

# GHOSTS HAVE TEETH

WRITTEN BY  
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She translates words for a living, but when a cartel assassin passes her a death threat against a judge, Clara Reed must decipher the *silence* between the *lines*—before she becomes the next message.





Welcome to “BOOK WORM”

**GHOSTS HAVE TEETH**

**BOOK ONE OF THE SILENT WITNESS SERIES**

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Lehi White—my steadfast anchor in every storm. Through countless nights of writing, moments of doubt, and the quiet thrill of bringing this story to life, you never wavered in your belief that these words mattered. Your encouragement gave me the courage to chase this dream, and your love gave me a home to return to when the fictional worlds I built grew dark. This book exists because you believed I could write it. Thank you for being my first reader, my fiercest supporter, and my greatest love.

And to the interpreters—the unsung heroes who stand in the gap between languages, cultures, and lives. You navigate the weight of unspoken words, the tremor in a voice, the silence that speaks louder than any sentence. Every day, you place yourselves in the crossfire of human conflict, armed only with precision and neutrality, to ensure that no voice goes unheard. This story was born from my profound respect for the risks you take and the bridges you build. May your words always find their mark, and may you always return home safely.

Ines M. White



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## **DISCLAIMER**

This book is a work of fiction inspired by the author's deep appreciation for the world of interpreting and the dedicated professionals who navigate its complexities. All characters, names, events, and incidents portrayed in this novel are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The situations, experiences, and organizations depicted herein are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. No character is based upon any specific individual, and the story—including its places and plotlines—has been created solely for the entertainment and engagement of readers.

The author's love of language and respect for the interpreting profession served as the creative foundation for this work, but the characters and their journeys remain imaginary constructs designed to tell a compelling story.

Ines M. White

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# CHATER 1

## DEPOSITION DAWN

If you are reading this, then I have looked into the abyss once more, and for now, it has not swallowed me. I have stared into the eyes of my own death, felt its cold breath on my skin, and I have lived to feel the warmth of another sunrise. That alone is a victory. But the game is not over. I am still a player on the board, and every breath I take is a defiance they cannot erase. Surviving today does not mean I am safe tomorrow, but it means there is still hope. And for as long as there is hope, the fight is not over.

Somewhere in the city, a secret had been buried, a warning left by a voice trembling on the edge of oblivion. That voice, and the danger it represented, felt far removed from the life of Clara Reed. Yet, the echo of such chaos was the very reason her world was built on unyielding order.

Clara Reed was always awake before her 6:15 alarm, a skill honed not just for punctuality, but as a fundamental defense against the chaos of a city that thrived on unpredictability. She had systematically purged the unplanned from her world, building her existence into a fortress of order, walled in by procedure and precedent. Inside these walls, chaos wasn't just avoided—it was a declared enemy. This was her shield, her only defense against the kind of storm that turned ordinary lives into shattered, anonymous warnings. And as the first light of dawn

touched her window, the alarm remained silent, a testament to the control she wielded—for now.

Her studio apartment always smelled of freshly brewed coffee and lemon-scented disinfectant. This morning it was no different. As she stood in her pristine kitchen, the city waking outside her window, she had no idea that today, the chaos would not wait to be invited in. It had already woven itself into the fabric of her schedule, a silent tremor running through the foundations of her life, poised to shatter her fortress of order into a million desperate pieces.

The day had plans for her that no amount of procedure could ever contain.

Clara was a court interpreter, the kind sought after for impossible cases. Her gift was to hear a tremor of doubt or a flicker of deceit and find the perfect word for it in a heartbeat. Late nights were spent poring over jargon, her electronic dictionary never far.

Her entire persona was engineered for objectivity, a human instrument. Only the subtle, defiant flash of a stiletto heel or the sharp point of a lapel brooch hinted at the woman beneath the precision—a woman who understood that some words, accurately delivered, could shatter lives.

By 7:00 AM, she was parked beneath the glass monolith of Hartman & Lowe, a downtown law firm whose lobby gleamed with marble and ambition. Today's deposition was for State vs. Vargas: a former logistics manager accused of funneling fentanyl through a shipping conglomerate's cargo containers. Clara had prepped the glossary—bill of lading, chain of custody,

DEA Form 6—but the real challenge was the defendant himself. Javier Ruiz had ice in his stare and a tattoo of La Santa Muerte peeking above his collar.

Before dawn, Javier Ruiz had knelt on the smooth and flawless floor of his cell at the Los Angeles Federal Detention Center. It was a standard prison cell, equipped with a bed, toilet, and sink. The only light in the windowless room was the flicker of a red candle casting shadows on the altar to La Santa Muerte. The skeletal saint's porcelain figurine gripped a scythe in one hand and a globe in the other, her robe embroidered with gold thread—protection for the faithful, vengeance for the defiant. He pressed his palm to the tattoo of her likeness etched over his collarbone, the touch a practiced ritual. Then, his voice dropping to a whisper, he murmured the old prayer—the one he'd learned from his brothers in the pandilla all those years ago, when loyalty was sworn in blood and survival was a language learned young.

"Santísima, guía mi lengua y afila mi ingenio. Que mis enemigos vean sólo lo que tú permites." ("Most Holy, guide my tongue and sharpen my cunning. Let my enemies see only what you allow.")

He dressed carefully: a tailored gray suit his attorney had provided to mask the gang ink, a silver tie pin shaped like a coffin—a gift from his hermanos in the cartel. In the pocket of his jacket, he tucked a folded square of paper, its edges sharp as blades. ITS CONTENT IS POISONOUS AND DAMNING.

At 7:00 AM, Javier sat across from his lawyers in a windowless conference room at Hartman & Lowe. They rehearsed his lines like a script.

"Stick to 'I don't recall,'" said Mr. Nguyen, the defense attorney, mopping sweat from his brow. "The prosecution can't prove you accessed those manifests without camera footage."

Javier nodded, feigning disinterest. "Let them think they're in control". His mind churned with darker calculations: the judge's schedule, the courthouse layout, the timing of the hit. He'd chosen today's deposition to pass the note—too many eyes, too much chaos to trace it back.

"And if they ask about the keycard?" pressed Nguyen.

Javier shrugged, flicking an invisible speck off his sleeve. "No recuerdo."

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Javier Ruiz spoke perfect, unaccented English, a fact buried in the discovery documents that he clearly assumed no one had read closely. His insistence on using a court interpreter for the deposition was a calculated move. By forcing every question and answer through the filter of translation, he gifted himself a series of precious pauses—extra seconds to weigh each word, to shape his testimony, and to artfully twist his answers just enough to muddy the record. It was a subtle, effective way of gaming the system, and he knew it.

Perched on the edge of the plush velvet chair, Clara sipped the bitter decaf, her body refusing the comfort of the cushions. On the low table beside her, a silver platter of perfect, untouched

pastries seemed to mock her. Food fogs the mind, she reminded herself, her fingers tightening around her tablet. Its screen glowed with a grid of legal terms, a fragile arsenal against the unknown. Every nerve was tuned, waiting for a cue she couldn't name.

The sharp hiss-click of the conference room door broke the silence. She stood gathering her tablet and shouldering her bag. The paralegal held the door open with a polite, impersonal smile. Clara stepped toward the doorway, the threshold between the safe, predictable world of the reception area and the coming confrontation.

And the trap sprang shut.

It wasn't loud or violent. It was silent and absolute. As she moved to cross, a figure materialized from her right, blocking her path so suddenly she nearly stumbled into him.

It was the deponent, Javier Ruiz.

He was supposed to be inside, already seated, controlled by guards and procedure. Yet here he was, free and moving, his presence filling the space. The air around him seemed to grow cold, carrying a faint scent of sandalwood.

Time slowed. Her professional smile froze on her lips.

His dark, calculating eyes locked onto hers, holding her in place more effectively than a physical grip. They weren't the eyes of a man being led to his own deposition. They were the eyes of a man conducting one. A flicker of something passed between them—not a question, but a statement. I see you.

In that elongated second, she noticed everything: the way his tailored gray suit hid the story told by his tattoos, the silver coffin pin glinting at his throat, the unnerving stillness of his posture. He wasn't just looking at her; he was assessing her, measuring her weight and worth like a predator sizing up prey.

Then, with a subtle, almost imperceptible shift, he was past her, brushing against her shoulder as he moved into the room. The contact was brief but deliberate, an electric shock of intimacy that felt like a violation.

The door sighed shut behind them, sealing her inside. The air was thick and still, heavy with a threat that had just been personally delivered. The deposition hadn't even begun, and Clara already knew, with a chilling certainty that coiled in her stomach: she wasn't here to interpret. She was here to be used.

The conference room was a fishbowl of tension. Sunlight glared through floor-to-ceiling windows as Clara took her seat at the foot of the table, equidistant from the prosecutor's stiletto taps and the defense attorney's nervous pen-clicking.

Javier sat slouched, his cuffed wrists resting on the table, confident and in control. He hooked the headset over one ear with a practiced flick of his thumb, the movement casual but precise, as if even shackled, he refused to fumble. His eyes flicked to Clara as she adjusted her own headset—a glance sharp as a switchblade, there and gone.

"Let the record show that all parties are present," said the court reporter, fingers poised over her stenotype machine.

Once the corresponding oaths were administered and preliminary questions asked, Ms. Carter, the prosecutor, launched first.

"Mr. Ruiz, you stated under oath that you never accessed the shipment manifests for Container 1147 between January and March of last year. Is that correct?" Clara's voice became Javier's. Her Spanish was crisp, borderless, stripped of accent—a linguistic chameleon. "Dijo bajo juramento que nunca accedió a los manifiestos de envío del Contenedor 1147 entre enero y marzo del año pasado. ¿Es correcto?"

Javier smirked. "Sí."

"Then explain why your keycard was used to enter the cargo database twelve times during that period."

Clara's lips moved, her mind partitioning: one half parsing legalese, the other sculpting equivalence. "Entonces, explique por qué su tarjeta de acceso fue utilizada para ingresar a la base de datos de carga doce veces durante ese período."

"No recuerdo" - ("I don't remember" )

"Mr. Ruiz, who authorized you to access the cargo database on February 14th?"

"No recuerdo."

"Did you discuss the shipment manifests with anyone at the company?"

"Quizás." ("Maybe.")

"Maybe? Yes or no?"

"No recuerdo."

Clara's voice remained a flat line, but her pen trembled as she interpreted his lies. Javier watched her, amused. The interpreter—neutral, invisible, perfect messenger.

When Carter cornered him about discussing the shipment with anyone at the warehouse, he leaned back, smirk widening. "Los abogados me dijeron que negara eso." ("The lawyers told me to deny that.") Chaos erupted. Nguyen spluttered objections. Clara's mask slipped—a flicker of fear in her eyes.

The conference room erupted like a pressure cooker blowing its lid.

"Objection! This deposition is over!" Mr. Nguyen slammed his palms on the table, sending a water bottle toppling. His face flushed beet-red as he whirled toward the court reporter. "Strike that last exchange from the record— Misleading and it violates attorney-client privilege! My client was confused!"

Ms. Carter shot to her feet, her voice a scalpel. "Confused? He just admitted you instructed him to lie under oath! This is obstruction, Nguyen, and I'll have your bar license!" Your client just waived the "attorney-client privilege".

Nguyen needed to get out of this one unscathed. "You're misinterpreting his testimony! He never said that I told him to lie," Nguyen barked, jabbing a finger at Javier. "This is a fishing expedition, and I won't let you."

"Let me?" Carter's laugh was a cold, sharp blade. "Sit. Down." The command cracked through the air, and her words didn't just hang there—they slammed into his shoulders with a tangible

weight, an invisible hand of pure will that drove him, stumbling, back down into his chair before his own body could even think to resist.

The stenographer's fingers froze over her machine. "Do I... keep recording?"

"Yes!" / "No!" the lawyers snarled in unison.

Javier Ruiz leaned back in his chair, cuffed wrists resting on his stomach, grinning like a wolf at a sheep convention. His tattoo of La Santa Muerte peeked above his collar, the saint's hollow eyes seeming to mock the room.

"Enough!" Nguyen tore off his glasses, spittle flying. "We're taking a recess. Now!"

"Like hell," Carter snapped, the words cracking through the room like a whip. She leaned forward. She slammed her palms down with such force that the polished, centuries-old mahogany table groaned in protest, its exquisite veneer seeming to flinch under her raw, uncontained power. Her voice dropped into a register of pure, unyielding authority.

"I'm not done with my line of questioning."

She let the silence hang for a single, suffocating beat. Her eyes cut to Ruiz's attorney like twin darts of fire, pinning him in his seat with a searing, silent challenge.

Her eyes locked onto Ruiz with pinpoint intensity.

"Mr. Ruiz," she said, her tone a blade, precise and cold, "why did your attorneys tell you to lie about the keycard?"

Clara's throat tightened as she translated: "¿Por qué sus abogados le dijeron que mintiera sobre la tarjeta de acceso?"

Javier opened his mouth, but Nguyen lunged across the table, shouting over him. "Objection! Leading, misinterpreting" He never used the word 'lie' "You are putting words in his mouth" Don't answer that!"

"You don't get to instruct him not to answer!" Carter roared. "This isn't privilege—it's fraud!"

The air in the deposition room turned to glass.

Javier opened his mouth to respond, but Nguyen was faster. He lunged across the polished table, his voice a sharp, contained explosion. "Objection! Leading the witness! You are misrepresenting the testimony!" He strategically avoided the word lie, but it hung in the air, unspoken. "You are putting words in his mouth! Don't answer that, Javier!"

The glass shattered.

"You don't get to instruct him not to answer!" Carter's voice wasn't just a roar; it was a hammer blow, slamming down on the table between them. She didn't lean in; she rose, her presence expanding to fill the room, her gaze locked on the defendant. "This isn't about attorney-client privilege," she seethed, the words dropping to a lethal, triumphant whisper that cut deeper than any shout. "It's fraud. And we are done playing games."

Carter knew she had him. The truth was finally, terrifyingly, on the record.

Carter: "Answer the question, Mr. Ruiz!"

As the tension continued to build up, the guards edged forward, hands on their tasers, as the two attorneys volleyed threats. Clara's headset screeched with feedback, but she kept her voice robotic, translating the chaos:

"Abogado Nguyen: 'No responda eso.' Fiscal Carter: '¡Esto es fraude!'"

Javier chuckled. "Esto es más divertido que las telenovelas." ("This is better than soap operas.")

Clara omitted the jab.

Nguyen dragged Javier into a broom closet-sized conference room, slamming the door. "What the hell was that? You just sank your own case!"

Javier lit a cigarette, ignoring the NO SMOKING sign. "Relax, licenciado. You'll fix it."

"Fix it? They'll disbar me!" By disclosing our conversations, you just waived the attorney-client privilege.

"Well, if you don't fix it," Javier blew smoke in Nguyen's face, "my hermanos will visit that pretty house in Silver Lake. Your daughter's what—six? Seven?"

Nguyen palmed his forehead, trembling. "We'll say... you misunderstood the question. That I told you to tell the truth and not to lie."

Javier smirked. "See? You're good at this."

Back in the fishbowl conference room, Carter pounced. "Mr. Ruiz, let's revisit your earlier statement. And, please don't tell

me anything your attorney told you. Did you lie under oath when you first said that you did not remember, and then your attorney instructed you to lie under oath?"

Clara translated, her pulse throbbing in her temples.

Mr Nguyen stated his objection to the whole line of questioning. Javier sighed, the picture of contrition. "Me equivoqué. El licenciado Nguyen me dijo que dijera la verdad, no que mintiera. Entendí mal." ("I was wrong. Attorney Nguyen told me to tell the truth, not to lie. I misunderstood.")

Nguyen nodded furiously. "As I said—a translation error!"

Carter's laugh was a honed blade. "A translation error? Ms Reed, did you mistranslate 'deny' as 'lie'?"

All eyes snapped to Clara.

She stared straight ahead. "No. The Spanish word negar translates directly to 'deny.' There was no error."

Nguyen looked ready to strangle her. Javier just winked.

Carter leaned in. "So, Mr. Ruiz, you admit you knowingly lied when you said your attorneys told you to deny?"

Javier spread his hands, chains clinking. "Soy un hombre simple, señora. Las palabras... se me escapan." ("I'm a simple man, ma'am. Words... escape me.")

The stenographer's machine whirred.

As the attorneys' shouting match crescendoed, Clara's attention split between translating Nguyen's frantic objections and the stenographer's panicked questions.

Javier seized the moment. With a flick of his cuffed wrists—practiced, precise—he palmed the folded note from his jacket pocket. Leaning forward as if to adjust his chair, he let the paper slip into Clara's half-open tote bag beneath the table. The guards, distracted by Carter's threat to call the state bar, missed the sleight of hand.

As the deposition limped to its conclusion, Clara packed her gear, Javier's note hidden in her bag like a live grenade.

Nguyen stormed out, muttering about motions to suppress. Carter lingered, thumbing a business card. "You ever need to testify about today, Ms. Reed... call me."

Javier lingered as guards unshackled him. Clara hurried to the elevator, the note burning in her bag like a live wire. The doors hissed shut—then jerked open again. And there was Javier staring into Clara's eyes with fierce determination, the intensity of his gaze a silent declaration of his unyielding resolve to see his mission through.

Javier stepped inside, flanked by guards.

The air thickened. Clara stared straight ahead, pulse thudding in her ears. Javier hummed a folk tune under his breath, "La Llorona", its mournful melody twisting into menace.

"Señorita," he murmured, his breath grazing her ear. "Cuida tus pasos. Los fantasmas de este lugar... tienen dientes." ("Watch your step. The ghosts here... have teeth.")

The guards chuckled, oblivious to the silent calculation moving behind Javier's eyes. The electric doors hissed open onto the sterile lobby. He strode out, not with the shuffle of a condemned man, but with the ownership of a king surveying his domain. He was whistling—a low, tuneless sound that was less a melody and more a signal.

As soon as she stepped out, a thin, tentative relief settled over Clara. The deposition was over, the strange, charged alliance with Javier Ruiz severed. She could finally retreat into the familiar rhythm of her work, leaving this unsettling chapter behind like a closed file.

But a deeper current was already moving beneath the calm surface of her life. The connection forged in that room was not so easily broken. Though she didn't know it, the door she had just closed was already cracking open, and the shadow of Javier Ruiz would soon fall across her path once more. This was not an ending. It was only the beginning.

Outside, through the bulletproof glass, the rain-slicked street gleamed under a bruised sky. A hulking prison van, its engine a damp growl, waited with its rear doors yawning open. His whistling didn't stop as he approached it, stepping in the door slammed shut, and he was gone.

The sunlight blinded Clara as she fumbled in her bag for her keys—and froze. The folded paper Javier had slipped there clung to her fingers like the web of a ghost-spider, its creases sharp and deliberate. She pulled it out, unfolding it slowly as the world narrowed to the scrawled words:

"Jueza Ramírez muere — viernes. 9 AM. Escaleras del tribunal.

"Judge Ramirez dies - Friday. 9 AM. Courthouse steps."

A cold void opened in her chest. The relief she'd felt just moments ago—the belief that the horror was behind her, that she could return to her orderly life—was shattered. The deposition, the threats, the feeling of being hunted... it had all been a prelude. This wasn't an ending. It was a countdown. The courthouse steps. Friday. The world, which had just begun to right itself, tilted violently back into nightmare.

A van idled across the street, its tinted windows opaque. Then, for a fractured heartbeat, Clara glimpsed—or imagined she glimpsed—a menacing face in the rear window, watching her. It was likely just a trick of the light, a projection of her own rising dread, but the van peeled away the moment her breath caught, as if it had been waiting for her notice.

And then, Clara's phone buzzed, shattering the silence. The screen glowed with her next assignment:

9:00 AM, Superior Court, Judge Ramirez presiding. Her blood ran cold.

A cold knot tightened in Clara's stomach as the realization struck her, delayed but devastating. It was the same judge from the Ruiz deposition.

The name echoed in her mind, and for a moment, the world seemed to tilt. This was no coincidence. The threat wasn't random—it was targeted, personal, and deeply connected to the very case she had believed was behind her.

A fresh wave of dread washed over her, colder and sharper than before. The danger was not just personal anymore; it was systemic, and she was standing right in the middle of it.

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