

One of Us, Part III

By Tamara Kula

Jason, Jeff, and Evan joked and talked as they walked through the dark streets. "I love summer vacation," Jeff was saying. "My mom thinks I'm sleeping in the tent in the backyard right now!"

"It's great, isn't it?" said Evan. "I wish 7th grade would never start."

The boys were so busy talking that they hardly noticed where they were going, and suddenly a dark, uninviting building loomed before them.

"The haunted hotel," said Evan in a hushed voice.

Jason snorted. "Are you scared?" he jeered.

Evan stiffened. "No, of course not."

"I dare you to go in there," Jason said.

Evan felt a chill as he stared up at the vacant windows that looked like evil eyes, but he responded, "Ok. I'm not scared."

"Oh, Evan, don't do it!" whispered Jeff.

"I dare you to sleep there," goaded Jason. When Evan nodded in consent, Jason added, "For a week. Starting tonight."

"You're not really going to do it, are you?" asked Jeff.

Evan tried to look nonchalant. "It's no big deal," he said.

Jason crossed his arms. "Then go inside."

Evan strode purposefully up the broken sidewalk and opened the creaky door. He glanced back at his friends, a look of defiance masking his fear, and disappeared inside.

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Evan looked around. He saw several old couches in the main room and a kitchen off to the side. What he didn't see, of course, was Max and Julia, sitting quite close together on one of the couches, deep in conversation with each other.

"I can't believe that was you trying to warn me, and I didn't listen!" Julia said tearfully.

"Don't think about that now," said Max, noticing the intruder cautiously peeking into one of the hotel rooms. "What's important now is getting this kid out of here!"

Evan tentatively stepped into the room. Then he curled up into a ball on the bed and, at long last, fell asleep.

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Max sighed and stretched out on the couch. Julia had gone to whisper to Evan to see if she could make him leave. After a few minutes, Julia called out to him, "Max – come in here! This kid is talking to me in his sleep!"

Intrigued, Max made his way to the little room. The boy, fast asleep, was saying calmly, "But Julia, I can't leave. It's a dare, so I have to sleep here for a week. I can't chicken out or my friends will laugh at me forever."

"Not if you're dead!" interjected Max.

"Listen, Evan," said Julia. "Forget about the stupid dare. You simply can not stay here. This hotel is cursed."

By the time morning came, not only was Evan still there, but he also seemed to think he could help Max and Julia if he came back the next night.

"This is not going well at all!" said Julia in frustration.

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When Evan met up with Jason and Jeff, he told them about his encounter with the ghosts.

"Dude, it was just a dream!" said Jason. "Relax!"

"It was more than a dream," said Evan, shaking his head. "The ghosts need help to break the curse."

Jason and Jeff glanced uneasily at each other. "Evan, I don't think you should go back there," said Jeff.

But go back he did, and Julia was not happy. "Does your mother know you're here?" she said in a scolding tone.

"Of course not!" said Evan with a smile. "My mother never lets me near this place. She never talks about it. All I know is that something happened here when my grandmother was young and she went crazy. My grandmother actually thinks this hotel is still in business and she recommends it to tourists."

"How unfortunate," said Julia sadly.

Evan's obsession with the haunted hotel grew until he no longer talked about anything else. Jason even changed his mind about the dare and said Evan should just forget it. But for Evan, that was impossible.

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The next day, Max was calmly eating his breakfast when Julia burst into the kitchen and started pulling Max by the hand, explaining that he had to see something on the third floor.

"What is it?" Max asked in surprise, still chewing.

"It's a record of the hotel's income," Julia said as they climbed the steps. They entered a small, dusty office and Julia pointed to a faded notebook of earnings.

"Wow, this hotel used to make so much money!" exclaimed Max, looking at the figures.

"Look at the last figure," said Julia. "In 1953, business suddenly stopped. Isn't that strange? What could have happened?"

"1953?" repeated Max. "Isn't that the date on the gravestone outside?"

Julia's eyes met Max's. "Let's go check," she said quietly.

Soon they were crouched by the old crooked tree, reading the small plaque. It said: "Theodore Robbins. 1896-1953."

Max frowned, puzzled. "That's not right," he said. "That would make Theodore 57 when he died."

"You're right," said Julia. "I distinctly remember thinking that this man was only 28 when he died. But the gravestone couldn't have changed – that's impossible!"

Julia looked closely at the plaque, surrounded by branches and leaves. Then she nodded, pointing to a second plaque barely visible beneath the debris. "There are two plaques," she said, looking quite pleased with her discovery.

Suddenly they heard a cold voice behind them. "I see you found where my father and I are buried," it said.

Max and Julia spun around. "Ted!" choked Julia. "You're Theodore Robbins ... Junior."

"You want to know why this hotel is cursed?" said Ted bitterly. "My father made a fortune off this hotel, and in his will, he left all the money and the hotel to me. My older brother – an irresponsible good-for-nothing – flew into a rage and killed our father, then me. But as I died, I cursed the hotel. Ever since then, it has brought nothing but sorrow to anyone associated with it." Ted smiled sourly.

"Oh, but why?" cried Julia in horror.

"If the hotel can't be mine, then it will belong to nobody," said Ted firmly, his voice full of bitterness.

"Can it be undone?" whispered Julia, barely daring to hope.

"If the hotel claims as its victim a male blood relative of the Robbins family, the curse will be broken," said Ted thoughtfully. Then he added with an unnerving grin, "But there are no relatives. My brother died in jail. My sister went crazy after my death and never married. She still works down in the beach house office, sending people to this hotel as if it were still in business..."

Max and Julia froze. They were both thinking the same thing.

That night, the two of them sat waiting for Evan in the main room of the hotel. "He's the only one who can break the curse," said Max.

"But by sacrificing his life!" exclaimed Julia in a strained whisper. "We can't ask him to do that."

But they didn't have to worry about what to say to Evan, because Evan never came. They didn't realize that Jason and Jeff had told Evan's parents their concerns about Evan's obsession with ghosts. And upon learning that her son had been sneaking away to sleep in the dreadful place where her relatives had been murdered, Evan's mom had packed up their belongings and had taken her family out of town on the first bus available. Evan would never return to that hotel.

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Back down on the beach, in a small office, an old woman with grey hair was patiently talking to a young vacationing couple. "I'm sorry," she was saying. "But I don't see your name on my list, and all the beach houses are full now. But there is a hotel just up the road, and there's a bus that will take you right to the beach..."

