

## One of Us, Part II

By Tamara Kula

"What are you saying?" asked Max in horror as he glanced back and forth between the two new-comers and his ghost friend. "That these girls will die too?"

"This place is cursed," answered the ghost with a casual shrug. "Everyone who stays here long enough is doomed to die. Me, you, all these others you see here – it has happened to all of us, and now it will happen to them too." He gestured to the new girls who were now examining the kitchen and nodding in approval. "By the way, my name is Ted."

Max felt more and more unnerved by Ted's tranquil acceptance of the entire eerie situation. "Cursed?" Max cried, his voice rising shrilly. "But how? Why?"

Ted smiled sadly. "I used to be like you, Max," he said. "I used to want to get to the bottom of it all, to change things. But it's useless. You might as well accept it."

"But the girls," objected Max. "Isn't there some way to warn them?"

"Oh, sure there is. But they won't listen."

"Tell me how." Max looked beseechingly at Ted.

"There is one way to contact the living, and that is to whisper to them while they are asleep," sighed Ted. "But I can guarantee you they won't listen."

"Why not?"

Ted laughed. "The living don't believe in us. They tell themselves that it was just a dream or their imagination."

"Maybe some people believe," Max said obstinately.

"Did you believe in ghosts when you were alive?" asked Ted with an amused smile.

"Well, no, but ..." Max trailed off. It was true that he had told himself he was simply being silly when he first suspected that this hotel could be haunted. It was hard to believe that his life was already over. It seemed far too short.

Max snapped out of his thoughts as the girls strode back to where they had left their bags.

"Come on, Julia, let's go find our rooms," said the blonde girl, who began lugging her suitcase into the corridor.

"Julia ..." thought Max, watching the dark-haired girl intently as she slung her purse over her shoulder and picked up her heavy backpack. "Such a pretty name for such a pretty girl. I have to save her. She doesn't deserve to die."

Since it was already quite late, the girls soon went to bed, and Max put his plan into action. He tip-toed into Julia's room, and then he laughed at himself for tip-toeing. "I am, after all, a ghost!" he told himself, shaking his head at the absurdity of his current existence. Then he knelt beside Julia's bed, admiring her face in the pale moonlight, and began to whisper his urgent message.



"Julia, you must leave this hotel. You can't stay here. Leave before it is too late!"

Julia frowned in her sleep and with a groan, she turned over and pulled the covers up over her head. Max was undaunted. "Julia, leave this place! Your life depends on it!"

Julia shook her head as if to clear away a bad dream. She pulled down the covers and slowly opened her eyes. She looked right at Max. Or rather, right through Max.

Julia frowned, and with a sigh, turned over again. This time, she put the pillow over her head.

Leaving Julia to her dreams, Max peeked into the blonde girl's room. To his disappointment, the girl wore headphones. The music was loud enough that even Max himself could hear Enrique Iglesias's latest hit song emanating from the headphones.

He returned to the main room, worried that his plan might not work. He joined a card game with the other ghost residents of the hotel and struck up a conversation. "So how did you guys die? For me, it was a boat crash," Max said as if talking about the weather.

"I drowned," said a man named Sam. "I'm usually such a good swimmer, but ..."

"Heat stroke," said a young woman.

"Shark attack," piped up an older woman.

Max marveled at the variety as each ghost told his story in turn. Only Ted remained silent.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Max hovered near Julia and her friend as they ate breakfast in the kitchen.

"Elena, don't you think this place is a little bit creepy? Last night I swear I heard whispers."

Elena's eyes grew wide. "Really? Me too." The girls' eyes met, and then both girls laughed nervously.

"We're so stupid!" cried Julia. "I can't believe I'm acting like a scared little kid. I'm sure it's just the noises of an old building."

Elena nodded. "I slept with my headphones to block out the noises," she admitted.

"Oh, that's such a good idea!" said Julia. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Come on, let's get out of here," said Elena, finishing her toast with peanut butter. "I've had enough of this old hotel!"

Julia agreed whole-heartedly. "To the beach!"

Discussing plans for a full day ahead of them, the girls walked out the front door.

That night, as Max feared, both girls slept wearing headphones. "Now they will never hear my warnings!" Max cried frantically to Sam and Ted.

"I hate to say 'I told you so,' but didn't I guarantee you that the living refuse to listen to the dead?" said Ted.

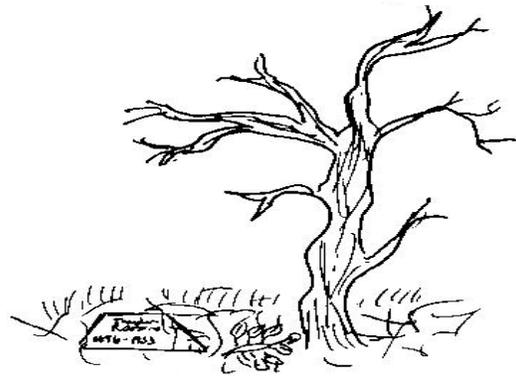
The days passed and the girls showed no sign of leaving. However, they did notice more and more that the hotel was full of strange secrets.

"Did you know," said Julia slowly one evening as the girls ate a late supper after their day on the beach, "that someone is buried outside?"

"Oh, Julia, stop!" hissed Elena. "You're freaking me out!"

"No, I'm serious," insisted Julia with a straight face. "Come with me."

Flashlight in hand, Julia led Elena outside and around back until she came to a crooked tree that was visible from her window. She brushed away leaves and branches to reveal a small plaque. Max, who had followed the girls, stepped closer to read the inscription: "Theodore Robbins. 1925-1953."



"I think he died here, in this hotel," said Julia with a hint of sadness in her voice. "He was only 28."

Elena shivered. "I don't like this. Let's go back inside," she said.

The very next day when the girls returned from the beach, Max noticed immediately that there was something very different about them.

"I can't believe that stupid bus didn't stop for us," Elena grumbled. "I hate walking home in the rain."

"As far as I'm concerned, we're lucky to be alive!" exclaimed Julia. "I can't believe we both got stuck by lightning!"

Suddenly she screamed, having just noticed that they were no longer alone in the building. "Who are you?" she demanded, looking hostilely at Max. "What are you doing here?"

"Julia, I - " Max said haltingly. "I hate to be the one to tell you this."