanted, “a-ba in-da-di.”

“Stop!” Winnie shouted. “You’re not going to hurt Timothy.”

“Nam ti i-ù-tu,” he said, and the circle on the floor glowed a sickly purple. He looked up at Winnie and in the purple light his face resembled that of a corpse. “And who’s going to stop me? You? That’d be capitol.” He laughed and tossed Winnie a wink. “Besides, I’m not going to hurt my brother. I’m just sending him on a little trip.”

“To where?” Winnie said. If she could just keep him talking long enough, then maybe someone would show up to help, or maybe the spell would run out. She looked for something to grab in case Raymond rushed her, but there was nothing on the dresser nearby more dangerous than a couple stuffed animals.

Raymond smiled again. “Why, I’m sending him back to your own time, of course.”
Winnie could only stare. She hadn’t expected Raymond to say anything she’d care about. She was just hoping to get the villain to talk about his evil plan long enough for help to arrive.

“He’s going where?” she said, when she found her voice again.

“Of course, time travel is no simple affair,” Raymond said, casually leaning back against the windowsill. “According to my research, the portal often eats the first person to go through. Which I imagine is a rather unpleasant way to die. That’s why I’m sending my brother ahead of me; to smooth the bumps out of the journey you might say.” Raymond chuckled.

Winnie took a step forward. The Timothy-sized bundle of blanket in the middle of the glowing circle struggled briefly against the ropes. “But…we stopped all the people you hypnotized,” she said. “You won’t be able to—”

“Pshaw!” Raymond said. “I only needed them and those stupid robes for half of the magic ritual—the half we already completed that out in the grove.” He chanted again, “Ge-na-di, a-ba in-da-di.”

The circle grew brighter, bathing the entire room in purple light. Raymond walked around the circle, leaving the window. To her surprise, Winnie saw streetlights outside. She even thought she heard cars out on the interstate. The window was the gateway! Did Raymond know that? He kept watching the circle.

“Wait,” Winnie said. “You don’t want to go to our time. There’s terrorism and AIDS and huge hurricanes and homework and…and….”

“Exactly!” Raymond said. “There are global problems, requiring global solutions. I’ve been using other spells to spy on your century—been checkin’ out the scene, as you might say. And in your time I know my genius will be appreciated.” He
spread his arms, encompassing the room and everything beyond it in a single gesture. “I’m stuck in this horrible, backwater farm town, surrounded by stupid people and way too many lemons. All my inventions have to use gears and pulleys and non-alternating current. But in your time….” He dropped his arms, knelt down next to the circle, and put a hand on Timothy’s blanket cocoon. “In your time there’s microchips and lasers and biological warfare. In your time I’ll use modern technology to invent weapons that I can sell to the highest bidder. I’ll play countries against each other. I’ll be the most powerful person in the—”

Now it was Winnie’s turn to laugh. Raymond stopped and stared at her, bewildered. “You’re just like me,” she said, catching her breath. “You don’t fit in either.”

“I hardly think that—”

“Oh-oh shut up,” Winnie said. “I can recognize another misfit when I see one.” She found it hard to keep her giggles under control. Their big bad villain was just a nineteenth-century nerd. “You know, you won’t fix anything by running away,” she said. “You have to accept who you are, where you are, and when you are.” Suddenly she thought of her dad’s farm, and realized just how much time she’d been wasting wishing she were back there. Her new place in California wasn’t that bad. And she had a great group of friends here.

“Go chase yourself,” Raymond said. “You don’t know anything.” He grabbed Timothy, lifted him up out of the circle, and turned towards the window. He did know where the portal was after all, she realized, and there was no way to reach him in time. He chanted, “Ge-na-di—”

“Níg-na-ge-da!” Another chant sounded from the doorway. It was Kat! She stood there, holding her big, silver penguin charm out in front of her. “In-da-ba,” she shouted. “A-ba-in-da!”

The light coming from the magic circle changed from purple to blue, and began to pulse like a heartbeat.

“Don’t!” Raymond shouted. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Kat said, stepping closer, penguin raised.

“You’re messing with the most powerful witch in Sunnygrove. Ti i-ga-da!”
Raymond screamed in frustration. The window portal began to flash open and closed. One moment, only regular 1891 darkness and coal bucket smoke lay on the other side. The next moment, Winnie could see streetlights and hear cars in the distance.

“Ge-na-de!” He shouted, and lifted Timothy up to the window ledge.

Winnie thought about rushing him, but it would be too easy for Raymond to push his brother out the window before she reached him. Kat kept her charm out at arms length, but she’d stopped chanting. Was she all out of magic tricks? Raymond watched the flashing portal and seemed to be counting in his head.

“Stop!” The voice rumbled in the doorway like thunder, and everyone in the room froze. Even the light of the circle seemed to cease pulsing for a moment. Mr. Carver stepped into the room. “Raymond, unhand my son.”

“Father!” Raymond said, and an oily smile spread across his face. “Thank goodness you’re here. These horrible ruffians were trying to kidnap Timothy. I was going to risk escaping through the window when—”

Mr. Carver strode forward, walked right through the magic circle, and grabbed Timothy up in one arm. Then he looked around the room, making eye contact with everyone. Finally he glanced down at the glowing circle, and grimaced.

“Would you be so kind?” Mr. Carver said. He set Timothy down in front of Winnie. She was still too shocked by Carver’s sudden appearance to do anything at first, but then she knelt and began untying the rope that was wrapped around the poor kid.

“Father, I can’t believe you—” Raymond began.

“I can’t believe you!” Mr. Carver boomed, spinning about to face him. “I swan, I had my concerns…you haven’t been right ever since your first year at the University, and recently that strangeness has spread to Carl as well. But even the worst of my fears didn’t encompass this!” He held his right fist out to Raymond, who shrunk back against the window. And in that fist, Winnie realized, Mr. Carver clenched a letter. It was the letter Eric had been carrying—the one Mr. Carver himself wrote. Or will write! Thinking too much about time travel was giving her a headache, so she got back to work untying Timothy.

Mr. Carver’s voice softened. “Why didn’t you talk to me, Raymond? We could’ve worked something out.”
Raymond’s smile was replaced by that ugly expression Winnie had seen at dinner, a sneer full of hatred and contempt. Maybe this was how he normally looked when he wasn’t pretending. “Stupid duffer,” Raymond said. “Idiot. How could a simpleton like you possibly understand how I’ve stagnated here? How I’ve suffered with this family?”

Mr. Carver shook his head. “Say what you want to me—it’s naught but water off a duck’s back. But for what you tried to do to Timothy,” his voice rumbled again, “you get your wish. You are quit of this family. You are no longer my son, no longer a Carver. I disown you. You can go to the deuce as far as I’m concerned.”

Raymond bared his teeth. “You’re nothing, father,” he looked at Winnie and Kat. “None of you are. You’re not even a footnote in human history. But I…I will make history.” And with that, he jumped out through the time portal in the open window.

Immediately there came a horrible, wet ripping noise, followed by a scream. The sounds seemed to echo from both the window and from the magic circle on the floor. The scream didn’t die off either, like it would if a person ran out of breath. Instead it seemed to get further and further away.

The circle’s glow steadied for a few beats, then began to pulse again; though this time the pulses were slower, leaving at least ten seconds between beats. Through the window Winnie could see the dark, quiet sky of 1891 still switching to the streetlights and traffic noise of her time and back again, though now the time between changes was longer. Did Raymond go through a normal window, or through the portal to her own time? And if he did go through the portal, did he survive? Judging by the scream, Winnie didn’t think so.
41. The Last Mystery

No one in the room spoke as Raymond’s scream faded, faded, then died away completely.

Winnie finished untying the rope, and pulled Timothy out of the blanket bundle. His hair was plastered down with sweat and he looked tired.

“I don’t like that game,” he said.

Mr. Carver shoved the letter in his pocket and scooped Timothy up in his arms. Then he looked at the girls. “I don’t know how to thank y’all enough…”

Winnie glanced at her friend. Kat still had the silver penguin out. “Where’s Brewer?” Winnie asked. “Is Eric all right?”

“You’re friends are fine,” Mr. Carver said. “I came back to the house looking for you, and that’s when I ran into the mess downstairs. I managed to get Carl settled down, but as soon as I did Kat here bolted up the stairs after you.”

He carried Timothy to the door and set him down. He looked the boy over, and seemed satisfied that he was okay. “Run downstairs now, and go find Linda,” Mr. Carver said. “She’s down in the foyer. Tell her to send our guests up.”

At first, Timothy just stood there. To Winnie, he still looked a little out of it.

“Go now, boy,” Carver said. “I’m not telling you twice.” That was enough to get Timothy’s legs moving, and he took off down the hall. “Anyways,” Mr. Carver continued, turning his attention back to the girls. “Eric and Brewer told me what was happening, and Eric gave me the letter as proof. So I headed up after Raymond.”

Kat had put the silver penguin back on a chain around her neck. Now she took a length of her hair, still wet from the rain, and pulled it into her mouth. “Why were you looking for Winnie in the first place, Mr. Carver?” she asked.

Here it comes, Winnie thought. Carver would talk about all the S.P.E.T.E.R. stuff
she’d told him earlier, and Kat would know that Winnie went behind the group’s back and revealed everything to a stranger.

“Well…since your clothes were missing I thought y’all might be running off again,” Mr. Carver said, “And I didn’t want Winnie to leave without her camera.” He tossed Winnie a wink. Then he looked at the flashing portal in the window and frowned. “I reckon you’ll be heading back to your own time now. I’ll go see if your friends need help up the stairs.” And with that he ducked out of the room.

As soon as he left Kat said, “For a prehistoric dude, he’s keeping pretty cool about the whole magic/time travel thing.” Even though she was talking to Winnie, Kat couldn’t seem to take her eyes off the scenes changing outside the window.

“I don’t know,” Winnie said. “Remember, at some point he’s going to wall off this entire room, and paint the window shut. Is that being cool about it?”

“Oh, well, when you put it that way….”

Brewer appeared in the doorway, with his arm around Eric. “Did we miss any—? Brewer began to ask, then stopped when he saw the glowing circle.

Eric had a bandage wrapped around his head, probably care of Linda, and still looked woozy. But at least now he’d stopped swaying and could stand up straight. He stared at the window. “We’re actually going home, aren’t we?” he said.

“Yup,” Kat said. “Raymond fed the portal for us, and now Time Travel Express is safe and ready for passengers.” She ignored the confused look on the boys’ faces and carefully stepped around the circle and approached the window. “I’ll explain later,” she said. “But I don’t know how long this spell will last. We should get going.”

“I thought you had the portal all figured out,” Winnie said. “You cast a spell just like Raymond did. You even said that he was facing the most powerful witch in Sunnygrove.”

“Hah!” Kat said, and spit out her hair. “I made that up as I went along. I was just throwing out all the Sumerian I knew. I probably didn’t even change the circle from purple to blue. I bet Raymond did that on his own.” She looked Winnie in the eye. “And when I said ‘most powerful witch’, I meant you. You’re the psychic.”

Eric shook his head. “I really miss my rational explanations,” he said, with half a smile. He let Brewer help him over to the window. “One thing I still don’t get. If
Timothy doesn’t die, and if Raymond is trapped in the portal, then who’s the Ghost of Carver Ranch? What’s in the picture that Ben sent us?”

Brewer opened his mouth, probably to blame the ghost on some type of conspiracy, but then he just shrugged. “I got nothing,” he said.

Winnie tried to call up the ghost picture in her head. It’d been taken with a camera that had a cracked lens…

“Brewer,” Eric said, standing on his own. “Would you mind going through first? We’ll have to time our exits so we leave when the portal is wide open. It looks like we’ve got ten seconds to work with between shifts.”

Kat walked right up to the window. “Oh-okay, stop trying to protect us girl-folk,” Kat said, in her best Winnie-Dakota accent. Then, before anyone could stop her she stepped out through the portal.

Winnie held her breath. There was no scream. The scene outside the window flashed back to 1891, and she couldn’t see anyone out on the dark balcony. Then, after about ten seconds, the world outside the window turned modern again, with distant streetlights and everything, and Kat was standing on the balcony waving.

Brewer went next. His exit was a little more difficult because he was too tall to simply duck out the window. He needed to slide out, and so he had to time it just right so he’d have the full ten seconds to work with. Winnie found herself holding her breath again, but Brewer made it out with a good three seconds to spare.

Winnie looked around. But for her and Eric and the glowing circle, the room was empty. She could understand the rest of the family being kept away from the room. The fewer people who saw the magic portal, the less explaining Mr. Carver would have to do. But where was Mr. Carver himself? Wasn’t he even going to say goodbye? Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. had helped saved Timothy, and all they got for it was a quick thank you?

Since Eric still felt woozy, Winnie volunteered to go last in case he needed help out the window. Eric watched the scenes change, and counted in his head. He was about to step out through the portal when Winnie grabbed him. “Look,” she whispered.

The coal pots had finally quit gushing smoke over on this side of the house, and she could just make out a tall figure standing out in the lemon grove. He looked like he was holding a camera. “It’s Mr. Carver!” she said.
“What’s he doing?” Eric asked.

Winnie remembered the last thing Mr. Carver had said to them was something about getting her camera. She’d thought that was a little odd, to worry about the camera he’d given her, when so many other weird things were going on.

The next time the portal closed, and it was plain old 1891 outside, she looked at Mr. Carver again. He was pointing the camera right at the window.

“Quick!” Winnie said. “Close the window.”

“Pardon?”

“There’s only one piece of the mystery left, and that’s our ghost. Carver is about to make it.” She reached past Eric and slammed the window shut. The glass rattled in the frame. “Think about it,” she said, “If everything outside looks all wonky, with the portal opening and closing, then how do you think this room looks to someone on the outside?”

Eric blinked. “Yeah, since the portal is only open half the time,” he said, “whoever appears at the window will look like only half a person. Winnie, you’re a genius.” He hugged her. “That’s the reason the ghost looks familiar. I’m the ghost.”

He let go of Winnie and stood up against the window glass, facing modern streetlights. After a few seconds, the portal closed again, and a flash of light exploded from the lemon grove below them.

He smiled and shook his head. “Mr. Carver just took the picture that he will send to Wells Fargo along with his letter. And I bet he’ll give the company instructions not to deliver the package until our yesterday, which is over one hundred years in his future.” Eric laughed. “See, that’s a logical explanation.”

Winnie reached past him and opened the window. Their heads were close, and Eric looked like he might try to kiss her again—even though they were running out of time and the portal might close forever at any moment! Was kissing all boys thought about? “Let’s have the next one in the twenty-first century, okay?” she said. “We need to go.”

Eric nodded, and the next time the portal opened, he slipped outside. The portal closed again and Winnie counted off the seconds. She glanced briefly behind her, taking it all in one last time—the animal wallpaper, the smell of coal smoke, the quiet of the
eighteen hundreds—then she held her breath and stepped into the future.
To her surprise, Winnie found herself alone on the little balcony. She knew she was back in her own time—car headlights marched across the freeway in the distance, like a parade of lightning bugs. And Brewer’s rope was still attached to the balcony railing.

Then she heard movement in the room behind her. When she turned and peered inside, she felt dizzy for a moment—the jungle wallpaper she had been looking at only a moment ago was now just a faded, green echo. The magic circle and the smell of smoke were gone too.

The rest of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. moved about the room with their flashlights on, packing up equipment. Brewer wrapped the extension cords around the two tape recorders, Kat collapsed their tripod, and Eric gently tucked his ghost-sniffers into his backpack.

“You can come in,” Eric said, when she paused at the window. He pointed his flashlight at the ghost room’s only door. “Since all our stuff was still here, the portal back in time must be through the door. As long as we stay in the room, we’re safe.” He shook his head. “I just wish I hadn’t left my computer in 1891.”

Winnie climbed back in through the window, feeling a tingle of fear as she did so—though nothing strange happened. She squatted down next to Kat and helped pack up the digital camera. She was glad she had something to do, to keep her mind off all the questions floating around in her head: Would Mr. Carver be able to snap Carl out of being hypnotized? Would Timothy be okay, after all he went through?

When everything had been gathered up, the members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. climbed out onto the balcony. Brewer set his backpack down, then yanked hard on the window of the ghost room. Wood squealed, and more paint chips drifted down, but he
managed to shut it all the way. Then he got a hammer and a couple little, metal pins from
his climbing kit. He pounded the pins into the two bottom corners of the window.

“Can’t be too careful,” he said.

“Maybe the portal’s closed,” Kat said. “Maybe it’s full after it ate Raymond.”

Eric shouldered his backpack. “If we’re lucky, the portal’s gone,” he said. “Time
travel is too dangerous. Can you imagine what would happen if some other poor kids
discovered this?”

Winnie had to agree with him. If a regular group of seventh-graders had been
sent back in time they’d probably still be trapped there…or worse. She and her friends
might be misfits, but no other kids could have solved the mystery of Carver Ranch. For
the first time in a long time she didn’t mind so much being who she was.

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Right on schedule, Brewer’s mother picked them up at the curb outside Carver
Ranch. Winnie was surprised to find that they’d returned to their own time at the exact
moment they’d left it. “Everybody knows that,” Brewer had said while they waited for
his mom. “Time travelers always come back exactly where and when they started. I
mean, it’s in all the movies.”

As Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. piled in the van, they explained to Brewer’s mother that
Eric had fallen off the Carver House porch and hit his head. She must have believed
them because she didn’t ask questions and instead rushed the whole group to St. Joseph’s
hospital a couple miles away. On the drive there the van weaved dangerously back and
forth in the lane while Mrs. Lyndon called all of their parents, and concentrated on her
cell phone instead of the road.

When they did arrive at the hospital, the S.P.E.C.T.E.R. kids had to spend two
painfully long hours in the emergency room where they couldn’t talk about their
adventure because of all the people and parents around. Finally they were let in to see
Eric all on their own. Kat had somehow convinced Eric’s father to let them have a visit
unsupervised.

Eric lay on a hospital bed with his head wrapped in white gauze. An X-Files
“No way, you got cable!” Kat said, bouncing up onto the bed. “Hey, careful,” Eric said, putting a hand up to his bandage. “I’m still a little seasick.”

“Don’t be a baby,” Kat said, poking him in the belly through the blankets. “They said you don’t even have a concussion.”

Brewer checked the hall outside to make sure the coast was clear, and then shut the door behind him. Then he quickly lifted the blankets on the bed across from Eric’s and looked underneath, though to Winnie it was obvious the bed was clean, sterile, and unoccupied. Brewer nodded at the group and tried to re-make the bed.

“We need to get our stories straight,” Eric said, as he lowered the volume on the TV.

Winnie could hardly contain her excitement. She began pacing the room back and forth, just like Brewer always did. “This is what you’ve been waiting for since the Club began last year, huh?” she said. “We finally have proof of the supernatural!”

Brewer lifted up the room’s metal, straight-backed chair and looked underneath the seat before deciding that it was safe to sit on. “We don’t have any proof that _they_ would believe,” he said. “I mean, we know what happened was real, but what evidence do we got? To everybody else, we just went on a trip to a Historical Society ranch that was closed for the evening.”

“He’s right,” Eric said, said. He scooted over in the bed so Kat would have more room to sit. “All the tape recorders and cameras we set up in the room might’ve captured something. But until we can check everything out, we’ll have to tell everyone the same thing we told Brewer’s mom—that we just wandered around the Ranch grounds until I hit my head.”

They talked about the details of their story to make sure everyone would tell the same tale, but they didn’t have much time. It was a school night. Soon Brewer’s mother, then Kat’s father, came in to take their kids home. Winnie’s mother had taken Sam down to the cafeteria for a late supper, so Eric and Winnie had the room to themselves for a bit.

Winnie sat in the visitor’s hard, high-backed chair while Eric flipped through the TV channels until he found a baseball game. They watched it for a bit, but Eric seemed
distracted. Finally, he said. “So, I was thinking, now that everything’s back to normal….” He touched his bandage and looked at the ceiling. “I was thinking maybe we could go out some time. You know, see a movie?”

Winnie tried not to laugh—he looked so cute and helpless lying there all bandaged up. She needed be serious, though. This was her first official date. “Okay,” she said, “That’d be cool. I just need to make sure it’s a night when my mom can watch Sam.” She shook her head. “I’m not sure how much free time I’ll have now that my mom’s dating.”

Eric muted the volume on the TV. “Yeah, when your parent starts dating it makes everything more complicated.” He laughed. “My poor dad—he had to leave his date in the middle of the movie. I guess they were watching that new Pixar film.”

“Really now?” Winnie said. “That’s what my mom went to see with her date, over at the San Diego Megaplex 20….”

She and Eric stared at each other. Then they spoke at the same time:

“Is your mom’s first name Dana?”

“Is your dad’s name Gryphon?”

“No way,” Eric laughed, sitting up in the bed. “No way. How strange is that?”

Then he frowned, thoughtfully. “I guess that’d be weird if both us and our parents were dating. But, hey, we went out first. We have first dibs. Our first kiss was, like, a hundred years before their date.”

But Winnie could only think about her mother, and how difficult the divorce had been. She thought about how hard Mom had worked to get them all moved out to California and started on a new life. Winnie had her S.P.E.C.T.E.R. friends to talk to, to help her out, but her mother was all alone. Mom really needed someone in her life right now.

She took Eric’s hand. “I think we should just stay friends for right now,” she said. “Besides, if we went out that’d just give Kat something to tease us about.”

“Sure, you’re right, we should keep the Club professional,” Eric agreed, though he looked disappointed. He freed his hand from Winnie’s and turned up the TV volume.

They watched the baseball game in silence until Winnie’s mom came to get her a few minutes later.
“Hey, check it out,” Eric said, as Winnie was leaving. “The Angels are actually up by two against the Yankees! I guess the impossible can happen.”
EPILOGUE

43. The Fate of S.P.E.C.T.E.R.

Winnie found it impossible to concentrate the next day at school. Her spirits were down, and she kept thinking about all the stuff they had to do after classes—pack up their files, return borrowed equipment, and close down headquarters. Where would they keep the S.P.E.C.T.E.R. Club files? Her house was no good because her dining room was still full of unpacked boxes.

She tried to tell herself not to give up hope just yet. Brewer had spent all last night going over information on their tape recorders and cameras and even Eric’s sniffers. Maybe something supernatural got recorded that they could show Principal Latham. Then they could prove that S.P.E.C.T.E.R. was worth saving.

She hurried out of English class right as the last bell rang. Outside a cold wind blew, and the sun played hide and seek behind fat, dark clouds. Even if she didn’t have first hand experience as proof, Winnie could easily believe just by looking at the sky that the weather in Sunnygrove dropped below freezing.

When she arrived at room 17A, she spotted the S.P.E.C.T.E.R. sign still taped to Mr. Mathers’ door. That was a good omen, wasn’t it? Inside she found the classroom empty except for Mr. Mathers, who was snoring softly at his desk, chin on his chest. Even the chess club kids who normally hung out after school were gone. She headed for S.P.E.C.T.E.R.’s corner of the room and began flipping through folders of case files. Maybe they should just save their most interesting investigations and toss out the rest.

The door opened, and a gust of wind made the A+ math papers stapled to the wall flap noisily. Eric ducked inside.

“’I thought your dad would make you stay home today,” Winnie said. Eric was
wearing a tee-shirt with a huge black-and-white photograph of Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out at the camera. Eric’s head was still wrapped in bandages and his blonde hair poked out in random places where the gauze didn’t cover.

“We’ve got too much work to do,” he said. “And I feel fine.” He sat down in a chair next to Winnie and pulled his laptop computer from its case. A couple lemon tree leaves drifted to the floor.

The door opened again and Brewer, dressed in army fatigues, walked in with some seventh grade girl. Winnie had to look twice to realize it was Kat. Her friend was wearing jeans, a regular looking sweater, and those boots that were selling for big bucks on Ebay. Kat had knotted her hair back in a ponytail. She’d even gone easy on her Goth makeup, and didn’t look nearly as corpse-like as she usually did. In fact, the only trace of the old Kat was a large penguin charm that dangled from a silver necklace—a penguin that might be lucky after all, Winnie thought. Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. did survive Carver Ranch. Maybe the penguin helped them.

Winnie knew she shouldn’t call attention to her friend’s new style, but she couldn’t help herself. “You look good, Kat,” she said.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” Kat said. “I put my hair back so it’d be harder to chew on. And the rest….” she looked down at her outfit. “I guess I’m tired of being Goth. I’m not sure what I’m going to do next, maybe student-body-president chick, or chess-club-nerd girl. But until I decide I think I’m just going to be a Kat.” She pulled out a stick of gum and popped it in her mouth. Probably tastes better than hair, Winnie thought.

“So, what’s the verdict?” Eric asked, nodding at Brewer.

Brewer’s eyes were red, and he looked like he might pass out from exhaustion at any second. He unbuttoned the cuffs of his army jacket and plopped down at a desk across from Eric. “I went through every second of audio, video and…smell-e-o,” he said. “Except for the first few minutes where we’re talking and setting things up, the tapes are blank.”

“Bummer,” Kat said. The rest of the group nodded. Winnie thought Kat’s comment was what they called “understatement.”

For the next few minutes the Club talked about where they’d store their equipment and files. Eric suggested that they meet every weekend, and even planned the
first three meetings on his laptop calendar, but Winnie knew it wouldn’t be the same. Without a home base at school where they could meet at lunch or any old time they wanted, it would be easy for S.P.E.C.T.E.R. to unravel. Everyday life would get in the way.

It’d been a half hour since the last bell rung when the door slammed open, welcoming in another cold gust, and a rumpled looking Principal Latham.

“He’s going to kick us out himself,” Eric said.

“I wonder how he’s involved in the conspiracy,” Brewer muttered.

“Maybe we could send him back in time,” Kat whispered.

Latham glanced over at the sleeping Mr. Mathers and managed to roll his eyes, sigh, and shake his head all at the same time. Then he strode over to the S.P.E.C.T.E.R. group. Winnie noticed his whole face was red, like he’d been yelling or, at least, arguing. His tie was pulled down a bit, and the top button of his shirt was undone. In his left hand he held a large, yellowish envelope. It reminded her of the Well’s Fargo envelope that came for them just yesterday.

“I don’t know how long you kids had this planned,” he said, staring them all down. “But I want you to know I don’t appreciate being toyed with.”

“We were going to return the equipment,” Eric began, “just as soon as—”

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about,” Latham said, waving the envelope at them. “I’m not sure how you did it, but I’ll figure it all out. And if I find out you’ve done anything illegal, I’ll guarantee you’re all locked up in juvie for a good, long time.”

The kids looked at each other. Kat mouthed something that, to Winnie, looked like a couple four-letter words.

“Principal Latham,” Eric said, standing up. “We really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fine,” Latham said. “I’ll play along with your little game. But this behavior isn’t earning you any points.” He pulled a smaller, off-white envelope out of the larger one, and from this he took a folded sheet of thick paper. Again, Winnie was reminded of their letter from Ben.

The principal began reading, “’To the governing board of Richland Junior High.
Greetings, my name is Mr. Daniel Carver. You probably don’t know me, except from books, but I’ve got business with you just the same.” The Principal glanced up at them. “The letter goes into a lot of legal details so I’ll just skip to the important part: ‘I hereby leave to Richland Junior High the entire value of my Wells Fargo account…’” Latham lowered the letter. “You know how much that is?”

Winnie could only shake her head. She did know her math, though. And if Mr. Carver put money in the bank way back in 1891, that money would have grown a lot by now.

“It comes to over six million dollars!” Latham snapped, his face getting even redder. “To be paid out over the next ten years.”

Eric looked confused. “Well, isn’t that good news? The school could use the—”

“Of course there’s a condition,” Mr. Latham said. “The school can only access the money if…” he raised the letter again and squinted. “‘If the school agrees to make Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R. official again, and give them their own laboratory, equipment, and advisor—the details about all that are in the attached letter from my lawyer. I’ve got a man from Wells Fargo who’ll be keeping a close eye on Richland Junior High School, and if the school breaks the contract, or doesn’t fulfill it in good faith, then they will lose access to my money.’” Latham shoved the letter back into the large yellow envelope.

Kat and Brewer stood up next to Eric. Winnie joined them. Normally she was nervous around Principal Latham, but it was hard to be afraid of a man who looked like he just found out that gravity was a lie and pigs do fly. “So, that means we’re still in business?” Winnie asked.

“It means,” Latham said, “That until I figure out what’s really going on here, you don’t have to return the microscope you borrowed from biology.”

He spun around and headed for the door. Halfway there he stopped. “And as I told all of you yesterday, he said, “I’m not your personal secretary. Don’t have your mail delivered here.” He reached into the big yellow envelope and produced another, regular-sized letter and tossed it onto a desk. Then he strode the rest of the way across the classroom an out the door. The wind closed it behind him.

The four members of Club S.P.E.C.T.E.R, still trying to absorb the news, rushed over to the envelope. It was addressed just like the last one had been:
“Mr. Carver left the school six mil,” Kat said. “You’ think he could afford a typewriter that works.

Brewer picked up the envelope and held it up to the overhead fluorescents. “I don’t see a cardboard square,” he said. “Looks like no ghost this time, just a piece of paper. And I’m pretty sure that no one’s opened this letter before us.”

“That was probably another rule for Mr. Latham to follow so that the school could get the money,” Kat said, smiling. “I bet it just killed him not to be able to open it.”

Brewer nodded, then carefully ran his finger along the seam of the envelope and gently shook the letter itself out onto the desk. Unlike the envelope, this was handwritten:
Friends,

   I hope this letter finds you well, and I hope that Eric’s head pains him less today. I apologize for the bludgeoning Raymond gave him.

   Timothy is well, thanks to S.P.E.C.T.E.R. I’m workin on convincing him that the glowing magic circle he saw last week was just a dream. He’s young; he’ll forget that in time. It will take longer for him to stop asking after Raymond.

   Carl is just about back to regular, though I’ll have a hard time forgiving myself for not noticing the difference in him sooner. I mean, the boy’s always gone at his own pace, but Raymond turned him into something like a puppet and I should’ve seen that right off.

   Anyways, I’ve sent money along with this letter by way of thanks. Hopefully with compound interest and the right investments it will some day turn into a small windfall for your school and your Club.

   I want Winnie to know that she made the right decision. Weather or not she reveals to the rest of you what that decision was, that’s her business and I’d ask that you not plague her over it. But Winnie, I do plan on listening to your advice. Perhaps if I follow it, then after 1916 I’ll have more to add to this little nest egg I’ve set aside for you all.

   Thanks again. I owe my family’s safety and sanity to you kids.

   -Daniel “Ben” Carver
Winnie read and re-read the letter. Carver must have sold his lemon grove before 1916 or, at least, he sold the part of it that would be destroyed by the floods. She’d have to look through the local history books and the records at Sunnygrove City Hall to see exactly how he followed her advice.

When she looked up, she saw the rest of the group staring at her. “Oh-okay, I’ll tell you,” she said. “Just promise not to get mad.”

“Mad?” Eric said, sitting back down. “Everything worked out perfect. What could we be mad at?”

“At what I did,” Winnie said. She took a seat and told everyone about looking for Mr. Carver in his study, and about giving away their big secret in the hopes that Mr. Carver would help. She told them how he seemed to think her story was just a big joke and gave her a camera to play with. Finally, to defend herself, she told them about all the little clues that she’d found which made her think Carver could be trusted, from the toys in the tool shed, to how he acted with Timothy, to the weird notes in the computer that didn’t seem to be written by anyone in the group.

“But something you said must’ve made him think,” Eric said, “Because when he came into the house after the fight in the foyer last night—that night—and Kat and Brewer told him what was happening with Raymond, he believed us right away. I think he would’ve believed us even if I hadn’t given him the letter.”

“Carver wasn’t an idiot,” Brewer said. He began pacing back and forth along their row of desks. “I bet he knew something strange was going on when we arrived in our weird clothes.”

Kat reached up to her cheek, probably to grab some hair to chew, but then seemed to remember that her hair was tied back, and so shoved her hands into her pocket. “That was pretty brave of you,” she said to Winnie. “Going off on your own like that.”

“Oh-oh, thanks,” she said. Maybe her friends were just being nice because everything did turn out okay. She promised herself that next time she’d trust her S.P.E.C.T.E.R. friends more, and tell them everything she had on her mind.

“That leaves just one last mystery,” Brewer said. He stopped pacing. “What happened to Raymond?” The classroom door banged quietly in its frame, probably from
the wind, and he glanced nervously at it. “What if he still made it through the portal, even though he went first, and now he’s plotting revenge on—”

“And what if he’s monstrously mutated!” Kat screamed, grabbing Brewer’s shoulders from behind. Brewer jumped about a foot.

“Hah, hah,” Brewer said, though Winnie saw him smiling.

Eric pulled his baseball and glove out of his backpack. “I don’t think we have anything to worry about,” he said, standing. “Either Raymond didn’t make it through the portal and so can’t hurt us anyway. Or, he made it through safely and has no reason to be mad at us, because he got what he wanted—he traveled to our time.” Eric walked over to the door and opened it partway. The wind tried to tug it from his hands. “I’m off to do some bench warming at practice, guys, I’ll e-mail you this weekend.”

“Heya, hold on,” Winnie said. “You’re still wearing your Einstein tee-shirt. Aren’t you going to change before heading down?”

“Yeah,” Kat said. “That tee-shirt just screams ‘Nerd Alert’ in big, shiny purple letters. The other players will torture you for it.”

Eric looked down at his shirt, and then shrugged. “You know guys, today I think I’m okay just like I am.”

THE END
November 18th, 2005