

ELECTIVE PROCEDURES



December 6, Nuevo Vallarta, Mexico

Don't look down. Don't look down.

I kept repeating those three words, a singsong mantra to steady myself and get through time, pushing through seconds and minutes until it would be afterward and this nightmare would be over.

Don't look down.

But I didn't have to look; I knew what was beneath me. I could picture what was lying six stories down on the concrete beside the kidney-shaped swimming pool, near the mouth of the alligator waterslide. Under the glowing light of sunrise, I imagined a widening crimson puddle. A clump of arms and legs. A shattered bone protruding through flesh. Tangled hair matted into a cracked skull.

Don't look down, I said again, and I didn't. Instead, I aimed my eyes straight ahead, focusing not on the brick wall in front of me, but on the air surrounding my head. I stared into it, straining to see my aura, looking for stains, for splotches of darkness. Was it possible to see your own aura? Was there even such a thing? If there was, I couldn't see it, saw only inches of emptiness between me and the bricks, and, at the periphery of my vision, the railing. For the briefest moment I had a lapse. I almost turned my head, almost looked down at my hand. Don't look, I chanted. Don't look. Looking would mean moving my head. And if I moved it—if I moved anything at all, I'd disrupt my balance and slip, and then, with a thud, there would be two blobs of bones planted beside the pool.

A pelican dive-bombed past me, the rush of air nearly knocking me over. I held my breath, holding steady. I called out

again, hoping someone would wake up, but no one came. So I told myself to stay steady and think of other things. Other times. I stared at the wall and repeated: Don't look down don't look down don't look down.



Girls' night was always on Thursday. So that meant it had to have been a Thursday, what, sixteen days ago? A soiled paper napkin had been fluttering along the sidewalk alongside us, dropping to the concrete and lifting off again, escorting Becky and me down South Street on a blustery November evening. I smelled onions frying at Jim's Steaks and the rawness of oncoming night.

Of course, I didn't dare shiver now. Didn't dare move. I kept still, muscles aching and taut as I concentrated on keeping balanced. Balanced. It sounded like eating a diet of yogurt, vegetables, and whole grains. Maybe if I'd eaten more granola, I'd be better balanced now. Maybe. Or maybe being balanced meant measuring out equal parts and counterparts—like impulsiveness and self-restraint. Sanity and craziness. Working and playing. Sleeping and being awake. Rising and falling. Stop, I scolded myself. Don't think about falling. Just balance.

I hung on, and there was the paper napkin again, floating beside Becky and me on South Street. Two weeks and two days ago. We were in no hurry. We passed tattoo parlors, coffee shops, pizza places, shoe boutiques, and then Becky stopped beside an orange neon sign: READINGS \$10. She peered through the storefront window, then turned to me with an impish smirk.

I knew that smirk, had seen it before. It had led to singles bars and spa days. All-night department store sales. Weekend cruises, online dating sites. Casinos and Zumba lessons. The smirk was like a neon sign warning: brace yourself.

“Elle, you up for this?”

No way. I was barely up for dinner, had come out only under duress. In the months since Charlie's death, I hadn't been doing much of anything. For a few months, I'd dragged myself to

work and managed to feign energetic cheeriness for my class of second graders, but by the end of each school day, my face had ached from smiling and my body from pretending. I'd come home content to wallow quietly within the walls of my Fairmount townhouse until, finally, I'd taken a leave of absence so I could spend my days staring at *Law and Order* reruns. My friends, however, had been relentless. They didn't understand that losing a husband, even a lying-cheating-inheritance-stealing one whom I'd been about to divorce, had taken its toll. They didn't comprehend the grieving process or how long it might take, and Jen had endearingly begun to call me DD, short for Debbie Downer. They insisted that I "move on," which included, but was not limited to, going out with them weekly for "girls' night" dinners.

That Thursday evening, Becky and I were on the way to one such girls' night with half an hour to spare. When she asked about the fortune-teller, I thought she was joking. The place looked sleazy and dark, and everyone knew that fortune-telling was a scam. But Becky started for the door.

"I've never had my fortune told, have you?"

I hadn't, no. And I wasn't about to. I was having enough trouble with the past and present, didn't need to take on the future. I hung back, but she tugged at my sleeve.

"Come on, Elle. What's the harm? It's only ten bucks. I'll treat—maybe she'll tell me if I'll meet a guy."

"Really?" Meeting guys had never been a problem for Becky. She was curvy, spunky, short, and soft, and men were drawn to her like sleepyheads to pillows. If anything, she needed help keeping men away.

"You know what I mean. Not just any guy. The Guy. A keeper. Come on. It'll be fun."

And so, reluctantly, I'd let Becky drag me through a small entryway into an overheated, dimly lit sitting area separated from the rest of a large rose-colored room by a pair of drooping crimson curtains. Crosses and images of Jesus hung on the walls.

A couple of upholstered chairs with flattened-out cushions backed against the window. Beyond them two folding chairs faced a small cloth-covered card table. The place smelled of roasting meat. Somewhere behind the curtains, a baby cried. I couldn't breathe.

I looked at Becky and stepped back toward the door. "Let's go."

But a young woman rushed through the curtains, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, yapping at someone over her shoulder in a language I couldn't understand.

"Welcome, ladies. I am Madam Therese. You'd like readings?" She smiled, glancing from Becky to me. "What kind? Tea leaves? Tarot?"

Becky shrugged. "I don't know—"

"It's okay. No problem. I can offer you choices. The cards are twenty dollars. Tea is twenty-five."

Becky pointed to the window. "But the sign says ten dollars."

Madam Therese hesitated, shoved her hair off her face with the back of her hand. "Okay, yes. The sign is for short readings. Palms. We can start with it, and then we'll see. You can upgrade. You understand? Who will be first?" She'd held her hand out for Becky's money.

Becky handed her a twenty.

"Good, this is for two."

"No—not me." I shook my head, but Madam Therese whisked the cash into her skirt pocket and disappeared behind the curtains.

"Becky, I'm not doing this—"

"Relax. It's no big deal."

"Get your change. She owes you ten dollars."

Becky put up a hand, refusing to hear more. Behind the curtains, Madam Therese spoke to someone unseen in her foreign tongue. A man grumbled and the baby's wails faded. In a moment, she returned, her hair tied back, revealing dramatic cheekbones and large bangle earrings. The bracelets on her arms

jingled when she moved. The scent of jasmine mixed with that of meat.

“For ten dollars, you get a five-minute reading. After, if you want more, we’ll keep going. You pay just a little more, you understand?” Madam Therese smiled and lit a candle, made the sign of the cross. She took a seat, motioned for Becky to sit across from her, reached for her hand.

I didn’t know what to do, so I sat on one of the cushioned chairs, watching the woman study Becky’s palm. I felt uneasy, as if I shouldn’t be there.

“You will have three children close together, but not for a while yet,” Madam Therese smiled. “At least one boy. I see him shining in your aura.” She looked at Becky. “Your lifeline is long, healthy. And your love line is long, also. But so far, you haven’t been lucky, I am right?”

Becky glanced at me, gave an embarrassed giggle.

“But see, the line gets wider here. More steady. So, not long from now, you will meet a man and fall in love. Not just in love. Deeply in love, you understand me?”

Deeply in love? I understood her. A raw hollowness gnawed my gut. Why was it that, even though he’d been dead for thirteen months, even though I’d thrown him out and had been in the middle of divorcing him, everything reminded me of Charlie? I turned away, looking out past the neon sign at South Street. And, of course, there we were, Charlie and me, strolling past shops, his arm around my shoulder. Where were we going? Out for coffee? For a drink? I saw him lean over and kiss my forehead, felt the brush of his lips. But abruptly, a delivery truck pulled up, cutting off my view. Wiping the image away.

Becky turned to me, beaming. “Elle. Did you hear that?”

Oops. No, I hadn’t.

“I’m getting married soon.”

Really. Should I buy a dress?

“Actually, I see many men around you. But this man—this special one you are waiting for, he is different. He is not the man

you expect. Understand me? He might be—how I should say it? Someone you never thought about loving.”

“Why, is he a criminal? He’s not a drug dealer, is he?” She blinked. “Or wait—is he hideous?”

Madam Therese looked up. Her eyebrows were thick and black. Perfectly symmetrical. “These things I cannot tell you. Only that he is unlike the others.” Her gaze returned to Becky’s hand. “Also, you will travel very soon. You have plans?”

Becky shrugged. “No.”

“Well, you will make some. You will go someplace warm. I see water. Maybe someplace by the sea.” She released Becky’s hand. “You want more reading? Because this was five minutes. For ten more dollars, I can tell you more.”

Becky paused. Was she considering it?

I interrupted. “Becky, you already gave her twenty. She already has the extra ten.”

“No. That’s for you.” Becky stood. “Your turn, Elle.”

Madam Therese persisted. “Okay. But when you return from your trip, you will come back to see me again, you understand? I will tell you more.” Madam Therese turned to me, gestured for me to join her.

I didn’t move.

“Go on.” Becky took the seat beside me.

Madam Therese bent her head. Her bracelets jangled when she crossed herself again. She looked at me with tired eyes. “Come. Sit.”

I stood, took a seat at the table.

Madam Therese took my hand, stared at it. Her brows furrowed and her back stiffened. She met my eyes. Hers were dark and deep, like bottomless holes. “You want to hear the truth? All of it?”

Despite my doubts about palm reading, my heart lurched. Why was she asking me that? What did she see? “Why not? Is it bad?”

“Bad? Life isn’t good or bad. It’s a balance.”

Yes, she’d definitely used that word. Had it been a warning? An omen? Had she said it intentionally?

I hung onto the railing, tried to stay balanced. To remember everything she’d said. I saw her dark skirt and white sweater, her black eyeliner. Her rings. I smelled the roasting meat and the jasmine. Felt her coarse fingers holding my hand.

In a jolt, she sat back. “Who has died?” She looked from Becky to me.

Becky blinked at me.

“A spirit is with us. It isn’t resting.”

Becky’s eyes widened. “Oh God, maybe it’s Charlie. Her husband died—”

“Becky, please—”

“Okay, I understand.” Madam Therese touched her forehead, frowned. Concentrated again. “Okay, listen. I will tell you only some, you understand? But not all. What would be the point?”

Lord. Was it too terrible to say aloud?

“So.” She looked just above my head. “Your aura—the energy that surrounds you. It is stained.”

Becky whispered, “What?”

My aura was stained? How? I pictured a halo blotched with spilled wine—or with my second graders’ colored markers.

“The stains are blood.”

Oh. Wrong both times.

“And also darkness.” Madam Therese’s voice was hoarse, throaty. “I see around you a cloud. A cloud of death—yes.”

What? I felt a chill, said nothing.

Becky said, “Oh God.”

“This cloud means you must be cautious. The dead—their spirits are drawn to you. Some of them are harmless. But others—” she met my eyes, “surely, you already know this.”

Knew what? Were dead people out to get me? I looked

around. Was Charlie there? But Charlie wouldn't hurt me. So was it some other dead person? I saw only Becky and Madam Therese. Nobody else.

"If you are wise, you will protect yourself."

From what? The dead? How could I do that?

"You are stronger than you think. This is why they come to you. You have the gift."

She let go of my hand. "So, do you have questions for me? Things you want to know?"

Questions? Seriously? I was surrounded by hostile dead people, death clouds, bloodstains and darkness. What questions could I possibly have? "No. I just came here with my friend."

"Listen, then: You will also travel, like your friend. You also will meet a man. But be aware: this cloud—the darkness goes where you go. It surrounds you. Be careful because the dead are drawn to this darkness; to them it is a beacon. They will find you. You understand this. You know this to be true." Her tone was matter-of-fact. She let out a breath. "And so, the five-minutes time is up. I am happy to go on, if you want me to."

Want her to? God no. I let out a breath. "That's okay. I'm good." I wasn't sure what else to say. "Thank you" didn't cover it.

"Okay, no problem. You will come back to me again. Another day." Madam Therese turned to the curtain, called a name. Stood.

A lanky man with gelled hair stepped out from behind the curtain. They exchanged words I couldn't understand, and he ushered us to the door in a hurry as if we were bothering him. Or as if we'd brought with us a cloud of death.

At the time, I'd dismissed the reading. It was hogwash. There was no such thing as a bloodstained aura. And it was absurd to think that the dead were drawn to me.

But two weeks and two days later, clinging to a balcony six stories above the ground, I reconsidered Madam Therese's pre-

dictions. I called out again and grasped the railing, struggled to balance and closed my eyes, reminding myself not to look down at the concrete. Picturing the lifeless body of the woman I'd just failed to save.



Closing my eyes wasn't the best idea. Charlie showed up again, this time in my den with my kitchen knife in his back. I saw not just Charlie in that terrible moment, but also all the other terrible moments that had ensued—the deaths and the twisted secrets came together in a montage—no, in a stark mosaic. A kaleidoscope made from shards of terrible memories.

“Elle!”

I opened my eyes. The kaleidoscope shattered, fell away. The sunrise greeted me, along with Becky, Jen, and Susan frantically reaching across the railing, jabbering and tugging at me. Had they heard me yell for help? When had they gotten there? They pawed at me, nearly knocking me over.

“Grab her thigh,” Jen said.

“No, wait. I think we should take her arm.”

“Her arm? I've got her thigh. You get her arm.”

“Careful,” I managed, but I doubt they heard me.

My legs were splayed around the brick wall between balconies. My left foot rested tentatively on the railing of ours; my right on the neighbor's. My left arm hugged the wall; my right grasped the edge of the next-door railing. Behind my t-shirt and panty-clad backside, I felt the warmth of dawn and the calm of the ocean. And the pull of open air that extended six stories down.

Another pelican whooshed by. I glimpsed huge wings, a long beak. I wobbled, dug my fingers into the cement between bricks, closed my eyes again. And saw the face of Madam Therese.

“Take Susan's hand, dammit.”

“She doesn't hear us. She's pulling an Elle.”

“Now? Are you kidding?”

“Elle,” Susan shouted.

“I can’t take your hand. I can’t let go.” Even talking seemed to throw me off balance.

The three of them held onto my left thigh and leg. I glanced down, disobeying my own advice, and saw a man kneeling beside the dead woman, taking her hand. He looked like Charlie. That was crazy. From up here, I had no idea what he looked like. He could have been anyone. Hotel staff gathered. Security officers. A lifeguard looked up, saw me. Pointed. People gaped up at me.

They looked very tiny.

Slowly, I tilted my head up, moving my gaze back to the sixth floor. The muscles in my legs twitched. I couldn’t stay straddled much longer.

“What’s her name?” I heard a man, a Mexican accent.

“Elle.”

“Come on, Elle.” He wore dark pants and a white short-sleeved shirt, and his beefy arms slipped under mine, around my shoulders. And lifted. I resisted, unwilling to release the railing. But he kept tugging, dragging me up and over, laying me down onto solid tiles of our balcony where I lay still, shivering, catching my breath. Hugging the floor.

Susan, Becky, and Jen hovered around me. The man knelt, put a hand on my forehead, my wrist. He spoke with Susan. She called him Roberto. A maid stood at the balcony door, bug-eyed. Becky brought a glass of orange juice. When I could stand, Roberto helped me through the sliding doors into our suite. Jen began pelting me with questions. What had I been doing out there? Was I crazy? Why had I been climbing on the balcony? Susan snapped at her, telling her to let me be. Roberto was on a cell phone or maybe a hand radio. Something. Speaking urgent Spanish.

I sank onto the living room sofa, shivering, watching. Roberto, it turned out, was a security guard. He greeted the police, introduced Sergeant José Perez and Juan Alonso, the hotel’s

general manager. Susan sat on one side of me. Becky covered me with a blanket and sat on the other. Jen sat on the floor at my legs like a guard dog. And then the questions began.



“What were you doing out there?” Sergeant Perez sat forward with the weight on his toes, as if about to take off in a sprint.

I explained that I hadn’t been able to sleep. Actually, Becky had been snoring like a chainsaw, but I didn’t think that was relevant, didn’t mention it. At about five thirty, I’d given up and gone out on our balcony to wait for the sunrise, and I’d heard voices from the balcony adjacent to ours.

Sergeant Perez interrupted. “They were speaking English?”

Had they been? “I don’t remember.”

“Well, could you understand what they were saying? Do you speak Spanish?” He was brusque.

“Sergeant, please.” Susan intervened. “She doesn’t remember. Let her tell us what happened.”

“Excuse me, señora.” Perez thrust his chest out. “A woman is dead. Your friend is, at the very least, a witness—”

“At the very least? What are you implying?” Susan’s back straightened.

Oh Lord. Did he think I’d been involved in the woman’s death? Again, I saw Madam Therese. So far, her predictions had come true: Becky and I had both traveled. We’d gone to Mexico with Susan and Jen. We were near the water, as she’d said we’d be. And Becky had met a guy: Chichi, one of the activity directors at the hotel. They’d been virtually inseparable since we’d arrived—Becky hadn’t come back to the room until after two a.m. If Madam Therese had been right about all that, maybe she’d also been right about my death cloud and the bloodstains in my aura. I thought of Charlie. Saw him wave.

Susan was nudging me on one side, Becky on the other. Everyone was staring at me. Damn. I’d missed something.

“No, she’s fine.” Susan insisted. “She does this. She wanders off sometimes.”

In fact, my mind did wander off sometimes. My friends called it “pulling an Elle.” A shrink had called it a dissociative disorder, usually triggered by stress. Which, right then, I had plenty of.

“She’s fine. Elle?” Susan’s elbow hit my rib. “Elle, go on.”

“Maybe she’s refusing to answer the questions. Maybe she’d prefer to come to the station.” The sergeant stood on his toes.

Roberto raised his hands. “*Por favor*, José. We all want the same thing: To hear what happened. Why don’t we listen and then ask questions afterward?”

Sergeant Perez replied harshly in Spanish, no doubt asserting his rank and authority. Roberto backed off, having made his point. The sergeant sat again, still on tiptoe.

“Go on, Elle.” Susan’s hand covered mine.

Where had I stopped? Never mind. I just began again. “I heard a man and a woman talking. They sounded romantic—soft giggling and cooing. After a few minutes, I heard the sliding door open and close. I thought they’d gone inside. Everything was quiet.” I looked from face to face. Everyone watched me. Waiting.

“And then?” Susan prodded.

“And then a while later, the sliding door opened again. Someone was moving stuff around. It sounded like the deck furniture. There were scraping sounds and thunks. Grunts. I was embarrassed. I thought the couple had come back outside and were, you know.”

Sergeant Perez stared at me. “I know?”

Apparently he didn’t. “I thought they were having rough sex.”

Sergeant Perez cleared his throat. His gaze faltered. “Did you hear voices this time?”

“A woman said, ‘*Por favor*,’ and then there were just grunts. Oh, also a yip. Like this.” I made a yip. It sounded shrill.

The sergeant blinked. “That’s all?”

I nodded, yes, but I wasn’t sure. I thought the sliding doors

might have slammed shut again. That would be important, wouldn't it? It would mean someone else besides the woman had been there. But I couldn't remember. Didn't mention it.

"What happened next?"

Next? "I got up off the lounge chair to see what the ruckus was about." I'd expected to see kinky sex. A woman with a whip. A man in bondage. I felt my face get hot admitting that I'd snooped. "I stood at the wall between the balconies, leaned over the railing and peeked around. And under a pinkish-gold glow of dawn, I saw a woman, dangling from the railing."

"You saw no one else?" Sergeant Perez frowned.

"No."

"So you can't be sure who caused those bangs and scrapes you claim you heard."

"She *claims* she heard?" Susan pounced, indignant.

"Señora, yes. All we have is your friend's word that there were sounds. I want to establish if she knew who caused them. Maybe it was the dead woman herself. Or maybe someone else—perhaps a murderer."

A murderer who might have slammed the sliding doors as he fled. I tried to remember. Couldn't.

Susan sputtered.

Becky gave my arm a squeeze. "Go on, Elle."

I shivered under the blanket. The inside of my bones felt cold. Go on, Elle. "I tried to help her."

I hadn't hesitated, hadn't thought it through. My intention had been to leap from our balcony to hers and pull her back up. Good plan, except I hadn't made it. Hadn't gotten all the way across. Instead, I'd climbed onto our railing, straddled the brick wall, and, as I'd taken hold of her railing with my right hand, I'd realized I lacked the height and momentum to swing all the way across. In fact, I'd been stuck halfway, balanced precariously with one foot on each railing. Unable to get to her. Unable to get anywhere.

I didn't tell them all that. Or about how her violet eyes made

contact with mine. How neither of us spoke. How we assessed the situation in silence, measuring the distance between our hands, eyeing my right arm and her left. Calculating the risks. All I told them was, “She took a hand off the railing to reach for me.”

I closed my eyes, trying to avoid the image. But there she was again, reaching. And in an eye blink, swimming through air. Again, I shuddered, felt the thud. Pictured her, face down on the concrete beside the enormous kidney-shaped pool. I thought of her hand, wondered if her lifeline had stopped abruptly in the middle of her palm. Becky put her arm around my shoulder.

“Did you know this woman?”

“No.”

“No?”

“How could she?” Jen bristled. “We only arrived yesterday morning.”

Sergeant Perez raised his eyebrows as if surprised the guard dog could speak. “*Sí*. And what brings you here? Vacation?”

“I’m having some work done,” Jen smoothed her ash-blond ponytail. “I brought my friends along—Elle doesn’t know anyone here. None of us do.”

“And yet, your friend says she risked her life. She did this for a stranger?”

“Yes, Sergeant. For a stranger.” Susan was on her feet, scolding. “And you’re badgering Mrs. Harrison when you should be rewarding her for being a hero and trying to save a life.”

The sergeant stood. “As I’ve said, *señora*. A woman is dead. It’s a serious matter. The death could not have been an accident. It was either murder or suicide. The information I already have makes me doubtful it was suicide.” He paused, eyeing each of us one by one.

I wanted to dodge his eyes but didn’t dare. I needed to act normal. Wouldn’t normal mean meeting his eyes? I wasn’t sure. What was normal in this circumstance? The circumstance of not

having saved a woman, of having let her drop six stories onto cement? Of bringing a bloodstained aura and a dark cloud of death with me to Mexico? Was her death my fault? Was I responsible? Would a person in my position meet the policeman's eyes?

Again, Charlie appeared, sitting dead on my sofa, and I heard Madam Therese's raspy voice whisper: "The dead are drawn to you. But you already know that."

I saw the woman's violet eyes, her flailing arms.

The sergeant was talking. I'd wandered again, missed part of what he'd said.

"—Phoenix, Arizona. According to hotel records Señora Madison was a guest of the clinic. Her procedures would have been completed this week, as she was due to check out today. So, she was here for plastic surgery. Maybe like you, señora?" He tilted his head at Jen. "The General Manager Juan Alonso tells me that she had a face and neck lift. And he thinks also some work on her lips, is that right, Juan?"

Juan Alonso stood tall, nodded assent.

"She told Juan Alonso and others that she felt like new. More beautiful and happy than ever."

Again, Juan Alonso nodded, said something in Spanish, perhaps her exact words?

"So. It seems that Claudia Madison was not a woman about to kill herself."

Nobody said anything.

"We also know that Señora Madison was paying for her operation and her stay here with cash—cash that she kept in her suite. If the location of this money were known, that would provide a motive."

"Well, none of us knew her or anything about her." Susan's voice was flat.

"Maybe. Maybe not." He watched me.

"Okay, Sergeant Perez." Susan's hands were on her hips. "That's enough. You'd better go before I contact the American

consul. I'm a criminal defense attorney, and I know our rights as American citizens. Mrs. Harrison has given you her statement. If you bother her further or make any more insinuations about her role in this matter, I promise you, there will be severe consequences."

"Relax, señora—I have all the information I need. For now. I will be in touch. In the meantime, please surrender your passports to the hotel manager."

"What?" Susan demanded. "That's preposterous—"

"No. It's protocol. Just a formality." He stood at the door with his police officers and Roberto the security guard. They watched while the hotel manager collected our passports, whispering apologies and gracias. Before leaving, Sergeant Perez turned and looked at me. "Be assured, Señora Harrison, we will never be far away. Enjoy your vacation."

With that, Sergeant Perez nodded, and led his entourage away.



Only the maid remained, asking if she could clean the bedrooms. Jen said, "Fine," just as Becky said, "Not now. Come back later."

The maid stood with her cart in the open doorway, confused.

"WTF, Becky." As was her habit, Jen spoke in curse code. WTF meant "what the fuck," not as tough to crack as other of her codes. Then again, it wasn't really necessary to translate them. If Jen used initials, she was swearing. "Let her get it done."

Becky shrugged, okay, but the maid didn't come in. She was talking to someone in the hallway, nodding, sí, saying something that sounded like "*policia*," and pointing into the suite. A man stepped around her cart, through the door.

Susan was on the phone, ordering room service. She looked up, motioned him to wait.

He was tanned, sandy-haired, lean. About my height. Elegant, even in khakis. He obeyed Susan, backing up a step, but Becky asked, "Can we help you?"