

The Captured

Jimmy pulled his poor abused economy car up to the equally ruined abandoned house, turned off the headlights, and excitedly leaped out. The serious-looking man he was there to meet was already unpacking the back of his fancy SUV onto the dirt and tall dry grass of the long-dead lawn. In the dark, the SUV's taillights revealed stacks of utility cases and piles of unidentifiable technical equipment. The headlights harshly lit the decrepit and decayed front porch of the old two story house they were there to explore.

"Are you Jimmy?" the stranger asked while holding out his hand.

Jimmy awkwardly stepped over one of the cases and shook the man's hand. "Yes. It's Mort, right?" The man nodded. "Thank you so much for letting me be a part of this. I'm totally excited to see what's in there."

Mort smiled. "Well I hope you don't scare easily. It's pretty creepy in there."

"No, I'm good to go." He lied.

"Have any trouble finding the place? I know it's kind of way outside of civilization."

"No trouble at all." He lied again. "I got the GPS and I filled up the gas tank before I got out here."

"Excellent. Well, I've got some stuff already set up in there. Help me grab the rest of this and let's go in."

Mort turned off his vehicle then they gathered the rest of the gear and climbed the creaky front steps to the open door. Once inside, it took a moment for Jimmy's eyes to adjust to the dark space. It was a very old living room with almost no furniture. Broken windows provided no light from the moonless night outside and only candles on the floor and an unstable-looking fireplace mantle lit the interior. Everything from the floor to the ceiling was constructed of cracked and warping wood. The only inhabitants this house had seen in decades were insects and wild animals.

Once Jimmy fully adjusted, he saw a single wooden chair sitting in the center of the room surrounded by a circle on the floor made of some sort of powder.

"It's salt," Mort explained seeing the confused expression on Jimmy's face. "It's basically a ghost trap."

"Oh, that makes sense," Jimmy answered enthusiastically even though he really had no idea what a ghost trap was.

As he continued looking around, he saw that Mort had already set up several cameras and similar devices on tripods all facing the chair. Mort busied himself opening up the remaining cases they had just brought in.

Jimmy felt an overwhelming need to break the silence. "So, um, Mort?"

"Yep?" he answered without looking up from his equipment.

"You do this alone then?"

Mort stopped his work, looked up, and smiled at Jimmy. "Yeah, I used to be a part of the local 'ghost hunting' paranormal investigation team in town but it

was mostly a game to them. They really didn't take it very seriously and some of the newer techniques I wanted to try were too complicated and unusual for them. The salt circle on the floor being a good example."

"Oh yeah, that's too bad," Jimmy said agreeably.

"So I figured I'd work on my own again until I could create my own team. You're the first one to respond to my ad."

Jimmy was very pleased with himself. "That's awesome! I'd love to be a part of the team."

"Excellent. Consider this your audition. I'm sure you'll be very useful to me. Give me just a minute to find what I'm looking for and then we'll get started."

Mort smiled encouragingly again then returned to shuffling through the open boxes.

Jimmy didn't want to disturb him any further so he went back to looking around the room. As he turned his back to Mort, he felt a sudden pinch in his neck. His entire body went limp underneath him but, instead of hitting the floor, he landed in arms that seemed to expect his fall. His lazily rolling head faced down so he could see the two hands holding him from underneath his arms. One hand clumsily tossed a syringe into the corner. Jimmy desperately wanted to scream but nothing happened. Though he could still feel his body, his muscles were completely paralyzed.

"Time for you to prove how useful you are," Mort whispered with a matter-of-fact but physically strained voice as he pulled Jimmy over to the chair. "Damn, you're heavy."

Jimmy heard the rickety chair creak and pop as he clumsily landed in it. Mort moved in front of him and back into his field of vision. Jimmy watched in terror as Mort arranged his body parts into a sitting position and tilted his head back. Mort then moved away and brushed the salt on the floor to repair the breaks in the circle that dragging Jimmy had caused.

“Not a good start for your audition, Jimmy,” Mort said with a mocking laugh. “We’ve barely started and you already messed up my ghost trap. Oh well, easily fixed.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened in horror. They were the only thing he could move.

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking. ‘What are you doing to me?’ ‘Are you crazy?’ Etcetera.” Mort cracked a sinister grin then knelt down and started rummaging through one of the cases again. He continued speaking without looking up. “You see, the problem with paranormal investigation, Jimmy, is that it is incredibly difficult to guarantee the presence of ghosts. You can do all the tests in the world but there isn’t any way to know for sure that the ghost is actually there. However, I have found a fool-proof way to bring the spirits to me.”

Mort stood up from the case with something hidden behind his back. “You know what a ghost trap needs in order to work right, Jimmy?”

Jimmy only silently stared back.

“No answer, huh? Well, I’m going to guess you’re thinking what a ghost trap needs to work is bait. That would be a good answer, Jimmy. You seem pretty smart. In fact, I’m betting that you think *you* are the bait, Jimmy. Well, you’re close.”

Mort pulled a long knife out from behind his back and rushed at Jimmy. Jimmy closed his eyes as the blade slammed into his chest with lightning crack of overwhelming pain. The force of the hit was so intense that he felt the knife pass through him and snap the back of the chair in half. With his eyes still closed, he felt his body fall through the back of the chair and hit the floor.

The pain and paralysis instantly vanished.

Jimmy sat up and opened his eyes to a dim and colorless twilight. He was still in the same room but it looked and felt very different. The house appeared to be even older but far less decayed. In the pale grayish-blue light that filled the space from no visible source, he could see much more than before. The same candles, now burned out, and equipment was there but there was other furniture as well. All of the items appeared to be varying levels of transparent that fluctuated slightly as he looked at it. The previously unseen furniture was the hardest to see while the items he helped bring in the house were the closest to solid.

“Where am I?” he tried to say aloud. Though he could move, no sound came from his mouth. Instead, he heard his own faint voice reverberate in the distance.

Then he saw it. In the chair in the center of the circle, sat his body, limp and bleeding black blood. *Is this an out of body experience? Could I be dead? Or dreaming?* In front of his body, a transparent Mort was frozen in the moment in time when he withdrew the blade from Jimmy’s chest. The expression on

Mort's face was pure brutality and bloodlust. He was enjoying that instant of violence.

Jimmy stared at the scene in both wonder and horror but still felt relatively calm. His emotions felt unnaturally muted in this place. As he watched, Mort faded from one still moment to another like a kind of three dimensional slideshow. He also noticed far more distant and faded images of other people in the room. They stood still in snapshots of trivial moments of domestic life but they were harder to see. For a moment, he thought they might be the ghosts that Mort sought.

Jimmy concentrated on the image of Mort and, as he did, Mort became more solid and began to move like a normal person. Mort didn't seem to notice Jimmy as he walked around the outside of the salt slowly while pointing a small handheld electronic device into the circle. Jimmy could also hear him speaking but it sounded like he was on the other side of a piece of glass.

"Jimmy, are you there yet?" he said looking into the empty air instead of at the body in the chair. "It's time to do our work. Are you there?"

Jimmy began to feel dread and wanted to get away from Mort. He tried to back up but something blocked his path. He turned around to see nothing there but, directly over the salt line, he could feel an invisible barrier. It felt like the same kind of soft but impenetrable force of two magnets pushing each other away.

"Have you figured it out yet, Jimmy?" Mort taunted from outside the circle. "Do you understand your role here tonight?"

Jimmy felt a rush of rage wash through him. He hated this stranger for fooling him. For taunting him. For killing him. He screamed incoherently with his distant echoed voice and pounded futilely at the invisible barrier. As his anger grew, Mort's handheld device began to beep incessantly and blink with an intensifying red light.

"Excellent, Jimmy. Thank you."

Jimmy dropped to his knees behind the barrier and cried in desperation over the final understanding of his situation. The handheld device changed from a blink to solid.

"You see, Jimmy. The problem with paranormal investigation is you never know when you actually have a ghost present. What I've come to understand is... the only way to see the ghosts is to create them."

Mort looked up from his device and directly into Jimmy's eyes.

"And I see you, Jimmy."