

“Hello?”

“Max?” The voice on the other line was faint and laced with static. “I’m calling about your mother. I think you might want to come to the farm.”

Max set down the phone and rushed to the car.

Hours later, Max stared through the glass of his windshield, squinting through the dust at rows and rows of corn, stretched out for as far as he could see. The entire car rattled as he drove down the unpaved country road, and every once in a while a rock would fly up from the road and hit the windshield, and he would grimace, thinking about how far he still had to go.

Earlier that same day, in the heart of rural Kentucky, an old woman had stood in her kitchen, waiting for lunch to warm up in the microwave. Her feeble frame was dressed in a faded calico dress, her gray hair pulled back into a loose bun. She started to lower herself into a worn wooden chair, paint chipping away from years of use, but stopped halfway down, suddenly hearing something strange.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Then voices; panicked, urgent. A scream.

Startled, she quickly reached out to push the *Stop* button on the microwave and rushed out of the house, looking for the source of the voices. She turned in puzzled circles in her garden, but the day outside was quiet and still. She slowly walked back into the house, her graying eyebrows knit together in confusion. She lived alone, and had no neighbors.

She walked back into the kitchen and stood still, uneasy. The wall beside her rattled, and she let out a little gasp, gripping the edge of her small dining table with whitening knuckles. A stifled scream rang through the house. Trembling, she put her ear to the wall.

There were voices inside.

She felt her breathing become erratic, a sharp pinch tightening in her chest. She rushed into the room on the other side of the wall to see if anyone was there- though she did not know why there would be. There was not.

She put her ear up to this side of the wall and heard the same, a muddled chorus of fitful beating and thumping and garbled voices heightening in tormented pleas, and the occasional

bone-chilling shriek. She shook with fright, rushing to the phone to call her nearest neighbor, who lived ten miles away.

She held the phone in trembling hands, sobs beginning to rack her body as she stilled her hands as well as she could to dial each number. It rang with antagonizing slowness, and she began to fill with desperation, feeling the walls and the house and the world slowly close in around her, until she was utterly alone, helplessly awaiting her doom.

Max drove for what seemed like hours through the sea of corn fields, finally arriving at a small clearing, on which stood an old farm where his elderly mother lived.

He slowly pulled up to the farm and pulled his keys out of the ignition, looking out the window. The old house was a Victorian, with a large porch wrapping around the entire house, and two rounded towers with pointed roofs on each corner of the front of the house.

The house's siding had once been lavender colored, but the paint had long since peeled almost all the way off, leaving the house a dirty-looking dismal gray from the years of soil and filth that had built up on the exposed wood. A crooked rooster weathervane was perched on the roof, slightly turning in the breeze.

He smoothed his auburn hair with his hand, and walked up to the front door. Before he got there, though, his mother ran through the front door, the wooden screen door slamming shut behind her.

"Max!" She called. "There are people in the house...in the walls!" She ran to him and grabbed his arm. Max's intelligent blue eyes flicked to the front door as another person rushed out, a middle aged man that he recognized as one of the neighbors that lived a couple miles down the road. The man pulled him aside, his eyes concerned.

"I got a call from her this afternoon sayin' that there was someone in her house." He said in a quiet southern drawl. "I got down 'ere just as fast as I could. She was hysterical, sayin' that there were people inside her kitchen walls, screamin' and poundin'. She made me put a hammer through the wall to see what was inside."

"Did you find anything?" Max asked, his eyes roaming over to his mother.

"Nope, sure didn't. It was as empty as a silo in the summer. I didn't hear no voices, neither." He lowered his voice a little. "Maybe you should take 'er to the fam'ly doctor to see if everything's alright," He tapped his head. "If you know what I mean." He gave Max a

sympathetic nod and left in his pickup truck, leaving the air thick with dust as he drove away. A conversation flashed through Max's mind from a year or so ago when he had gone with his mother to a doctor's appointment. The doctor had pulled Max out of the room, telling him that he believed Olivia was showing early signs of schizophrenia.

Oh, no. Max thought. *Not so soon.*

"I'm not crazy, you know." Olivia broke into Max's thoughts. "I really heard something."
"Let's go take a look." He said.

As they walked into the farm house, Max's eyes drifted to the walls in the entry hall, where a dozen or so family portraits hung on an ancient wallpapered wall, all in matching gold plated frames. When his mother had bought the house years ago, the pictures had already been there. Strangely, each portrait was of a different family. She had liked them, saying that it was like looking into a little piece of history, and she had kept them up all these years.

Max had always felt strange when he walked past them- it was as if they were staring at him, judging him as he walked past, looking right into his soul.

They walked past the portraits and into the kitchen. On one of the walls was a jagged, gaping hole.

"I heard pounding and voices in that wall- it was like someone was trapped in there and trying to get out." She said.

"It's an old house, Mom. It was probably just the walls creaking and settling."

"They were voices, not creaks, and they were there just as sure as you are standing in front of me right now." She said, her mouth forming a straight, stubborn line.

"Well they're gone now, so let's just not think about it." He said, reaching out to put an arm around his mother's frail frame.

That night, the mother and son sat together in the living room- Max adjusting the old television antenna to try to get in the few local television channels that reached this far out, and Olivia sitting with her favorite book, finally able to relax just a bit.

Deciding that his efforts in finding anything good to watch were pointless, Max got up to get a drink of water. As he walked towards the kitchen, he suddenly heard a noise that got louder as he walked nearer to the kitchen.

Thump, thump, thump.

As he walked into the kitchen he saw something different where the hole had been, something that tore the breath from his lungs. There was now a door, looking as if it had been there as long as the house had been.

After a moment of shock, he sucked air in through his teeth and reached out to turn the knob. As he did, he heard the doorbell ring. *Who could it be?*

“Max, can you get the door?” Olivia called from the TV room. Max rushed to the door, and opened it. There stood a strange man. He wore an old tweed suit with cowboy boots underneath, and had a long beard and a mustache that curled at the ends. He held out a hand to shake.

“My name’s George Albertson, and I heard around that you’ve been having some strange happenins’ in this here house.” He said in a casual, innocuous manner. “I’m here to make an offer to ya’ll, one that I recon you’ll like. I’d like to take the house out of your hands, and in return I’ll give ya’ll five hundred grand. That’s enough to buy a big nice house for your mamma, aint it?”

Max was shocked at the offer. “I...I can’t. Thank you.” He said after a moment’s hesitation, sensing that something was off. He moved to shut the door.

The man just smiled. “Well, my offer still stands. If you change your mind, I’ll be around.”

Max was too disturbed about the frightening events that were unfolding in the kitchen to think much about the odd visitor. He hurried back into the kitchen, and went to open the strange door for the second time. He took a deep breath and reached out a shaking hand to turn the knob. A deep groan rose from the hinges as the door opened, and stale air hit Max’s face. He cautiously peered into the doorway, and was surprised to see that the room beyond was only a few feet deep, and that there was another door on the far wall of the tiny room. He cautiously stepped in, making sure to keep his foot in the door so that it would not close behind him. As he opened the next door, he felt pressure on the first door, as if someone was pressing on it from the outside with increasing strength. He yanked his foot from the crack, and the door slammed shut. He rushed to reopen the door, panic quickly making its way to his throat. As his hand went to grasp the knob, it suddenly vanished- along with the entire door. He stared at the now empty wall, feeling as if every organ inside of him had suddenly flipped upside down.

He stared with horrified eyes at the wall for a heartbeat or two before reality set in, and then he pounded on the wall with all his strength, yelling for anyone who could hear him. Minutes passed, and he realized his efforts were hopeless.

Though the thought filled him with dread, he turned to the other door and opened it. He entered another room, one identical to the first. Again, the door he had entered through disappeared. His breath grew heavy with growing terror, and he began to go as fast as he could through the rooms, repeating the same thing over and over, desperately hoping that it would soon end.

Meanwhile, Olivia had been wondering why he had been taking so long. She got up and went into the kitchen, and gasped when she saw the door. Behind the wall she heard a sound that drained the blood from her face- her son screaming. She stepped in, and the door latched shut behind her. And then, the door in the kitchen disappeared.

Suddenly, in the front hall of the farm house, there was movement. The rows of portraits seemed to shift just a bit, and suddenly a new portrait appeared at the end of the line.

In an intricate gold plated frame was now an image of Olivia and Max, joining the ranks of the serious eyes that stared down upon every person that stepped into the old Victorian farm house.