

**The  
Psychic  
Sisters  
of Oleander Street**

**DANA PRECIOUS**



Muskegon, Michigan

THE PSYCHIC SISTERS  
OF OLEANDER STREET

Also by Dana Precious

*Born Under A Lucky Moon*

*A Miss Merry Mac Mystery:  
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Dedicated With All My Love To  
August Gueulette

With deep love and appreciation for  
Sylvia Precious  
and  
David Susko

Thank you to  
Amy Conn-Tenny  
for encouraging me in all ways  
and helping to edit this book

And lastly,  
heartfelt appreciation for  
my great-grandmother, Gertrude Payne  
and  
my grandma, Ruth Payne Precious  
both of whom truly had the gift.  
Your stories were passed down to me  
and were the basis for this book's existence.

## PROLOGUE

It is legend in Michigan that you are never further than six miles away from a lake, river or stream. I'm not entirely sure that this is true and wonder what topographer took the time to figure this out. It's probably just for bragging rights, like how Minnesota claims to be the land of ten thousand lakes. Who counted all of them, anyway? Regardless, it is difficult to go very far in Michigan without getting wet.

Also crossing these bodies of water and peninsula of land are two very different, and it is said magical, lines. These lines intersect in a small town on the shores of Lake Michigan. The lines are not well known but maybe once people catch on to them the tourism board can use the lines to attract visitors: Muskegon: Land of the Ley Lines.

I learned about these Ley Lines from my grandma when I was barely tall enough to reach the kitchen countertop. In the summers when my sisters and I stayed with her she would teach us about everything from how to contact the spirit world, read the Tarot, why UFOs are seen so often in our area and, yes, Ley Lines. We made an attempt to pay attention but we really just wanted to go to the beach and not hang out in her dimly lit house.

But we did learn that these lines are considered to be energy paths crisscrossing the earth. The Chinese call them Dragon Lines. The Irish call them Fairy Paths. The intersection of Ley Lines is said to have significant energetic and magnetic powers.

These powers can supposedly magnify psychic, spiritual and healing activity. Stonehenge is built on the intersection of Ley Lines. So is Easter Island. And so is my grandmother's house that stands on Oleander Street in North Muskegon, Michigan.

One summer after many summers spent in grandma's house something happened. It must have been very bad because we were never allowed back to her house again. My memories of that August didn't just fade away. They were buried to the point that I didn't even know I had the memories to begin with.

## CHAPTER ONE

The nightmare always started pleasantly. James was in bed next to me tracing his forefinger down my nose and around my lips before his hand slid downwards. Just as I was becoming aroused the real nightmare began. James's car sped off the road, rolled over and over down a steep hill and burst into flames. James' agonized face pressed against the cracked driver's side window. I heard him screaming my name just before the car exploded. As always, I woke up in a cold sweat.

A minute later just before five a.m., I was startled when my niece, Mim, called me. I fumbled for my phone in the bedcovers. "Wha? What's wrong?" I gasped out. No one calls at that hour unless something is really wrong.

"Mom is royally pissed at you," Mim's voice rang with irritation.

"She's always pissed at me." I put my forearm over my eyes. "What do you want?"

"You got a letter and you haven't responded to her texts or voicemails. You need to find it and call her." Mim's voice was steel. It was like a forty-year-old taskmaster was trapped in her fourteen-year-old body. She was uncannily like her mother—my sister—Stella.

"Did you really have to call this early for this?" I was still shaken from the nightmare.

"I have to be in school soon, so I had to do it now." Mim paused, "Oh right it's two hours earlier in California. Sorry." Then she ended the call without a goodbye. Again, so like her mom.

There was no way I was getting back to sleep now. Blearily, I got up and grabbed the basket by the front door where I threw the bills that were arriving in alarming shades of pink. I'd thrown the innocuous manila envelope in there because who sends anything by snail mail if it's important? I crossed the three feet from the door to my kitchen table.

I'm sure the converted garage that I live in is an illegal rental. But I didn't ask any questions because the price was right and beggars can't be choosers.

Ripping open the manila envelope I discovered two separate envelopes inside. One was heavy, cream colored and smelled like money with its black embossed return address of: Smithton, Everett & Binks, Attorneys At Law, Muskegon, Michigan. The second was pink with flowers printed along the edges. Written in my grandmother's spidery handwriting on the front was: *For Stella, Frances and Jodi*. I ripped open the official looking envelope first. Upon reading the stiff pages of the letter I realized why my sisters had been texting and calling in the past two weeks.

I'd been in a major funk lately and hadn't read the texts and seeing their phone numbers had let the calls go to voicemail. I hadn't wanted to talk to them or anyone else for a while. Jodi could usually cheer me up, but I hadn't even wanted to talk to her.

Now I realized I should have paid more attention to how often they had been trying to reach me. What I held in my hands was a copy of my grandmother's Last Will and Testament.

After a brief introduction by the lawyer, John Binks Sr., the letter read:



*Stella, Frances and Jodi, my three granddaughters, shall equally divide the proceeds from the sale of my house and contents at 1011 Oleander Street, North Muskegon, Michigan. This is contingent upon first clearing the house. All three sisters must be in attendance at the same time for this clearing and must live in the house together for seven days. If any one granddaughter does not meet these specifications, then all proceeds from the sale of the house shall go to the Muskegon Museum of Art.*

The document continued but I dropped it on the kitchen table and leaned back in my chair. It was kind of amazing that grandma had left us anything at all.

My sisters and I had drifted away from her decades ago. None of us that I knew of had even gone to Michigan for her funeral a few months back. The last time I'd seen Stella had been at another funeral—our fathers'—four years ago. Jodi usually breezed through Los Angeles every so often and we'd spend the day strolling the beach, pant legs rolled to our knees, laughing and catching up.

With some trepidation I opened the pink envelope. It contained a single page. While it was my grandmother's handwriting it appeared to be a copy. I assumed that my sisters had received an identical letter. *Dear Stella, Frances and Jodi—*

*I did not allow the three of you to come to my home for many years. This was necessary to protect you from a ghost named Stuart Carmen. Now, with my death, you and quite possibly your families are in extreme danger. He had been tormenting me since his death many years ago. He was a man who, when he was alive, did terrible things and his ghost has proven to be far more evil. With my abilities I was able to prevent Stuart from inflicting any harm to you or others. But my powers simply were not strong enough to rid this world of him forever. I inherited my skills as a medium and psychic from my mother and her mother before. Each of you, as children, displayed remarkably varied psychic abilities. You then suppressed and lost these abilities.*

*After a lifetime of denial, you must rediscover them. With the three of you drawing upon your powers together you will be able to send Stuart's ghost from this earth forever. Look to the Ley Lines to guide you.*  
*Love, Grandma Gertie*

After reading the letter twice I sighed and rubbed my forehead. Why wouldn't grandma believe that I didn't have any psychic powers? None of us three sisters did. I looked back at the official letter. Damn it. Grandma had given a freaking timeline for us to complete this task.

It had to be done by the end of August. It was now August nineteenth and while I'm sure the Muskegon Museum of Art was a deserving entity I really needed the money from the sale of Grandma's house. I pondered calling Stella. Talking to my older sister was like petting a sleeping rattlesnake. You got lulled into a false sense of security when she was nice to you. But you never knew when the snake was going to wake up and bite you. It usually took me days or weeks to recover from Stella's casual cruelty. Taking a deep breath I reluctantly picked up my cell phone and dialed my older sister.

## MIM

Mim flopped back on her unmade bed. Hopefully the phone call to her Aunt Frances would move things along so her mom would go to Michigan. Her friend Mallory was having a pool party this week and her mom already said no to the party. She didn't approve that both boys and girls would be there, much less boys and girls in bathing suits. On the other hand, Mim's dad could usually be persuaded to let her do things her mom forbid. Even without the pending pool party it would be a relief to get her mother's high hum of anxiety out of the house for a week. Maybe her call to Aunt Frances would give the whole situation the kick in the butt it needed for her mom to pack up and go.

"Miriam, have you made your bed yet?" Her mom's voice echoed from halfway up the stairs.

Mim closed her eyes in annoyance as she yelled back the lie, "Yes."

"Keep your voice down." Her mom's voice scolded. "What will the neighbors think?" Sighing Mim figured she'd better just make her bed and get it over with. When she opened her eyes and sat up she found her friend Henry had arrived. Henry had been her best friend since she was in diapers. As usual he was sitting on the edge of her window. He came in that way because he didn't like passing by her mom.

"Is she going to let you go?" Henry asked.

"No." Mim flopped back again and covered her head with her pillow.

"Mallory always smells like pee anyway." Henry twisted his face as he sat down in her desk chair.

“But Jason is going to be there and he’s so cuuuuute.” Mim picked the pillow up off her face for a second to moan.

“He’s so cuuuuute.” Henry mimicked her.

“Knock it off.” Mim mumbled from back under the pillow. “God, if she would just leave this week life would be so much easier.”

## CHAPTER TWO

"I'm not doing it." Stella was adamant on the phone.

"Stel, come on, it's only for one week," I said. "We can just hang out and eat pizza or something."

"No!" Well, hell, that was Stella. Blunt and to the point. Stella continued, "I've been trying to reach you for weeks. You finally decide to get back to me and then you have the nerve to demand that I drop everything to go to Michigan right this second?" Inwardly I cringed since I didn't have much of a defense on this front. I hate it when Stella is right.

I could just see Stella standing in her perfect suburban house, in her perfect St. John's knit suit, joined by her perfectly, perfect plastic surgeon husband. Thank God we lived a thousand miles apart.

"I don't need the money, Frances. You do. So go clear the house by yourself." She snapped.

"You know it has to be all three of us," I said as I closed my eyes and thought, Bitch.

I couldn't risk alienating her though, so I pleaded with her to think about it. Her only response was a heavy sigh. Then, like her daughter, Stella hung up the phone without saying goodbye.

The next call was to my younger sister, Jodi. Where Stella left me wounded Jodi usually left me laughing. She answered on the first telephone ring. "I knew it was finally going to be you," she chirped. "I vibed it."

Smiling to myself I thought, that is such a Jodi thing to say. Jodi gleefully studied crystals and Reiki and every New Age thing that crossed her path.

“When are you coming?” she asked.

I was startled by the way she asked the question. “Why? Where are you?”

“I’m in Grandma’s house right now,” she said, “I’ve been here already for a couple of days and I can tell you this house is ten kinds of creepy,” she confided.

“Are you staying there?” I couldn’t imagine her rattling around the four stories by herself especially at night.

“No F-ing way. The energy in this place is so negative that I’d be surprised if even the three of us can get rid of it. I spend nights at the Drift On Inn over by the bagel place,” she told me. “I figured I’d get a head start,” she continued. “I’ve been trying to guide this Stuart Carmen guy to the afterlife.”

Hope surged in me, “You know how to do that?”

“No.” Jodi admitted. “I just kind of wave my arms around and tell Stuart to go to the light. I haven’t had much luck,” Jodi sounded disappointed. Then her voice brightened. “But there are the kids.”

I dreaded asking, “What kids?”

The phone spilled her excitement, “It’s fascinating, really. You’d think we would have known the story given how much grandma talked about the afterworld. Seems that around the early 1900’s there was a fire in this house. It spread fast through the third floor. That’s where the kids’ bedrooms were and all three of them went up in flames.”

I cringed at her cheerful tone, “How do you even know all of this?”

I fully expected her to say she had had visions or something. Instead, Jodi explained, “Oh, from Betty Van Wiggins. I saw her at the Bear Lake Tavern last Tuesday night.” Smiling to myself I remembered Jodi's talent for making friends with pretty much anyone, anywhere. Jodi continued, “Betty is ninety-years-old and she heard about it from her mother. So, you know, pretty close to the source.”

“Did you ask her about this Stuart Carmen guy?” I asked.

“Oh.” Jodi paused. “Huh. I didn't think to do that.” Good old Jodi. She'd forget her head if it wasn't attached.

“Anyway, how soon can you get here?” She pleaded, “I've taken a ton of time off work already.”

I didn't know Jodi even had a job. Usually she was flitting from place to place in a permanent state of, “I'm sure this will be the perfect job / town / yoga retreat for me.”

“I'm not sure I'm coming,” I said. “Stella said she wouldn't come and there isn't much point if we aren't all there.” I didn't want to waste precious dollars on a plane ticket if it wasn't going to work out.

After I hung up I tried to relax by playing the Scrabble-like puzzle Words With Friends on my cell phone and then went into the only other room with a door, the bathroom. My cell phone rang but I didn't pick it up when I saw the caller I.D. It was my landlord. I'd been avoiding her calls for about a month now. I was two months behind on the rent.



Brushing my teeth I regarded myself in the mirror. Thirty-four years old and I looked like hell. My mousy brown hair was in dire need of blond highlights and dark circles hung under my eyes. Inheriting Grandma's house might just save me.

## CHAPTER THREE

For many years my sisters and I had spent the entire summer at our grandmother's home. Together, we spent happy, languid days sailing our little Sunfish on Bear Lake or riding our bikes out to the channel wall or begging grandma to drive us out to Ruth Ann's ice cream shop near the campgrounds. We'd sit at the brightly colored picnic tables licking our cones while we breathed in the campfire smoke. That smell still reminds me of those wonderful days.

One of my best memories was spending days with my sisters on the white sugar sands of Lake Michigan. Around four o'clock every day someone would spot an object on the horizon and yell, "Wave!". Others echoed the call up and down the long beach. And, as if at the start of a race, gleeful beachgoers ran together to splash into the clear water.

Non-locals would have no clue what was going on. Only when the Cross Lake Ferry approached the deep channel leading into Muskegon Lake did they understand. The big ferry created a giant wake behind it. As that wake approached the shore it became a perfect wave. Swimmers bodysurfed or boogie boarded the wave for a glorious five seconds.

About twice a week our grandmother tried to teach us psychic lessons. She had learned everything at the knee of her own mother. Her mother had learned everything at the knee of her mother and so on. Suffice it to say the information and the legends all went back a long, long time.

Barefoot, my sisters and I would pick tomatoes and green beans from grandma's garden as she sat nearby in a webbed, aluminum folding chair and instructed us. I think we did try to listen but usually Jodi would do something like put an earthworm down the back of Stella's shirt and it would set the three of us girls off giggling.

Grandma watched each of us girls closely waiting for us to reveal any psychic D.N.A. in our genes. Grandma waited a long time. I think we disappointed her in that we were normal, ordinary people.

If nothing else it would be good to see Jodi. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a faded Cage The Elephant concert t-shirt then started throwing clothes in a suitcase. What did one wear to a ghostbusting I wondered?

Last to be packed was the framed photo of James and me that always sat on my bedside table. It showed a caught moment taken by a friend. James had run up behind me by the bell tower at Michigan State University, grabbed me by the waist, and swung me around. We were laughing amidst the red and yellow fall leaves on the wide lawn.

My head was down and obscured, but his face was tilted up and laughing in that way James just had. I remember that I had never felt so happy as at that moment.

After slipping on the little blue topaz ring that James had given me, I went outside to wait for my Uber to the airport.

## MIM

Henry and Mim stopped a block away from her house so Mim could slip off the childish blouse her mom made her wear. Underneath she had on a black t-shirt depicting a silver skull. She stuffed the shirt printed with flowers into her backpack. Every item of clothing that Stella bought for Mim was far more appropriate for a seven-year-old. Even Mim's dad, Ashland, was now trying to persuade Stella to let Mim wear more age appropriate clothes but so far it was a non-starter. What they didn't know was that Mim just went thrifting at Goodwill with her babysitting money and changed the second she left the house.

Dropping her skateboard, she took off on it. Henry hustled to keep up on his board. "Stella decided to go, huh? Henry asked.

"Don't call my mom Stella, it's weird." Mim said over her shoulder. "And can't you go faster?"

Henry's skateboard couldn't keep up with Mim's longboard so she finally stopped, flipped her board up, and carried it. Henry picked his up too and they walked side by side.

"What made her decide to go? I thought she was mad your Aunt Frances took so long to reply." Henry jumped to swat at a low hanging branch over the street.

"I guess my aunts finally persuaded her. She left for Michigan early this morning." They arrived at the park where Mim dropped her board and rolled it back and forth with one foot. "And then my dad said I can go

to the pool party so, you know, all is well in the land of Mim.” She bumped fists with Henry and took off towards the skate park area with Henry following. She hoped the older kids weren’t there today. They usually edged her out of the best parts of the drop-ins. Henry pushed his board hard to keep up, “Stella didn’t explain why she changed her mind?”

“What do you care? All I care about is I get to go to the pool party.” Mim skated even faster leaving her friend behind. Henry shook his head and as usual headed over to watch the Little League game. His lousy skateboard couldn’t handle the skate park.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Arms out-stretched, Jodi ran up the sidewalk outside of the tiny Muskegon airport to wrap me in a hug. I hugged her back tightly. It was so good to see her. I rolled my suitcase down the sidewalk to where Jodi had momentarily parked her car at the curb. “Stella’s already at Grandma’s house waiting for us,” Jodi called over the car roof as she ducked her head to get into the car. “She just showed up out of the blue.” It was just like Stella not to deign to tell us she was coming.

While I wore my usual T-shirt and jeans, Jodi had on an embroidered bohemian shirt and some kind of glittery blue strands were clipped in her long hair. Her wedge sandals made her even taller than normal. Jodi was a big woman. She wasn’t overweight, she was tall and I suppose in the past people might have called her ‘big boned’.

We crossed over the Causeway. The Causeway is a small concrete bridge that goes over the Muskegon River to reach the tiny peninsula of North Muskegon. Just beyond that to the west the river meets Muskegon Lake.

Flowering oleander bushes grew in a short, neat hedge bordering the fence. Jodi pushed the handle down on the ornate front gate and we entered the property.

I was certain that our ghostbusting mission was the current topic of conversation at our local Jodi parked on Oleander Street in front of the house. As I remembered, a high, black wrought iron fence still stood around the entire property.

The red brick house loomed in front of us. As Jodi and I made our way up the long walkway I could see the house's entry was built like a wooden gazebo arching in front of the massive doors. Six carved columns held up the pointed entry roof. It was painted dark brown with accents of turquoise and burnt orange. It was really a mansion I realized for the first time. The place was huge.

Hoisting my suitcase, I followed Jodi up the porch stairs. Through the front picture window, I could see into the parlor where Stella sat bolt upright, ankles primly crossed. Her suit was in Stella's signature colors of cream and white and her hair was styled in a chic French twist. Speaking into her cell phone she exuded confidence. Inwardly I shuddered. Stella never changed and that was not necessarily a good thing.

Jodi pulled a massive key ring out of her patchwork quilted shoulder bag and finally located the correct key to the front door. After a struggle with the lock Jodi murmured, "Ah, got it," and the door swung open with a sigh.

Inside, the light was dim. Dust motes floated through the bit of sunlight in the entry hall. Jodi ran her hand along the wall to find the light switch and a crystal chandelier cast a soft glow across an ornate oriental rug.

Upon entering I instinctively turned back to see the rectangular stained glass window above the front doors. I remembered how I had loved the way the sun had spilled its colors onto the rug when I was a kid. Way back when, Jodi, Stella and I would roll around on the rug laughing as our bodies were painted with color.

The walls also were still the way I remembered. They were covered with what appeared to be wooden inset panels painted the color of port wine.

When I was younger I hadn't appreciated the beauty of the house. Then it had just seemed dark and oppressive. Now I saw it through different eyes. It was phenomenal and I hadn't even made it past the entry yet.

Jodi led me into the parlor. Stella acknowledged our presence with her forefinger held in the air meaning, 'just a minute'.

Her gesture immediately made me start fuming. I pretended to go look at the books in the bookshelves. I hadn't seen Stella in four years and this is the way she greets me? Stella had always thought she was oh-so-important that everyone else had to wait on her Highness and her schedule.

Continuing her call Stella was all friendly, silky smooth sales pitch. "The roof is brand new and there's plenty of space for that pool you wanted." She gave a fake-y laugh and ended the call with, "Just let me know when you want to put in an offer."

Finally, Stella stood up and gave me the kind of hug where you bend forward at the waist so no part of your torso really has to touch the other person's. We then all perched ourselves on the antique Eastlake chairs. The pink velvet covering on the rounded hump of a seat was worn to a shine and I felt myself sliding off every few seconds.

"So," Stella said in a surly tone that was markedly different from the one she had used on her call. "Here we are."



We sat together in awkward silence until I finally asked Stella, "Why did you change your mind about coming?"

"I just did that's all," she said. That put a damper on the small talk.

After another long silent pause Jodi asked a bit too loudly, "Does anyone know what we're supposed to accomplish here?" I knew that when Jodi got nervous her volume increased.

"Can't you learn to keep your voice down?" Stella winced.

"Sorry." Jodi was cowed. Poor, sweet Jodi. Stella's treatment of her made me simmer even more.

"We're supposed to get rid of the guy Grandma wrote about," I said, "whatever that means."

"Why does she care if we get rid of some ghost anyway?" Jodi asked. "Why can't we just pass him on to the next owner of the house? I mean, she lived with him all these years," she went on, "why can't someone else?"

"Because this Stuart Carmen could hurt us." I replied.

"Wooooo," Stella waved her hands next to her head, "I'm so scared."

"I never saw ghosts when we stayed summers here." I mused. I looked at Jodi and Stella, "Did you?" They shook our heads no. When another long silence ensued, I reached for my overnight bag. "It's been a long day. I'm going to bed. I guess I'll just take the bedroom I usually had."

"Of course you would." Stella leveled a gaze at me. "It's the best one."

“What’s that supposed to mean,” I steeled myself.

“Just that you always made sure you were first in line,” Stella again said evenly. She knew it pissed me off when she said hateful things but in a perfectly sane tone of voice. I felt the anxious, panicky tightening in my chest that happened whenever Stella started in me.

“What? Like I always hogged everything good for myself?” I could feel a hysterical pitch begin to enter my voice. I closed my eyes and willed myself to keep calm. I thought, Must. Not. Lose. Control. Why was it that I was a perfectly sane person except when I was around Stella? Oh no, oh no, I thought. I had promised myself I wouldn’t let this happen. I thought about all the Youtube videos I’d watched telling me to breath evenly and find my center when I felt anxious.

“Since you said so, yes,” Stella hissed. “You always made sure you got the best of everything!”

“Like how you always made sure you had a giant stick up your butt?” I flung right back at her. Not elegant words but effective.

The familiar game was on.

Stella reared back in her chair like I had struck her and shouted, “You are the world’s biggest B-I-T-C-H!”

God. She couldn’t even *say* the word bitch. She had to spell it out like H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks. I couldn’t understand how this person was my blood relative. To hell with my center. I shouted back, “If I’m the world’s biggest bitch then you’re the first runner-up! Which means I’m still the best!”

Grabbing my bag I flew out of the room, tears blinding me. I heard Jodi running after me, “Frances, Frances please come back.” I ran up the stairs down the hallway and into the ‘best’ bedroom where I flung myself facedown onto the bed and pulled a pillow over my head.

Kind-hearted Jodi followed me in. She sat on the side of the bed and patted my back while I sobbed. “We need to try to be patient with Stella.” My sister murmured.

“*Why?*” I wailed from under the pillow. “She’s always so nasty. It’s like she’s just waiting for a chance to hurt someone’s feelings.”

“We don’t know why,” Jodi stroked my hair now. “Remember that sign mom and dad had above the kitchen sink? It read, ‘People need loving the most when they deserve it the least’. Maybe Stella needs some loving to become nicer.”

“It’s going to take a lot of loving then.” I mumbled. Jodi gave me a final pat on the back and I heard the bedroom door close quietly behind her.

That night I had another dream. I hadn’t had this one for a long time. I was walking along the sidewalk bordering the Red Cedar River that ran through the Michigan State University campus. When I got behind the library, I saw James sitting on the bank of the river. His brown hair was unruly and he wore a plaid shirt over the gray hoodie that I always stole from him to wear.

I had anxiously been looking everywhere for him so I broke into a run. But when I stood in front of him it was like James couldn't see me. It was like I didn't even exist. He just kept looking at the river flowing by.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I was still sound asleep when I felt something brush my cheek. Fitfully I brushed at it. Then I bolted up in bed. What if a spider was crawling on me? But the finger then traced a full outline of my lips before moving down to tease a nipple. This had never happened when I was awake before. Staring into the dark I waited for the nightmare to begin.

It didn't. I lay back on the pillow in confusion and then moaned involuntarily. It had been so long since anyone had touched me. Between my legs I felt an insistent throbbing. A ghostly hand teased my vagina. My vagina rewarded the unseen hand with a wetness I had never experienced. This was beyond anything I had ever felt before. Half awake, half asleep I soaked in the touch that became more and more intense. My body half arced off the mattress to meet the hand. Then I felt full lips cover my own and opened my mouth in response. When the ghost finally entered me, with a complete fullness, I was ready to explode. My legs tightened and wrapped themselves around an unseen, unknown, hardened body. Groaning I exploded into the most intense orgasm I'd ever had. It went on and on in enormous waves until I couldn't take anymore. I lay in bed heaving in the aftershocks.

It was then that a blood curdling scream echoed across the house.

Jesus! Throwing off the bedcovers I ran out into the darkened hallway where I bumped into Jodi who looked as confused as I felt. Taking my hand she pulled me to Stella's bedroom. We burst through the door.

Jodi shouted, “Stella! Stella! Are you...” She broke off at what we both saw by the bright light of the moon through the window.

A thick book was hovering four feet above Stella who lay in bed. It was as if the book was held by an unseen hand. Stella’s slippers were oddly placed on either side of her head. Her eyes were open wide with shock staring at the book. Abruptly the book dropped landing hard on Stella’s stomach.

“Oh my God,” I frantically ran my hand along the wall to find the light switch. As light illuminated the room Stella sat up in bed. The book slid off her stomach and onto the floor.

“I woke up and that book...” Stella’s voice quavered with fear. Jodi and I ran to her bed. Jodi sat on the edge and held her hand as I bent to pick up the book.

“It’s ok, Stella. It’s all over.” I said with more assurance than I felt. I turned the book over in my hands.

“It’s my Bible.” Stella managed, “When I went to sleep I put it on the bedside table.”

“Why are your slippers on your pillow?” I asked. I didn’t have a lot of experience with ghosts but playing with shoes wouldn’t seem to be their preference.

“I...” Stella looked down at her pillow and seemed to see the slippers for the first time. “I don’t know. I left them on the floor next to the bed.”

Jodi and I tried to determine how the book had been hovering four feet above Stella’s prone body. Had there been a sudden wind? But, no, the window was

shut. Even if it had been open the book was too heavy for a breeze to lift. Not to mention that Jodi and I had seen it hovering in place without moving until it fell.

Once Stella calmed down she set about convincing us and herself that the book had not really been floating. That what we saw was a trick of the light. That she must have been sleepwalking and put her slippers on her pillow. Never mind that Stella didn't sleepwalk, Stella decided that was her story and she was sticking to it.

I gave up trying to convince her otherwise and Jodi and I left for our own bedrooms. As Stella requested, I left the overhead light switched on in her room. Out in the hall safely I wrapped my arms around myself as I shivered involuntarily, "What in the hell was that? That book was floating in midair. I don't care what Stella says."

Jodi smiled at me. "That prank is just the kids. They're always doing stuff like that." I shook my head too tired to respond and wearily made my way back to my own bed. Lying there I luxuriated in the memory of what had occurred before Stella's outburst. Then I fell into a hard, happy sleep.

The next morning, as I lay in bed, I pondered the events of the night before. I stared at the photo of James and me that I had set on the table next to the bed. God, my heart ached with the pain of missing James. Taking a deep breath I closed my eyes and willed the thoughts away.

An hour later I sat out on the sunny wide veranda with Stella and Jodi having coffee. We relaxed

in the broad wicker chairs surrounding a table inset with an antique wood and ivory chessboard. Jodi sat cross-legged doodling in her always present sketch pad. She wore a blue t-shirt with white script that read, Lake Michigan: No Salt No Sharks. Stella always wore white. Today it was white shorts, white blouse.

Glancing over at Jodi's sketch pad I saw that, as usual, she was drawing odd looking cartoon characters. To be kind, I always praised her art ability. But the characters were so whacko I wasn't surprised she could never sell them.

Looking around I saw that the veranda had the same type of woodwork that was at the front entry. The underside of its roof revealed exposed beams held up by painted and gleaming, carved wooden columns. Beyond the porch lay the vast garden with a view of Bear Lake.

A few two-man sailboats drifted along hoping for a breeze while speedboats pulled water skiers. I remembered that it was always annoying when someone was new to Bear Lake. Boaters were supposed to go around the lake counter-clockwise to prevent tangle-ups.

New boaters just screwed everybody else up. Turning my face to the warm sunshine I wondered if we would have time to go to the beach. There was no better feeling than a swim in the fresh waters of Lake Michigan in late August.

A man wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase appeared on the lawn from around the side of the house. He called to us. "Ah, there you are. No one was answering the doorbell."



Jodi called back to him, "Come on up, John." The man joined us and after introductions, perched awkwardly on the edge of a wicker chair. "Let me get you some coffee." Jodi offered but John waved her off.

"I know where it is. Remember I made it the other morning." He stood up.

"Oh, that's just perfect!" We all started at Stella's sudden exclamation. She slammed her coffee mug on the table seriously making me worry about its' fragile top. "Like we need this right now, Jodi! As usual you've hooked up with the first..."

"Ma'am..." John stammered.

Stella didn't stop ranting, "...man you meet in a bar!"

"I don't go to bars," Jodi murmured.

"Ma'am..." John was seriously trying to get a word in edgewise,

Stella continued, "And Jodi, really, he spent the night here which is so inappropriate!"

"Ma'am!" the volume of John's voice seemed to startle even himself and Stella stopped abruptly, "Ma'am, I'm John Binks, of Smithton, Everett & Binks, Attorneys at Law." He paused to take a deep breath. "I came over the other morning to show Jodi how to use the old-fashioned percolator."

Stella paused at that. I couldn't help but enjoy her discomfort. You could practically see the gears turning in her head as she abruptly downshifted. Yet, without an apology, she lifted her chin. "If you're the lawyer then shouldn't you be getting down to the business at hand?" She snapped at the unfortunate

attorney. Her cell phone ringing interrupted her rant. Stella answered with, "Miriam, it's about time you called me back." She listened to the other end then responded, "You know I don't text."

As she strode back into the house to continue her call she said to John over her shoulder, "I assume you will be ready when I return." The screen door leading to the kitchen slammed behind her.

"Is she always like that?" John looked after her in amazement.

"Pretty much, yes," Jodi sighed.

"She might benefit from medication." I mused.  
"Or a stiff drink."

Jodi gazed at the door through which her older sister had disappeared.

"She's always been wound super tight."

"She's right though." John picked up his briefcase. "We do need to get started."

Gathering our coffee mugs we followed Stella back into the house. She was standing in the kitchen with the phone pressed to her ear, "Are you sure you're all right, Miriam?" Jodi and I exchanged glances. What could have happened to Mim? Stella paused to listen to my niece then responded, "Absolutely not, Miriam. You may not wear lip gloss and that's that."

Poor Mim, I thought. As I recalled I was wearing full makeup by the time I was her age. And nobody but Stella called Miriam, Miriam. Everyone else called her Mim. Whenever Stella said her daughter's full name it always sounded like she was mad at her. Like whenever my mother had said, 'Frances Jo Payne!' to me, I knew I was in trouble.

When Stella touched the off button on her cell phone John took the opportunity to speak. "You have a deadline in which to get rid of the ghost in this house. It's very strict. Please bear with me one moment." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and made a call. After a brief greeting to someone on the other end John pronounced, "It is now 9:48 a.m. August the twentieth. The Payne sisters have exactly seven days from this time to accomplish their task."

"What is this? A reality TV show?" Stella snarked. Jodi and I shushed her as John ended his call.

"The will was very specific with the details of how this was to be handled." John explained. "I had to call the office to let them know that time has started for you." He clasped and unclasped his hands nervously. "So, would you like any help getting, uh... set up?"

"Setting up what?" Jodi furrowed her brow.

"Your stuff. Your potions or whatever," John was turning red.

"We don't have any potions," I laughed. "We're not witches, you know." As politely as I could, I added. "Look, thanks, but you can go now. We'll take it from here."

John held up his hands like I had just pulled a gun on him, "That's not possible. I have to stay with you to make sure your grandmother's wishes are fulfilled." Inwardly I groaned. There went my idea of sitting around playing online games and eating pizza until the week had passed.

Stella demanded, "How is it that a partner in a law firm has time to babysit us?"

"I'm not a partner, that's my father."

Stella didn't miss a beat, "Of course. I can't see you having that kind of leadership position."

John's face reddened but he politely soldiered on. "Now that you are all together I'm supposed to give you this." He opened his briefcase and brought out another pink envelope like the one I had received at home. Setting that on the kitchen table John wrestled a brown paper wrapped object out of his briefcase as well.

I picked up the envelope. The front again read, For Stella, Frances and Jodi in my grandmother's handwriting. Stella picked up the wrapped object and hoisted it in her hand. "What's this?" She asked John.

"I don't know," he replied, "your grandmother just left instructions that it was to be given to the three of you." Eager to see what was in the envelope and the package we trooped back out to the porch. Jodi, Stella and I sat down on the wicker chairs. John hovered near us seeming not to know what to do until Jodi politely suggested that he should wait inside the house. He seemed relieved to leave us. I can't say I blamed him.

Just then a big white butterfly drifted down to land on my shoulder. I shooed the butterfly away as Jodi murmured, "The negative energy in there is so intense." She missed Stella rolling her eyes as she adjusted a pillow with a Moroccan design behind her.

"Why are you whispering?" I asked her.

"Oh, sorry," Jodi answered, "I didn't realize I was whispering. I just feel like something doesn't want us here." She gave an involuntary shiver. "Don't you guys feel it? Like a feeling of doom?"

"Don't be an idiot," Stella snapped. "There's no such thing as ghosts. This is just a huge waste of time."

Jodi didn't take the bait to get into an argument. "Open the letter, Frances." She said in a neutral tone. I ripped the envelope open, removed the page, and read Grandma's message out loud.

*"Look to where the Ley Lines intersect"*. I paused and looked up from the letter to my sisters.

"What else does it say?" Stella asked.

"Nothing. That's it." I turned the letter so she could see the single sentence. Looking out towards the lake I tried to remember what Grandma had told us about Ley Lines when we were kids. I only vaguely remembered that where Ley Lines intersected that particular spot was supposed to have special powers.

My older sister had clearly lost interest in the entire proceeding. "This is such horse pucky." Stella flicked an ash careful to hold it far away from her white shorts. "Ley Lines, ghost hunting, psychic stuff. More like psychosis if you ask me."

I pulled the first letter I had received in L.A. out of my pocket. Smoothing it out on the table I studied it. "Anybody know a Stuart Carmen?" I asked. As expected, they both shook their heads no. I studied the letter again, "What happened in 1999?"

"That was the last summer we spent with Grandma." Jodi volunteered.

"That's right," I pondered a moment, "we stopped coming when I was, what, eleven? Stella, you would have been twelve and Jodi, you would have just turned ten."

"Did something happen that summer" Jodi asked. None of us could think of anything.

"Didn't you have an imaginary friend you'd run off with?" I turned to Stella.

Her lips quirked in a smile. “You two were so gullible. I just told you guys that so you wouldn’t tag along with me everywhere.”

“No,” I remembered more clearly now, “No, you really did have an imaginary friend. You said the two of you would act out little plays by the boathouse. I remember you telling us that.”

“And like I said,” Stella was no longer smiling, “I told you that so you’d leave me alone once in a while.”

Jodi broke the following awkward silence by holding up the brown paper wrapped package she’d had in her lap. “Maybe some kind of instructions are in here.” She tore away the wrapping to reveal a thick, leather journal. Flipping it open to the first page we could see that it bore a handwritten title: *Grandma Payne’s Encyclopedia of Psychic Secrets*.

Stella groaned. “She really was deep down the rabbit hole, wasn’t she?” Ignoring Stella’s comment I moved closer to study the book as Jodi turned another page.

“There’s a Table of Contents.” My sister ran her finger down the listings and read a few of them randomly out loud. “The information is in alphabetical order: Angel Lights, Clairvoyant, Clairaudient,” She flipped several pages and continued reading aloud, “Medium, Remote Viewing, Psychic.” Jodi looked up, “This must have taken her years to put together.” She quickly flipped through the pages seemingly looking for a particular entry.

“Here,” she pointed, “Ley Lines.” Bending her head she read the passage out loud. Grandma Gertie had written that Ley Lines crisscross the entire earth. They are literally energy currents that flow across the earth’s surface much like the jet stream in the air.

At the intersection of these Lines there exists an enormous amount of life energy force. An intersection of Ley Lines is phenomenally powerful for spiritual and psychic activity. People supposedly greatly enhanced their psychic powers when standing where two or more Ley Lines crossed.

The Lines are rare and there are only a few in the United States. Important landmarks are built on the intersection of Ley Lines all over the world. Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids for instance. Sedona, Arizona was built on an intersection of the Lines and people reported feeling great peace and well-being in that location. And, grandma wrote, Ley Lines crossed in her lawn.

I gazed out at the back lawn. It was enormous, probably several acres. And that didn’t even count the front and side yards. “Didn’t aliens build Stonehenge or something? I inquired.

“Dunno. But there must have been something special about that location because wherever Ley Lines intersect there is something crazy going on.” Jodi traced grandma’s spidery writing in the book.

“Would’ve been nice if she’d included some information to find these damn Lines,” I said. This was frustrating. Grandma wasn’t leaving clues she was leaving vague bread crumbs.

Stella sniped, “She’s trying to force us to learn the psychic nonsense that we didn’t want to do when we were kids.”

Ignoring Stella I asked, “Grandma says she was a Medium. Can either of you talk to dead people?”

“I wish I could,” Stella said, “then maybe you could get over that whole thing with Jimmy.”

I gasped, “Stella! Why would you bring that up?” Hearing James’s name out of the blue was like a stab in the heart. No one called James, Jimmy, except for Stella. She didn’t call him that as an endearment she had called him that to irritate me. James hadn’t cared. He just laughed it off in his easy going way. But, I cared.

Stella shrugged, “You’ve always blamed yourself. Don’t you want to know what really happened? You practically haven’t even dated since it happened.”

I was dangerously close to tears, “Let it go, Stella.” For once, Stella eased up. Jame’s death had weighed ten thousand pounds in my heart ever since it happened. There wasn’t a moment that I didn’t feel grief and sadness since his loss. Sometimes I’d wake up and feel good before I remembered. Then the darkness descended again. It was a trauma that was etched deeply into my soul as if it were made by a fine tipped diamond.

The three of us sat in silence with our thoughts for a long while. Tilting my head back I looked at the rafters as I willed the thoughts of James to be sealed back up in the box I kept in my head.



I rarely dared to open that box. White butterflies were floating just below the gazebo roof and I kept my eyes on them willing my tears away.

## MIM

Picking up the pink tube of mascara Mim leaned over her bureau to get closer to the mirror. Just as she was about to touch the mascara wand to her lashes a voice behind her made her jump.

“Whatcha doing?”

“Jesus!” Mim looked up at the face of her friend reflected in the mirror. “Stop sneaking in the window. My mom isn’t even home. You don’t need to worry about avoiding her.”

Henry ignored her as he sat down on the edge of her bed and pulled a throw pillow onto his lap. “How’d your hair turn out?” Mim turned to face him.

“Check it.” She gathered her long brown hair into a ponytail revealing bright blue stripes on the underside.

Henry laughed. “Your mom is going to kill you.”

“My mom won’t know.” Mim grinned and turned back to the mirror.

“How’s it going in Michigan?” Henry inquired.

Mim paused briefly to look into the mirror and separate two lashes with her fingers. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“Your concern for your mother is overwhelming.” Henry played with the purple fringe edging the pillow.

“She’s just there to clean the house.” Mim picked up a lip gloss and pursed her lips at her reflection. “I doubt any Clorox related accidents have occurred.”

“Sarcasm duly noted.” Henry murmured. When Mim turned around to retort he was gone. Looking out the window she saw Henry crossing the roof. She knew he would then jump over to the adjacent garage roof, drop down onto the garbage cans and take off down the street.

“You’re a weird kid,” Mim called out after him. Without turning around Henry briefly raised his hand flipping her the bird and then he was gone.

## CHAPTER SIX

Jodi wondered out loud why Stuart Carmen was haunting grandma and her house. “It doesn’t matter,” Stella announced as she flipped her cigarette into the bushes. “We just have to pretend we’re getting rid of his ghost. John will never know the difference.”

“Aren’t you just the least bit curious about what happened between this guy and grandma?” Jodi asked.

“Not really.” Stella leaned back in her chair and folded her arms.

“You never were very inquisitive,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stella asked as her lips tightened. Realizing my mistake, I tried to back track. “I just mean that it’s understandable because your life is so busy,” I offered trying to placate her.

“Oh, so now you’re saying I’m a narcissist,” Stella bit back.

I felt that tightening in my chest again. God, Stella pissed me off. I couldn’t help myself but to reply in kind. “I just call ‘em like I see ‘em,” I said while studying my nails.

Stella glowered at me. “Maybe if you were better with your money we wouldn’t be here right now.” She turned on Jodi, “Or maybe if you could *make* some money we wouldn’t be here right now.

It’s not like I need the cash from this house. I’m doing this for the two of you!” At this point Stella and I jumped to our feet and launched into a full-blown shouting match going over every perceived insult we had experienced over the years with each other. Jodi tried desperately to calm the two of us down.

“Excuse me,” John said timidly as he poked his head out the screen door. None of us paid him any attention. “EXCUSE ME,” John yelled over us. We all fell silent and turned to stare at him. He took a deep breath before stating, “You need to get started.”

After a brief pause to absorb what he said Stella and I ignored him and turned back on each other to start screaming insults all over again. Jodi was trying to get in between us to separate us. John marched down the stairs to the lawn and came back dragging the garden hose. Twisting the faucet on the veranda he aimed a full blast of water at the three of us.

“Cheese And Rice, John! What the heck are you doing?” Stella shrieked as she bolted down to the lawn to escape the onslaught of water. She had her wits about her enough to grab the journal and the letter off the table before she ran. Jodi and I darted around the veranda trying to dodge the fire hose of water pressure while shrieking like we’d seen a mouse. Finally he let up. We stood before him in silent, dripping wet shock.

“That’s what I do with my dogs if they get in a fight,” John said with a nervous cough. I started to think that maybe I was going to like John. He had some hidden gumption. John continued, “I think you all should take a minute alone to settle down.”

Jodi picked up her sodden sketchpad from the porch floor. She held it at arm’s length gazing sadly at its destruction. Then she pushed by me, opened the screen door, and quietly stated, “I’ll be in my bedroom.” “I have to go change,” I said to John as I wrung water out of the hem of my T-shirt. Stella came back up on the veranda and pointedly handed me the journal and letter which I snatched out of her hands.

“That wasn’t very nice, John.” Stella scolded him. “Effective, but not nice.” She had escaped the majority of the dousing. Taking her cell phone out of her purse she said, “I want to take photos for my clients as reference for this particular style of house.”

As she trotted down the three wide steps back out to yard she brushed away another white butterfly flitting near her face, “What is it with these butterflies? They’re everywhere.”

As I turned to leave John asked me wanly, “Do you and Stella ever get along? I mean, you’re just awful to each other.”

I paused at that. “Sometimes. I mean we used to when we were little.” Giving a shrug I ended lamely with, “I don’t know,” as I headed upstairs.

An armoire holding my clothes stood next to the double bed and I quickly changed out of my wet jeans and t-shirt. I placed my make-up bag and blue topaz ring on the marble-topped vanity. It had an intricately carved wooden front tipped with gold gilt. I traced my finger along the edge of a carved rose.

Through the lace curtains hanging over two tall windows I could see the back garden and Bear Lake. The walls were painted pale green. The paint ended about three quarters of the way up the wall where it met a cream-colored wooden molding.

Above that was wallpaper with a dark green and gold checkerboard design. I had never taken the time to consider how ornate and opulent the house was. Now I wondered how my grandparents had the money to buy it much less restore the house to its original grandeur.

My grandpa had owned a small tool and die company in downtown Muskegon. Maybe it had done a very good business. But how had grandma kept the house up so nicely after grandpa died? She must have had help and money.

As I pondered this, I brushed my shoulder length brown hair in front of the mirror that hung above the vanity. In its reflection I saw a movement out the window behind me so I walked over to look out.

Stella was far away in the garden taking photos of the house's exterior. Jodi came out to join her. She had changed to dry clothes and they appeared to be in now conversation. Thinking I'd better get back downstairs I turned back to the vanity then stopped short.

My blue topaz ring was gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Are you positive you put it there,” Stella asked again as she leaned against the wall with her arms folded across her chest.

“Of course I'm sure! I only turned away for a minute,” I said from my hands and knees peering under the vanity. Only dust bunnies were under there. It was all I could do not to panic. The blue topaz ring had been a promise ring from James. It meant the world to me.

“It's the kids,” Jodi said, “They'll bring your stuff back. They're just playing around.” She tried to comfort me. “A couple of days ago they took my sketch book and I looked everywhere for it. Then the next day the book appeared right there on the kitchen table where I'd just had breakfast an hour before.”

“What kids?” Stella asked.

Before Jodi could answer John called up the stairs, “I brought some lunch if you're hungry.” Reluctantly I gave up my search. I had already covered every inch of the room twice. I forced my panic to recede by breathing slowly in and out. I would find the ring I assured myself.

We all made our way downstairs to the kitchen. While I barely remembered the rest of the house this room brought back good memories. I recalled Jodi, Stella and I dragging chairs from the kitchen table over the worn red-and-black checkered linoleum floor and sitting side-by-side at the butcher-block in the center of the room.



A mason jar was always filled with lilacs or other wildflowers my sisters and I had gathered. Somehow the butcher-block table seemed more homey than the kitchen table.

Grandma would make us bologna sandwiches with Miracle Whip on white bread. I would always add potato chips inside the sandwich. Then Grandma would laugh as she served Fig Newtons telling us that they were filled with chopped worms. This had always made Jodi squeal with delight as she ran from the table in mock fright.

John set out sandwiches and a couple of bags of chips “I went to Fatty Lumpkins, best sandwiches in town.” He added to Jodi, “I got that tea you like too.” She nodded her thanks as she pulled her laptop out of a carrying case and set it on the table next to her sandwich.

“How did you get on the internet?” I sincerely doubted my grandmother had installed Wifi. “Are you using a hot spot?”

“Nah. I glommed on to the neighbor's Wifi,” Jodi answered. “The password is 1-5-1-2 oleander. The first thing to try is someone's street address.” I wasn't surprised at Jodi's somewhat criminal knowledge. She was always too broke to afford things like Wifi.

In a matter of minutes Stella, Jodi and John had their laptops booted up to search for information on Stuart Carmen and Ley Lines.

I was still upset about my ring and I knew the second I touched my own keyboard that I should have waited. When I was upset electricity coursed through me.

It wasn't electricity traveling from the keyboard into my body, it was the other way around. "My computer crashed," I pointed at the little colored ball rotating on my screen that meant the computer was thinking. I knew that in my case it would spin until the end of time or until I took it into the Mac repair store where the technician would sigh and say, "You again?"

"Ah, the spinning rainbow wheel of death," Jodi looked over my shoulder to witness the colored wheel continually whirling onscreen.

"It's frozen," I said and slammed the top down. "Again."

"Let me see if I can fix it," Jodi picked my laptop up along with her iced Chai tea. She headed toward the veranda. "While I'm doing that I left some research on the table for you. I printed it out and highlighted stuff that might be important."

"When did she get so organized?" Stella asked as she reached under John's computer case and pulled out Jodi's papers. "Look, this one is titled: Awakening Your Psychic Powers." She read through part of it for a moment, looked up, and said, "It's about a guy named Edgar Cayce."

"Why is he important?" I mumbled as I took a bite of a sandwich. I was mildly allergic to mustard and I tasted it now. Starting to gag and choke Stella stood up to walk over and rub my back as my eyes watered. She used to do that when we were kids.

"Why didn't you check first for mustard?" she asked.

"I dunno." I gasped out.

Stella continued to sooth me like I was a little girl. Once I caught my breath, Stella continued gently stroking my back. It was an odd, but nice, thing for her to do. She continued reading, “Seems he was a famous psychic back in the day. Edgar Cayce was a well known psychic in the early nineteen hundreds who...”

Suddenly the room tumbled away from me. I felt like I was floating and falling at the same time. The kitchen disappeared. I was suddenly in Grandma’s parlor. I could clearly see Grandma sitting at the little round table, turning the pages of a book and reading aloud.

Two people were also gathered around the table. One was a man dressed in work clothes. The other was a woman, hair teased up in the fashion of the eighties and wearing a faded pink sweatshirt. It depicted a kitten dangling from a branch with the saying, ‘Hang in there’.

A small dog slept in a patch of sunlight. I shook my head and fought to get back to reality but it eluded me. I heard myself speak but it was if someone else talking.

I spoke out loud exactly what I heard my grandmother read to the others, “Edgar Cayce examined people’s bodies simply by looking at them. He then figured out what was physically wrong with them.

Cayce prescribed medical treatments that were accurate even though he only had a seventh grade education.” I saw and heard the long ago events in the parlor very clearly and the information poured out of my mouth unbidden. I saw Grandma set the book aside.

The two people joined hands with grandma and they all closed their eyes. As I felt Stella's hand leave my back I suddenly reeled again. Blinking I found I was back in the present still sitting at the kitchen table.

Stella had moved back over to her own chair and was regarding me curiously. "Wow, you know a lot about him," John said as he reached into his bag of potato chips.

I was more than a little shaken. Touching the table I reassured myself that it was real. I'd never heard the name Edgar Cayce before. It was as if I'd been physically transported into that long ago place and time.

I was still trying to gather my wits when Jodi came back into the kitchen carrying my laptop. "I fixed it," she said then paused when she saw my face. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "I don't know." I quickly explained what had just happened to me.

"When did it start?" Jodi asked.

I thought. "It was when Stella put her hand on my back."

"Maybe it took the two of you to make the vision happen." Jodi mused.

"That's stupid. I think you should see a doctor." Stella announced.

"I don't think a doctor can help you when you suddenly spout knowledge you didn't know before." John observed. Jodi had opened grandma's encyclopedia and was reading and flipping quickly through the pages.

“It looks like it could be one of two things,” Jodi looked up from the pages. “It could be Remote Viewing or it might be Retrocognition or it might be...” she flipped a few more pages, “channeling a spirit.”

She traced her finger along grandma’s almost illegible handwriting to read; “Remote Viewing is when someone sees an object, event or person that is in a different place than the observer.” She looked up at me. “Does that sound like what happened to you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but what I saw was in the past. And I didn’t just see it, I heard it too. Does that make a difference?” Jodi flipped to a different page.

“Maybe. Grandma wrote this as the definition of Retrocognition. She says here,” Jodi paused to find her place in the encyclopedia, “It’s when someone experiences a past event as if it were happening in the present. The person didn’t experience the event themselves first-hand.”

We all absorbed this for a moment. I thought about what I had seen. “Why do you suppose I saw that particular event? Who were those people with grandma? And why did that even happen? It’s never happened before.”

No one had an answer. “Do you really believe this stuff? You’re probably just dehydrated and hallucinated it.” Stella sat back and lit a cigarette. I stared at her incredulously. For someone who had seen a book floating over her head the night before Stella was remarkable in her firm denials.

“Better not smoke in here,” Jodi cautioned Stella. “Grandma would be pissed.”

“Grandma's dead.” Stella took another pull on her cigarette. We all looked up as a loud rumbling started on the floors above us. As the sound increased in volume the windows began to rattle violently. We froze in our places.

Suddenly, with a roaring whoosh a blue flame rolled across the ceiling as if a giant broiler had just been turned on. Then as fast as it had started it stopped. For a split second we remained motionless. Next, it was like a starting gun had fired. My sisters and I jumped out of our seats and bolted for the door. Jodi had to run back and pull a still stunned John from his chair.

We regrouped outside in the sunshine on the veranda. No one said anything for several minutes. Stella still had her cigarette in her hand. She looked at it then quickly stubbed it out on the wooden deck.

“Got it Grandma, no smoking in the house,” Stella said in a shaking voice.

## MIM

Henry was out in the suburban street practicing kick flips on his skateboard when Mim came out of her house. "Let me use your board," he called to her, "it's better."

"Can't. Gotta go." Mim was already on her bike. "What are you doing here anyway?"

Henry answered with his own question, "Where you going?"

Mim replied as she was passing by him, "Babysitting." Henry artfully grabbed onto the back of her bike seat to get a tow. "The two brats on Culvert Street or the baby on Tenth Avenue?"

"The brats." Mim swerved her bike back and forth on the road trying to shake Henry off. "Let go, you'll make me late." Henry laughed and hung on.

"You excited about the pool party?" Henry hit a pebble and almost took a header but regained his footing.

"I can't wait. But I'm a little nervous. I bought myself a bikini instead of that Disney one-piece mom got me."

Henry was concentrating on staying on his vibrating skateboard as they hit a bumpy patch of road. "I'll go with you if you want."

"Nah, that'd be weird." Mim stood up on her bike to get more power while pedaling up a slight hill. Unable to pull both herself and Henry up the incline Mim stopped, panting, by the side of the road.

Henry flipped his board up and leaned it against his leg. Then he dug in his pocket. He brought something out in his closed fist.

“I found something and thought you might like it.” Henry said casually. He opened his hand and Mim plucked the object from his palm. Holding it up she saw how the color shone in the sunlight .

It was a little blue topaz ring.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Stella reached down and picked up the dead cigarette butt from the floor of the porch then, not knowing what to do with it, she finally deposited it in my Diet Coke can. John pulled at his tie and unbuttoned his collar as he slumped in the wicker chair. Finally, he asked in a small voice, "Is it going to be like this all week?"

None of us responded to him until Stella finally said, "This isn't good." I immediately thought no shit, Sherlock. But Stella continued on a different line of thinking than the rest of us were on. "We need to call an electrician. There must be a short in the wiring." The realtor in her spoke, "We'll have trouble selling the house with bad wiring."

"I think Grandma was showing us a visual of her displeasure." I said slowly as I thought it through. "Maybe she'll be giving us clues to this ghost busting." Stella rolled her eyes at me.

"Couldn't Grandma be slightly less terrifying about it?" Jodi wrapped her arms around her knees and hugged them tight.

"None of us ever thought we were psychic," I said. "We never thought Grandma was either but look at what just happened in the kitchen." I bravely asked, "What if we open ourselves up to the possibility of being psychic for this one time and see where it goes?"

Jodi quickly agreed, "Ok."

Stella eventually shrugged her shoulders in grudging acquiescence, "Whatever."

“Grandma used to have us all sit quietly with our eyes closed and just see what comes. Why don’t we try that?” I suggested.

“John, you should move away from us,” Jodi instructed. “Your energy could interfere with ours.”

“I should go get some groceries anyway.”

Picking up his briefcase John walked around the corner of the house presumably to his car parked out at the curb. I noted that he didn’t go back through the house to exit.

“Lots of different meditations exist,” Jodi turned to Stella and me. “Let’s just try an easy one. Focus on your breath. Silently breath in slowly to the count of eight then exhale back down to zero and gently move any random thoughts out of your head. If you see something unusual stay with it and see where it goes.”

The three of us sat quietly in our wicker chairs at the table with our eyes closed. Minutes ticked by. Eventually I opened one eye, “Did anyone get anything?” They shook their heads.

Just then John yelled from the front of the house, “Hey, can you all come help me with something?”

“No!” The three of us yelled back at him in unison.

“Is he a little weird or is it just me?” Stella mused.

“It’s just you,” Jodi replied softly, “I think he’s sweet.” She shuffled through her notes on the table. Finding the right one she read, “It says here sometimes it’s stronger if people hold hands.”

“What’s stronger,” Stella sniped losing patience with the whole thing.

“The energy to talk to spirits I guess. I dunno, but try it,” Jodi grasped my hand and reached across the table for Stella's. Stella joined hands with me. We all closed our eyes again. I fought to concentrate on my breathing and push random thoughts out of my head.

There was a pause as we silently maintained the closed eyes and handholding. Then I heard Stella start breathing in and out more slowly.

At that point I completely relaxed and started to feel electrical surges in my body. The strong tingling sensation felt like a cross between sticking your finger in a light socket and the pins-and-needles you feel when your foot falls asleep. The feeling started in my right hand, raced up and across my shoulders, and down to my left hand. When both Stella and Jodi reactively tried to pull their hands away I hung on tight. I sensed that they could feel it.

Abruptly, I felt like I was spinning through black space. Disoriented, I hung on to Stella and Jodi's hands for dear life. I was afraid I would float away forever. Once again I was transported back to an earlier time and place. I saw my grandma as though I was standing right in front of her. She faced me and then held a white, ceramic jar painted with pink roses out towards me. The scene played three times as if in a loop. It didn't change until the electrical surges running

through my body abruptly stopped. Jodi and Stella must have felt it too because we all simultaneously dropped hands and opened our eyes.

Jodi rubbed her hands together, “Wow, what was that? It felt like I just stuck a fork in an electrical outlet.” I was amazed. They really had felt it too.

“Holding hands must have been like completing an electrical circuit. Stella? You felt it too, right?” Jodi asked. Stella just tilted her head noncommittally. I told them about the images I had seen.

“You’re letting your imagination run away with you,” Stella leaned back in her chair. With a glance at the house she lit a cigarette. “That’s just the cookie jar grandma always kept on her counter.”

“Yeah, but it must mean something.” I countered. Over Stella’s shoulder I saw John trudging back across the lawn. He carried his suit jacket along with what appeared to be trash. His previously starched white dress shirt was filthy.

“My phone is dead,” He wiped sweat from his face as he mounted the stairs to the veranda. “Can I use one of yours?”

“What in the world happened to you?” Stella leaned away from him so he wouldn’t inadvertently brush dirt on her white sweater.

“I couldn’t get the front gate open.” He tossed the trash on the table in front of us then wiped his dirty hands on his now rumpled pants. “The bushes grew around the handle and through the lock.”

I was incredulous. “You just came in through that door this morning.”

“Yeah, it’s nuts,” John gestured out to the broad lawn. “Look,” he pointed along the perimeter of the property. The oleanders have taken over the entire fence line.” Sure enough the bushes had grown several feet. We couldn’t even see through the fence slats as we had before.

Jodi poked through the trash. “Are you litter patrol now, too?” She teased John.

“That stuff was stuck in the branches.” John held out his hand, “Phone.” Jodi handed her cell phone to John. “I gotta call Stamford Landscaping.” John said as he looked up the number. “Maybe Don there can come help get the gate loose.”

Jodi plucked a crumpled business card from the pile of trash. “Albert Conroy, Gardener.” She read. “Where is he when we need him?”

John ended his call and told us he was going to wait out front for the landscaper. Jodi volunteered to go wait with him. As they descended the veranda steps she paused to tell me, “I left your computer on the butcher block table. I got it running.”

“You did?” I was surprised. Jodi had never displayed any particular technical skills before.

“Yeah, it had a virus. Plus, some other stuff was jamming it up and making it run really slow. It should be all right now.” Jodi and John disappeared around the corner of the house.

Stella, pleading a headache, went up to rest in her room. That left me more or less alone in the house. I played Words With Friends on my phone for a few minutes. After playing a forty point word I sat back, self-satisfied. I was ahead for the moment.

Figuring I’d better check my email I flipped open my laptop. A promising one stood out from Warner Bros. I had been waiting to hear if they were moving ahead with a long project. They had promised they would hire me to write the script. Opening the email and glancing quickly through it I exclaimed, “Nooo.”

The script project I had been counting on was inexplicably dead. My sure thing had fallen through. I lay my head on the butcher-block table. I had forty-eight dollars to my name before I hit complete zero.

Eight years ago I was a hot young screenwriter with a hit movie to my name. I made more money than I'd ever thought I'd see in a lifetime.

My house in the Pacific Palisades was expensive and, while I didn't understand it at the time, far more than I could afford long term if I didn't have another hit.

My next script was a total flop at the box office. I was in what is called 'Hollywood Jail' until I had another hit. Which I couldn't do until someone gave me a shot. I had been more than counting on the Warner Bros. project. Naively, I trusted all the wrong people with my finances. The money evaporated with bad investments and shysters.

Did I have anything left to sell? I wondered. All my jewelry was already sold except for my blue topaz ring from James. And I wouldn't sell that even if I could find it. I repeated to myself: Be strong. Pull up your bootstraps. Don't collapse in a heap of tears. You can't solve it right now, I told myself.

But there was one thing that would bring in some fast money and that was fulfilling Grandma's wishes and then selling this house. I walked purposefully from room to room to see if I felt anything unusual. In each room I would ask myself, "Is the cookie jar in here?" I decided that if I felt an electrical surge in my body then it meant that I was on the right track.

Feeling nothing, I went to the parlor and sat down on a fragile-looking antique chair. A small fireplace was set into the wall facing me. Andirons in the shape of lions were joined together at the top by an iron bookshelf. Books certainly older than my grandmother were lined up neatly on it. Surrounding the fireplace were green ceramic tiles with raised butterfly patterns. Seeing a framed photo on the mantel I walked over to inspect it.

Picking it up I saw it was a photo. Our grandma must have taken it from the end of the dock with her ancient Kodak camera. Stella, Jodi and I, outfitted in our orange lifejackets were just offshore in the little Sunfish sailboat. It was about twelve feet long and meant for just one or two adults.

Stella was holding the tiller, I sat on the side and Jodi fit nicely into the footwell. The sail was wind filled and our hair blew around our faces as the three of us laughed in joy.

I studied each of our faces. What had happened to that happy sisterhood? Setting the photo back in its place I noticed the tall grandfather's clock that stood silently in the corner. It probably hadn't been wound in decades. Its wooden door had an inset glass panel that showed off the pendulum.

Vaguely I remembered that the old-fashioned key to wind the clock was kept on a little ledge inside. Feeling around inside I found nothing. I then felt along the top and sides but still, no key.

Giving up I sat back in the chair, closed my eyes and willed the movie of my grandma to come back. I breathed in and out steadily for several minutes. Just when I was about to give up the vision began to play. It was dimmer and blurrier than it had been before.

Instead of focusing on Grandma or the cookie jar I focused on what was behind her trying to determine her location. The background appeared to be blond wood or stone?

Peeking out from her right shoulder there seemed to be some kind of carving. I couldn't quite make it out. But from what I could see it looked like... what? Sticks? Maybe weeds?

The vision abruptly vanished as the parlor door slammed shut. Then in quick succession every door in the house slammed shut one after the another. The noise seemed to start on the ground floor where I was and make its way all the way to the top of the house. Gazing towards the ceiling in stunned amazement I heard Stella shriek, "Frances, help!"



## CHAPTER NINE

I raced up the stairs to find Stella standing on the landing. “All of the doors slammed shut!” Stella yelped. Since she clearly wasn’t in any danger I relaxed.

“For God’s sake, Stella.” Relief flooded through me. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“It’s just...” Stella paused to consider what had frightened her. “It’s just that they all closed one after the other.”

“It’s probably a draft.” I grumbled. At that moment a door on the floor above us slammed shut. Then it slammed shut again and again and again.

“Go up and check the door.” Stella instructed me in a quavering voice.

“*You* go up and check the door.” I threw right back. In the end we decided to go up to the next floor together. Upon mounting the stairs to the third floor we were immediately faced by a door. Twisting the glass doorknob it oddly opened outward towards us and over the stairs. I had to move Stella back down a few stairs to get it fully open so we could enter the room.

We found we were in a small parlor. The same type of tall windows that were in my own bedroom now faced the street.

It was apparent that this floor was rarely used in recent years. A vague memory came to me that this had been Grandma's meditation and tarot card room. We hadn't been allowed to play in here.

“Maybe grandma is saying the cookie jar is up here.” I thought out loud. “You take the other end of the floor and look for it.” I told Stella.

“Shouldn’t we do this together?” Stella was trying to appear brave.

“We’ll get it done faster if we split up.” I said with more bravado than I felt. Stella reluctantly left the parlor and I watched her slowly walk down the hall with her hand trailing along the wall as she went. “Look for anything that looks like a carving of weeds or hair,” I called after her. “Or the cookie jar.” She nodded her head without looking back.

Turning back to the parlor I pulled the protective sheets off the furniture. I found a pretty pink tufted chaise lounge and matching chairs. They were arranged in front of a small fireplace. This one had dark green tin panels surrounding the sides and top of the fire grate.

A flash of light like a small sparkle caught my peripheral vision. When I turned my head, nothing was there. Then the sparkles appeared again and again floating in the air around the room. Sometimes there was only one but on occasion there were groups that looked like glitter bombs. A group appeared that was sparkling white. That dissipated and was replaced with a group in a different area that were sparkling green.

Hoping whatever this specter was didn’t know about technology I set my iPhone on the mantle and pressed, ‘Record’ on the camera. Then I went back to the search.

I quickly determined that there was no carving that looked like weeds or hair in this room or the jar and I moved down the hall to a bedroom and bathroom. After a search inside armoires and under beds I still hadn’t found anything.

Stella returned and sat on the bed next to me, “I didn't find anything.” A door yet again slamming shut stilled us for a moment.

“Oh come on,” I groaned. “This is getting old.” Moving back down the hallway and through the parlor we saw that the door to the stairs was now shut. Stella tried the knob but it didn't turn.

“It's stuck,” she tried the knob again while shaking the door. Waving her away I tried myself. It didn't budge. “Maybe we can take the hinges off,” Stella offered. We quickly determined that the hinges were on the opposite side of the door. After ten minutes of trying to figure out how to get the door open to no avail, I decided to call Jodi to come to our rescue.

I was just crossing the room to retrieve my phone when a voice hissed from it, “You're mine.” I yanked my hand back like the phone could bite me. Stella shrieked as we ran towards each other. The voice repeatedly hissed its message as Stella and I clung together.

Her eyes were squeezed shut. “Make it stop!” Stella tremored. Finally, there was only silence for a long minute.

“Stella, I think it's over.” Trembling I moved away from her and across the room to pick the phone up.

“...you're...mine...” The voice from the phone hissed again. Squealing we both ran helter skelter to escape. Stella was ahead of me and frantically turned the doorknob. The door now swung easily out over the

stairs. Before Stella could take a step I saw her head snap back as though someone or something had given her a brutal shove forward. Knocked off her feet Stella tumbled hard down the entire length of the staircase.

## MIM

Mim examined the ring. Inside the band she found an inscription 'J & F forever' and traced her finger over it. Slipping on the ring she found it was a little loose, so she got scotch tape from her drawer and carefully wrapped it around the band to make it smaller.

Henry had never given her a gift before. She wondered why he would do so now. When she was little she had tried telling her mother about Henry. But her mother firmly replied that Henry only existed in her mind, that he was an imaginary friend, and she had to get those silly ideas out of her head.

Mim only mentioned Henry one more time after that. It was two years ago. Stella, hearing Mim laugh in her bedroom, had come in to investigate. Finding Mim alone she had asked what was so funny? Mim, feeling defiant, said a ghost was making her laugh.

Stella spanked Mim so hard her butt hurt for a week. Her mom announced that only crazy people saw ghosts or thought they existed. And did Mim really want everyone to think she was crazy?

There was no one she could talk to about her grief at losing her friend. Eventually she went on with her life, going to school, hanging out with friends and pushing any thoughts of Henry out of her mind until a very long time went by without her thinking about him.

She began to believe her mother was right. Henry was a figment of her imagination.

Henry did not show up for a long time after that. Mim was devastated and cried into her pillow every night. Then about three months ago Mim tried one more time to ask Henry to come back. She had squeezed her eyes shut and mentally sent him message after message, night after night, to reappear.

That's when Henry started showing up again. When Mim protested his absence he told her that he had visited her several times but that she couldn't see him anymore. Upon hearing her pleas, he had decided to give it one last shot and found that Mim could once again see and communicate with him.

Mim sat at her desk and rested her chin on the palm of her hand. Staring at her bulletin board with its photos of her friends and ticket stubs from various school football games she thought about what she had learned about Henry over the years.

She had asked him if he came down from heaven to visit her. "No," he had responded. "I can't go to heaven. I'm stuck here in the in-between."

"Why can't you go to heaven?" Mim had asked.

"I don't know how to get there. And even if I could I'm scared to go because something really bad happened when I died." Twelve-year-old Henry had hung his head. Now Mim wondered what a kid like herself could possibly have done that was so bad that his ghost was terrified of going to heaven.

## CHAPTER TEN

When the front door slammed loudly both Stella and I, sitting at the kitchen table, stiffened on alert. Stella was already starting to show bruises under her eyes. It had taken me a while to stop her nose bleed and my t-shirt was still covered in her blood.

I had put ice into ziplock bags to make ice packs and put them on her wrist, ankle and neck. Stella sat dazed in the kitchen chair as I did my best to patch up her injuries.

Jodi called out from the front hall, “Hi, we’re back.” Jodi and John entered the kitchen, talking and laughing with their heads together, and hoisted grocery bags onto the counter. The two of them, not noticing Stella’s distress, began unpacking the bags. “I got us some bagels at Brooklyn Bagel but they didn’t have lox.” Jodi rambled, “They said they tried selling it in Muskegon but not many people went for it.”

Jodi turned from the counter with a bottle of red wine in her hands and suddenly noticed Stella’s face. “What the hell?” She gasped. “What happened?”

Instead of answering her Stella marched over, took the bottle of wine from Jodi’s hands, and twisted open the cap. She poured herself half a glass, considered, then went ahead and filled the glass to the brim.

Hands shaking visibly Stella took a long slug of wine. “I need a cigarette.” She let the kitchen screen door slam behind her.

I explained to John and Jodi what had occurred. John thought Stella needed to be checked out at the hospital as Jodi pushed some of the grocery bags aside and sat down at the table with her computer. “You both heard a voice through your phone?” Jodi mused thoughtfully.

“Maybe it was just a crossed signal or something.” John pointed out.

Jodi ignored him. “You look in Grandma’s encyclopedia,” she instructed me, “and I’ll Google.” Jodi’s hands were already flying across her keyboard. “Here it is,” she announced moments later.

We crowded around her to read the computer screen even as she read aloud. “Electronic Voice Phenomena is also known as EVP. Unknown voices that are heard through phones, car radios or similar types of electronics are known as EVP. Theories abound on this phenomenon ranging from the dead trying to communicate with the living to earthly radio waves randomly bouncing back from space.”

Grandma’s encyclopedia addressed the same phenomenon but she called it ‘Voices From The Beyond Heard Through Electronics’. She defined it as a spirit that speaks to the living through means of a baby monitor, radio or the like. These electronics help the spirit amplify a message. Her encyclopedia went on to give examples of the phenomena.

A mother heard a woman’s voice through the baby monitor warning her that her baby was in trouble. Checking on the baby she found he was choking on a spool of thread. The mother saved the baby. However many people report hearing messages through electronics that are threatening.



“What does “You’re mine” mean? I queried.

Jodi shivered, “Stuart wants to hurt us and I vote that we find another place to spend the night tonight.”

Stella came back into the kitchen to pour yet another glass of wine, nearly emptying the bottle. Jodi immediately went to her and wrapped her in a hug.

“I’m so sorry honey.” She rocked Stella back and forth. “That was a terrible thing you went through. We won’t let that happen to you again or to any of us.”

Stella looked up at Jodi, her eyes tearing with gratitude at the kindness from her sister.

“You can’t find another place to spend the night.” John straightened up from where he was hunched over Jodi’s computer. “It would void the deal.”

Stressed out and in a foul mood I said, “What are you? Keeper of the Rules?”

“Yes,” John responded mildly. “Yes, I am. If one or all of you don’t live in the house there is no inheritance.”

“Then you’re staying right here with us,” I snarked. “Otherwise, how will you know that we don’t leave right after you do?”

“You don’t have a car,” he retorted. “Jodi used mine to pick you up at the airport.”

I arched an eyebrow at him, “Ever heard of Uber?”

“I don’t think we have Uber here.” Jodi interjected before I shot her a dark look.

John hesitated before saying, “I’m sure your grandmother didn’t mean that I had to...”

Stella cut him off, “You would be lax in your duties if you left the house and I’m sure your father, John Binks, Sr. Attorney at Law, would agree.”

John's face blanched and finally he nodded his head, "Just show me which room to take."

In all the excitement I had forgotten to tell Jodi and John about my vision. I explained that I had seen Grandma in a place that had a white, wooden carving behind her.

Jodi handed me her sketchpad. "Do you think you can draw what you saw?" Awkwardly I attempted to sketch what I could see in my head. Jodi glanced over and seemed to suppress a chuckle. "Is that really what you see?" I shook my head no. My hand couldn't translate what was in my mind.

Jodi took the sketchpad back. "Tell you what. You tell me what it looks like and I'll draw what you say." Closing my eyes I described the weeds or sticks I saw in detail. When I finished I opened my eyes and Jodi turned the sketchpad so I could see what she'd done. It was exactly as I had seen in my vision.

It looked more like curves than straight lines. Jodi had added shadowing and the texture I had told her about. The result looked like smooth, white curving waves moving from right to left.

"That looks like it," I affirmed to Jodi. "Now, where and what is it?"

Stella didn't appear to be paying much attention. She merely glanced at Jodi's sketch. Slouched in her chair she continued toying with the wine glass on the table in front of her.

When my cell phone rang I glanced at the caller I.D. It was my landlord again. Figuring I might be out on my ear if I didn't talk to her I finally picked up.

My landlord's voice rang out loud, "It's about time you picked up."

"Yeah, I'm sorry..." I was making my way out of the kitchen and into the entry hall for privacy."

"Sorry won't do it. I need the past three months rent by the end of August or I'll evict you. Got it?"

"Got it." I whispered in mortification and fear. Where would I go if I were evicted? The end of August was less than two weeks away.

"And in case you didn't know, your car was repo'd this morning." She rattled off the phone number of the towing company.

"I can't remember that." I shut my eyes tightly to hold back the tears, "Can you please text it to me?"

"End of August, Frances. I mean it." My landlord ended the call.

Sitting heavily on the stairway I leaned my head against the wall and tried to calm myself. I could have sworn I had made a payment on my car recently. It might have been a while ago. Maybe months ago? A year ago?

Wearily I made my way back into the kitchen. Jodi and John were saying that Stuart must be making threats through my phone.

Stella slurred her disagreement. "Some physical person is messing with the phone, I just tripped going down the stairs. Jodi looked at me and made a drinking motion with her hand. I nodded agreement. Stella was drunk so I didn't argue with her assessment.

"I wish I had some kind of psychic power and could hear spirits." Jodi's shoulders slumped.

“Be happy about that,” Stella said. “I recognized that voice.” she added softly.

Jodi perked up, “Who was it?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve heard that man’s voice before,” she took a slug of wine from her glass. “And it scares the bejeebees out of me.”

I surreptitiously moved the wine bottle away from her and over to the counter. “Are you sure you don’t know who it is?” I asked.

“No, I’ve been trying to figure it out.” She looked sadly into her almost empty wineglass. “That voice is the reason I showed up here.”

Swiveling from the counter where I had begun to make coffee I stared at her, “You recently heard that voice?”

“After you and I talked on the phone, and I told you I wasn’t going to come here, I went to run errands. The music stopped on the car radio and that voice came through the speakers clearly.”

“What did it say?” Jodi leaned forward.

Stella rolled the stem of the wineglass between her palms. “He said a name over and over again in that scary, whispery way.” She gave an involuntary shiver as she reluctantly accepted a cup of coffee from me.

“What name was this voice saying?” Jodi asked impatiently.

Stella looked up with tears in her eyes.

“Miriam.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The information that the ghostly voice had been saying the word “Miriam” to Stella sent an involuntary shiver down my spine. I had seen Stella call Mim a million times in the last hour to check on her. But she still hadn’t gotten back to us yet. Now I understood.

Jodi and John looked somberly at Stella. The implications of our grandmother’s letter were starting to really sink in. We had to do something.

“Stella, call Ashland.” I suggested. “He’ll know if Mim is ok.” Ashland was Stella’s husband.

“And tell him what?” Stella cried, “That my grandmother believed in ghosts and one of them might be out to get our daughter? Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

I was flabbergasted. Did Ashland know absolutely nothing about any of this? Then I realized, it did sound crazy.

John answered reasonably, “It’s not like you have to say any of that. Just say you’re checking in.”

Right then Stella’s phone on the table in front of me rang. With a sigh of relief I saw it was Mim. I pushed speaker on her phone so we could all hear. But I didn’t even get out a hello before Mim started in. “What is wrong with you? I don’t answer my phone for half a sec and suddenly it’s a federal case?”

I started to gesture to Stella to come take the phone then stopped when I saw that she had burst into tears of drunken relief. Best to spare Mim from the slurred sounds of motherly love. I took the phone off speaker and put it to my ear. “Hey, Mim. It’s Aunt Frances.”

“What is going on?” Mim demanded. “You’re all freaking me out. Mom keeps leaving messages asking if I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be all right?”

I tried to play it off with a laugh. “Oh, you know us, we see ghosts around every corner.”

There was such a long pause I thought Mim had hung up on me. “Ghosts don’t exist.” She finally responded.

“It’s just an expression, Mim.” I acted annoyed because I figured the best defense was a strong offense. From across the room Stella was now making slashing motions across her throat. That either meant she wanted me to hang up or that she was going to kill me.

“Do you see ghosts?” Mim asked in an even tone. “Because if you think you do, then my mom says you must be crazy.” I leaned against the wall with the phone still to my ear. What was up with this kid? ‘Seeing ghosts around every corner’ really was just an expression.

“Mim, I’m glad you’re ok. I’ve got to go now. Bye.” I didn’t give her a chance to get another word in before hanging up.

## MIM

“What do you mean my mom might be in trouble?” Mim looked up from painting her toenails to ask Henry. “What would you know about my mother?” They were in Mim’s backyard.

Henry cast a glance towards the house, “Keep it down, would you? Your dad will hear you.”

Mim narrowed her eyes. “He can’t hear me. He’s got his air pods in. And if my mom’s in trouble I need to tell my dad.”

“I just think she might be in over her head.” Henry knew he sounded evasive. “Maybe she could, I dunno, get hurt.”

“And this is based on...” Mim gestured with the nail polish brush, “what, exactly?”

“I’ve been in the house and—”

“What house?” Mim waved her hands over her toenails attempting to dry them.

“The house in Muskegon. Your great grandma’s house.” Henry said slowly.

Mim’s head snapped up. “Why in the hell would you be at that house?” Mim demanded.

“I go there sometimes.” Henry said. Mim stared at Henry for so long Henry grew uncomfortable and began pacing on the patio. “To be honest I live there.”

“You live there? In my Great Grandmother’s house? What the fuck? You’d better start talking now, mister.” Mim voice was fierce.

As Henry began to talk Mim’s eyes grew wide. He told her that he had died in the house in a fire a long time ago. That he had been with Mim’s great-grandma,

Gertie, when she passed on. But she didn't just die naturally. She was murdered.

An evil spirit named Stuart had thrown her over the stair railing and onto the floor two stories below. Now Mim's mother and two aunts had to confront this spirit and banish him forever from the house.

"This is a lot." Mim took a deep breath. "I mean, a whole lot." After a pause she asked, "Can't my mom just come home and leave the entire mess behind?"

Henry shook his head, no. "Stuart will just follow her here. I don't know why but between your aunts and your mom he seems to try to terrorize your mom the most."

"How do you even know all of this?" Mim demanded.

"I'd listen to Gertie and her friend Betty talk about it. And I saw what Stuart's spirit would do to torment her. Once he shoved her down the on the front sidewalk so hard she lay there with a broken hip." Henry's face twisted in pain at the memory. "I couldn't do anything to help. No one else could hear me. I sat beside Gertie for six hours holding her hand."

He was unsuccessful at holding back his tears. "I sent my little brother and sister to go find her friend, Betty. They kept whispering Gertie's name in her ear over and over to get her to think about Gertie."

Mim reached over and wiped away his tears with her forefinger. "What happened?"

"It made Betty think of Gertie. When Betty couldn't get a hold of her on the phone she finally stopped by. She found Gertie and got help."



Mim attempted to absorb the enormity of the information Henry was imparting. "Oh my God. Poor great-grandma." Mim closed her eyes against the pain her relative had suffered. "Can't you talk to this Stuart guy?" Mim finally asked. "Make him go away?"

Henry shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. I can only see the results of what he does in the present time. I can't see or talk to him."

"Ghosts can't see each other?" Mim wondered.

"Not if we die at different times." Henry responded. "I died in 1921. Stuart died in 1999. We can't cross over timelines."

"My mom doesn't believe in ghosts." Mim murmured. "There's no way she can do this."

"I think you're right." Henry replied. "Your mom can't get rid of Stuart because she suppressed her abilities a long time ago. Gertie thought it took at least three people to banish a spirit as strong as Stuart."

Henry reached over to take Mim's hand. "Mim, I don't know why but I think Stuart really, truly wants to hurt your mom. I think he's going to try to kill her."

Mim stared at him. "What can I do about it?"

Henry turned his head to look at her somberly, "You have to go take her place."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

With no better ideas of how to proceed we decided to search the house to find a carving with sticks or weeds. Between her injuries and all the wine she drank, Stella wasn't in much shape to help but she offered to continue to search for Stuart Carmen on the computer to see if any information surfaced. We left her drinking a second cup of coffee.

"Should we start in the attic and cupola or the basement?" John asked.

"Why do we have to start with the creepiest places first? Jodi complained. "If this was a horror movie our first dumb decision would be to start in the attic or the basement."

"I'm just being logical. You know, start at the top or the bottom," John said.

"Personally I'm sticking to the first floor for now," said Jodi. Following her lead we started in the entryway. We rapped at the decorative walls and scanned the sides of the staircase but found nothing. Moving into the parlor Jodi ran her hands over the ceramic fireplace tiles and tried to pull the wooden bookcase from the wall but it didn't budge.

I made sure the door was lodged open with a small stone sculpture that was sitting on the floor. I didn't want to be startled by slamming doors again.

John quickly got sidetracked by various books and knick-knacks exclaiming over their origins and value. He paused in front of a faded, framed map of North Muskegon, Michigan. "What's a Ley Line?" John called out to us.

“We’ve been trying to figure that out. That was in grandma’s letter to us,” Jodi still had her head deep into the depths of an open window seat.

“You could’ve mentioned that.” John said.

Jodi’s voice sounded hollow as she raised her voice to say, “Ley Lines are energy currents over the earth’s surface. Kind of like how jet streams move the air in the sky. They are pretty rare. So where two of the Lines intersect can supposedly greatly enhance a person’s psychic abilities. Grandma said to look to the Ley Lines. But we have no idea where to find them.”

“Then this is kind of a big clue.” John chuckled. “The brass plaque on the frame reads, Ley Lines.” That captured our interest. Jodi and I quickly joined him in front of the map. I traced my finger along the faded lines.

“Can you guys tell exactly where the Lines intersect?” I squinted at the lines.

John studied the map closely. Then he hoisted the framed map up and off the wall to lay it on the tea table where there was better light. Despite a careful inspection of the map there was not enough detail to determine exactly where on Grandma’s property the Ley Lines crossed each other. But it did hint that it was somewhere on the gigantic expanse of lawn leading down to Bear Lake.

After much conversation back and forth, John and I gave up on the Ley Lines for the moment and returned to the task at hand. After another hour we still hadn’t found anything. We moved into the larger living room and turned the chandelier lights up as bright as possible.

Jodi and I hoisted up the grand piano lid to see if anything was in it. Other than the normal workings there was nothing unusual. We ran our hands over the heavily patterned wallpaper and mahogany wainscoting to no avail. John sat at an antique cherry wood desk that featured a bookshelf with glass doors built in above the desk. It was crammed with junk. He pulled out paperwork and files from the top drawer and made his way to the bottom.

Jodi and I finally sat down on the couch. “We aren’t doing this right,” I complained. “Grandma wouldn’t make it quite this hard, would she? Maybe we’re supposed to be using our psychic powers to find the cookie jar.”

“Even if you’re right” Jodi flopped back into the couch cushion “she didn’t clue us in on how to exactly find the Ley Lines so that we *could* figure out our psychic powers.”

John abruptly swiveled around in the desk chair holding a big book to exclaim, “I might have found Stuart Carmen.”

With John carrying the book we all made our way back to the kitchen. Stella was absorbed in her Google search but cleared her computer off the butcher-block table so we could see the book better. She had changed clothes and looked marginally more alert.

I put my arm around her shoulders, “Do you want me to change your Band-Aids or get you more ice packs?” Stella mutely nodded her head. I administered to her as gently as possible while John showed us a family photo album. He flipped through the pages of

black and white photos until he got to one of a man and woman holding a child who was perhaps three years old. A hand-written inscription under the photo read, Alonzo and Eleanor Carmen with their son, Jacob Stuart Carmen.

“Ah, his first name was really Jacob,” Stella mused. “No wonder I couldn't find anything that matched up with the name Stuart Carmen.”

“I don't remember any Carmens in our family history.” Jodi mused. “I never would have guessed that Stuart was related to us.”

“We don't know that he is,” I pointed out.

“Then why is his family photo in our family photo album?” Jodi asked reasonably.

“I don't know. But it's a good thing you went through all of those papers,” I remarked to John.

“I'm a lawyer so I look for answers in books.” He pulled nervously at his ear but he seemed pleased that he had contributed.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We tried to find out something about Jacob Stuart Carmen online to no avail. After an hour Jodi slammed her laptop shut. “We’re going to the Bear Lake Tavern for dinner,” she announced.

“Why? We just bought groceries,” Stella said.

“Because it’s Tuesday and Tuesday night is The Widow’s Club at the B.L.T.” Jodi said. “If anyone is going to know anything about Stuart Carmen, they will.”

“What’s The Widow’s Club,” I asked.

“Pretty much what it sounds like,” Jodi responded. At Jodi’s prodding we all went upstairs to get ready for dinner. Stella asked me to come into her room with her, like she was a five-year-old, to make sure no one lurked behind the curtains. She applied makeup foundation to hide the worst of her bruises as I waited.

That mission accomplished I went to put on some makeup and change to a slightly nicer pair of jeans. It wouldn’t have mattered if I’d shown up in my gardening clothes though. The B.L.T—or as the locals called it, the ‘Blit’—didn’t have much of a dress code. The Bear Lake Tavern is located on the Bear Lake Channel and had been a fixture since 1929.

Generations of North Muskegon-ites had grown up at the dark wooden tables. When college kids came home for Christmas vacation, they always reunited at the twelve-foot-long table that ran down the center of the room and was supported by thick wooden pillars at either end.

As Michigan is renowned for its craft beers the beer on tap was always cold and locally brewed. In the summer the B.L.T. was packed with boaters who had tied off at their docks and tourists who had heard of “the quaint Tavern” a few miles from the state parks. But the rest of the year it was only the locals.

The Bear Lake channel joined Bear Lake to Muskegon Lake. As kids, my sisters and I spent a lot of time there. With plastic bread bags dangling off our bike handlebars we'd pedal there to stand on the docks alternately throwing stale bread to the ducks paddling in the water and running from the aggressive geese on land. Grandma Gertie, Stella, Jodi and I had eaten there so often Grandma called it our “meal plan.” I hoped it hadn't changed. I doubted it had though. Some things are meant to stay the same.

As it was a warm night, we opted to walk. I strolled alongside John down the sidewalk bordering Ruddiman Drive. Jodi and Stella were several steps behind us. Huge oak trees towered over our heads lining the way. John, after a quick look over his shoulder asked, “Is Jodi, um, you know?” For a second I wasn't sure what he was asking.

Then I teased, “Crazy? No, no, she's just different.” Glancing at him with a grin, I saw that John was turning ten shades of red. I mentally kicked myself. John didn't know my sense of humor and it had been hard enough for him just to ask the question. I patted his back, “No John, I don't think she has a boyfriend.”

His shoulders visibly relaxed down from his ears, “Oh. Ok, um, that's good to know.” We crossed the small traffic bridge over the channel and

approached the restaurant. It was a roundish building painted black with red trim. The windows faced the parking lot and beyond that the channel's water. I had often wondered about this as a kid. Why hadn't they put the building right on the water for the view and stuck the parking lot on the other side? I guess when it was built over one hundred years ago cars weren't that much of an issue. Or maybe since water was pretty much on all sides of us anyway a view wasn't considered all that special.

When we entered I was startled to hear a cheer go up, "Jodi!" The group sitting at the long table that ran down the middle of the room called to us, "We've been waiting for you!"

Jodi wedged her way through the other tables to get to them. She went from one person to the next hugging them, asking about their sciatica, their grandkids and in several cases their great grandkids.

"Just how long has she been here in town?" I nudged Stella. When we approached, Jodi introduced us to The Widow's Club. First was Alita Mills. She had been widowed the longest, Jodi informed me, for about fifty some-odd years. Alita nodded politely to us. Stella and I then were introduced to Joel, Gloria and Vrill. Last was Betty Van Wiggins.

Betty, Jodi whispered to me was grandma's best friend, ninety years old, and in love with a forty-year-old guitarist who did not return the affection. I didn't even bother asking how Jodi knew that. Jodi knew everything about anyone she met within five minutes. Jodi stopped short at another person, "Rose, why are you here?"



Rose extended her hand to me and smiled, "I'm Rose Thompson." Turning to Jodi she said, "I'm not a widow but I drive Betty here most Tuesdays." Rose then pulled me close to say into my ear, "Betty only lives about a half a mile away but if she drives she manages to hit every garbage can on the street between there and here."

A big shuffle ensued at the table to make room for the four of us. We squeezed in where we could as Betty yelled at the man behind the bar for another beer.

Rose leaned over, "Betty, you don't have to yell. Tommy is only six feet away from you." Then she turned to me again, "She's a little deaf so she yells a lot."

Tommy brought over a foamy draft beer and set it in front of Betty saying, "Now Betty, you fall down and break a hip out there in the parking lot it's not my fault."

She grinned up at him. "Tommy Loyce, I can still drink you under the table any day of the week."

As he walked away I heard him mutter, "And you usually do." The waitress was greeted with hugs from Jodi and after more introductions and placing orders, Jodi stood up and clapped her hands for attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen we need information. We are here to ghost-bust Gertrude Payne's house. If we can't accomplish that then no inheritance."

I cringed. Jeez O' Pete, nothing like letting every family secret out. But Jodi had effectively commanded their attention. She continued, clearly in her element, "We need to know anything you know about how a Stuart Carmen was related to Grandma.

He's the one haunting the house." I saw Betty nodding vigorously at Jodi's statement.

She hauled the photo album out of her backpack and flipped it open to the page showing Stuart as a child. I had expected blank looks at the name Stuart Carmen. Instead there was a flurry of discussion that was almost impossible to follow.

It went something like; Wasn't he Ann's boy from...No, no, that was Larry who was married to that woman who inhaled paint thinner by accident and then she...Carmen, wasn't there a Carmen who lived on Mid Oak that ran his boat up onto the rocks? No, that was Harmon....

It went on and on in a jumble and I couldn't follow the family trees they were climbing and swinging from. Finally, they came to a consensus.

"We remember now. Stuart Carmen was your grandmother's stepbrother," Alita announced. She turned to Rose. "Is stepbrother the right term? They weren't related by blood." Rose raised and lowered her shoulders in a shrug to indicate she didn't know.

"He was just awful," Betty added. "I couldn't stand him." Alita inclined her head that I took to infer gracious assent. Betty grabbed the album and flipped through pages of the family photos, "I didn't know him when he was that young." She said referring to the photo Jodi had shown them, "I barely knew him at all, he just came around that one summer."

"Which summer?" I asked.

"Honey, I've had a lot of summers. I have no idea," Betty took another sip of beer.

Vrill leaned over Betty's shoulder and pointed triumphantly at a photo on a different page. "That's Stuart." Instead of passing the book directly to my sisters and me she handed it down the line of The Widow's Club. One by one they all looked over the photo and nodded ascent.

Betty asked, "Stuart's been haunting Gertrude's house for decades. Have you seen the kids yet?"

Jodi shot me a triumphant look, "I think they're around."

Stella turned to me, "What kids?"

"I'll tell you later." I was anxiously waiting for the photo book to make it to my hands.

"Last time I was at Gertie's house those kids hid my car keys," Betty slurred ever so slightly.

"Probably a good idea," John murmured.

"Cost me almost a hundred dollars to replace them." She went on, "Then the next time I left Gertie's house the missing keys were hanging right out of the lock on my car door. Damn tricksters."

Finally, the photo album made its way to us. Stella, Jodi and I crowded together to see the photo. An average looking middle-aged man with a hefty paunch and a widow's peak was leaning proudly against a shiny big Cadillac. Our Grandmother's house was in the background.

Stella stared at the photo for a long minute. Abruptly standing up she said, "I need a cigarette," over her shoulder as she began edging between tables towards the door."

"What happened to her face? Those bruises?" Betty inclined her head toward the retreating Stella.

I wasn't sure what to say. Midwesterners tend to keep our issues to ourselves. Jodi on the other hand piped up, "We think Stuart's ghost pushed her down the stairs." No one at the table pooh-pooh'd us. Most everyone simply nodded in understanding.

Jodi and I bent our heads over the photo of Stuart. "There aren't any oleander bushes in this photo. Maybe that's a clue as to when Stuart was at Grandma's house?" I peered at the photo closely. "How can we find out?"

"It wasn't the dark ages, you know." Jodi slipped the photo out of the sleeve and turned it over. "Photos usually had time and date stamps on them," she said while she held up the back of the photo to us. Sure enough, July 14, 1999 was printed in faded gray, dot matrix lettering. Animated conversation followed this.

"People, people!" Jodi now stood at the foot of the table. "Can we get back to the point here?" She waved an impatient hand at John. "John," she directed, "could you please take notes?" John dutifully got out a legal pad and pen.

"What do you know about Stuart Carmen?" Jodi demanded of The Widow's Club.

"Why honey, it took us a few minutes to remember but I guess we assumed you already knew," Alita hesitated.

"Knew what?" Jodi asked.

"Your Grandma Gertie killed him," said Alita.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

This small detail had taken a “few minutes to remember?” I was incredulous. Which is what I said to the table.

Betty regarded me, “We are very busy people and can't remember every little thing that happens in this town. Keeping up with Facebook alone is a full-time job for me.”

“But she killed him?” I demanded, “As in murder?” Jodi stared at me white faced from her place at the table.

John who had visibly started at Alita's pronouncement now leaned over to whisper to me, “As a lawyer I'm advising that I probably shouldn't write any of this stuff down.” I nodded my agreement and he put his pen and pad away. Everyone involved in the apparent murder was now dead. But...still...

“Did we ever tell Marv Anderson about this?” Vrill asked the group. At our puzzled expressions she explained that Marv was the lone police officer in North Muskegon and had been for decades.

“No, I remember Gertie saying that we probably shouldn't tell Marv,” Betty said. She paused to take another sip of beer then yelled towards the bar, “Tommy! This beer is warm!”

“Drink it faster!” Tommy yelled back at her from where he was washing glasses behind the counter.

“Why did grandma kill him?” I asked.

“She wouldn't say, dear.” Alita replied quietly. “She just said it was necessary. If that was good enough for Gertie then it was good enough for me. After this

many years on this earth, it's easy for me to believe that some people just shouldn't exist here with the rest of us."

Neither apparently did Grandma explain when or how she had killed Stuart. Grandma's friends were remarkably unperturbed by the lack of information Gertie had revealed about murdering her stepbrother.

Some details did fill in bit by bit as we ate dinner. Detours were taken to discuss someone's new baby, another's divorce that occurred over thirty years ago, or what the water levels were going to be this year in Lake Michigan. But slowly facts emerged as decades-old memories resurfaced.

Eleanor and Alonzo Carmen were the parents of Jacob Stuart Carmen. Eleanor died a few years after Stuart's birth. Alonzo Carmen then married our great-grandmother, June. Alonzo died early on in that marriage leaving our great-grandmother to raise Stuart.

Great-grandma June then married our great-grandfather, Allen, and subsequently gave birth to our grandma, Gertrude. Gertrude was raised along with Stuart. One thing was certain; Gertie and Stuart were not blood relatives. I started writing it all down on a paper napkin to keep it straight. Stuart was seven years older than Gertie. When June died in the late 1970's it came to light that Stuart's biological father, Alonzo, had left her a decent chunk of change. June was apparently a ferocious penny-pincher and the estate had grown.

Upon her death about four million dollars was inherited by grandma Gertie and Stuart. Stuart contested the will for years but grandma Gertie and Stuart wound up splitting the cash down the middle just as the will had stated.

After all the legal wrangling they didn't speak at all. So Stuart's visit to Grandma that long ago summer was notable because it rarely, if ever, occurred. Vrill thought maybe Stuart had come back one last time to try and convince Gertie about how the money had been split up and that he deserved more.

I realized that this money must have been how grandma and grandpa had afforded the big house on Oleander Street. Jodi eyed the group at the table. "You people are so completely superior to Google," she announced. John timidly raised his hand. No one paid any attention to him except me. I watched him gather his courage.

"Excuse me?" John ventured. No one paid attention. "Hello?" John tried again. He sighed, put the palms of his hands on the table, stood up and strode to the head of the table. Gently he moved Jodi aside.

"HEY!" He bellowed. The gathering turned their heads toward him. "If grandma Gertrude Payne murdered Stuart Carmen we should inform the authorities!" John announced.

A gigantic silence engulfed the table. Then Tommy Loyce, long-time owner of the Bear Lake Tavern, came from behind the bar and walked slowly over to stand next to John.

"We loved Gertie," Tommy said simply. "She's dead. Stuart's dead. Maybe some things are best just left alone. The Widows Club nodded their agreement.

“But Tommy, until we know why she killed him we won't know how to get rid of his ghost!” I protested.

“It doesn't make any difference if you know the reason she killed him,” Betty announced. “Gertie was an astounding Medium. As I recall your sister Stella was too as a child.”

She paused a moment to order another beer. Tommy looked over at Rose who shook her car keys at him indicating she was driving. Tommy went to get the beer as Betty continued, “If Gertie brought you here to get rid of his ghost it's because she knew you had the skills to do it.”



## MIM

Mim lay on her bed, knees up, with her laptop balanced on her stomach. Her fingers flew across the keyboard. She was figuring out how to get herself from Denver, Colorado to Muskegon, Michigan. She knew there was no way to tell her parents the truth. First of all, they would laugh at her. More importantly, they would stop her. She couldn't let them know she was on the way to Muskegon.

Mim quickly discovered that flying was not an option. She didn't have an I.D. to get on the plane. Not only that but apparently she would be considered an 'Unaccompanied Minor' and a parent or guardian had to deliver her directly to the airport gate and stay there until her plane took off. So that was a no go.

The bus would take forever. The last option was the train. Mim reviewed the schedule. The train left at 7:10 p.m. that night arriving in Chicago tomorrow.

Then she would have to wait several hours and catch the train from Chicago to Holland, Michigan. From there, what? Holland was thirty miles from Muskegon. She didn't know what would happen once she was in Holland, MI. but decided she would figure it out from there. The train ticket was about two hundred dollars.

Mim shoved her computer aside and pulled her nightstand drawer open. Grabbing her babysitting money she found she only had about twenty dollars. She was going to have to get creative.

Padding downstairs, she found her father sitting in his easy chair in front of the television. "Dad, I need your credit card." Mim patted the top of his head.

"What for?" Ashland didn't take his eyes off the screen. Then he started yelling at the T.V. "Go! Go! All right! We just pulled ahead!" Mim glanced at the screen where the Colorado Rockies were high fiving on the baseball field.

"Dad. Credit card." She nudged him.

"What's it for again?" He was already pulling his wallet out.

"A library thing." Mim lied easily.

He handed her the card eyes still glued to the game. Mim slipped out the back door. On her bike she made it to the local grocery store in less than ten minutes. There she picked out a Visa gift card.

"How much do you want on this?" The cashier barely looked at her.

"Three hundred dollars." Mim tried to sound casual as she shoved her dad's card into the credit card receptacle. Anxiously she eyed the little screen until the word 'Approved' appeared.

"Have a nice day." The cashier said automatically without looking up from checking her texts.

Outside the store Mim used her phone to go to the Amtrak website and purchased her train ticket with the gift card. There, she thought, now they can't track me through dad's credit card.

Back home Mim threw some clothes into her backpack. Running down the stairs she found her dad where she had left him. "Here's your card," Mim handed it to him.

“I’m spending the night at Cynthia’s house.”

“Ok. Be good. I love you.” Her dad was only paying half attention. Mim planted a kiss on his head,

“Love you too.” Then she went outside, changed quickly in the garage to a black t-shirt, put in her fake diamond nose stud, and went to wait for the Uber she had ordered with her new Visa card.

Two hours later Mim was on the train.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

John paid the bill at the B.L.T. Then we collected Stella from where she sat outside on the wooden bench overlooking the channel. The light from the windows of the restaurant revealed that Stella's face looked even more pale than usual.

"You ok, Stella?" I asked.

"I just have a really bad headache." Stella didn't seem to want to talk after that. She lagged behind on the sidewalk as we straggled back to grandma's house.

Yet again the oleander bushes had grown over the gate and through the lock and around the handle. Grunting, John hoisted himself over the fence and he and Jodi worked for a long time from both sides to free the lock.

I yanked at trash that had caught up in the tangle of branches. A business card fluttered out and by my face. Instinctively I grabbed it. "Oh, for fuck's sake." Jodi groaned as we neared the house. Stella winced at her language, but I couldn't blame Jodi because I felt the same way.

I couldn't quite read it so I turned on my iPhone flashlight. The card was printed with the name Albert Conroy, Gardener.

"Jodi, didn't you find a card for Albert Conroy before?" I called to her. Her only response was a grunt as she struggled to break a branch with her bare hands.

"How is it possible that a bush could grow four feet in the span of two hours?" Stella pulled half-heartedly at one of the branches holding it far from her body so she wouldn't get her white shirt dirty.

I turned to her, “It’s *not* possible. Something doesn’t want us to be able to get out of the house.” I muttered the last to myself, “Or in it.” Stella didn’t even bother responding.

A motion caught my eye. I stopped trying to help Jodi and John because I began watching the white butterflies. Did butterflies come out at night? I didn’t think so, but I hadn’t been the best Girl Scout in the world.

With the gate finally pried free of the branches we made our way into the house. A dozen or more butterflies flitted after us until John shooed them away when we reached the front door. It was still early evening so we sat at the butcher-block table while John made coffee. Stella alone poured herself another glass of red wine. She was oddly silent even when we told her that Grandma Gertie had murdered Stuart.

“Stella,” I poked her, “are you even listening to us?”

She rubbed her temple, “I got a bad call while I was outside of the B.L.T.” The story came out. The biggest sale of her career—the one that would have landed her the cover of Colorado Realtor Monthly magazine—had fallen through. Further, the seller had pulled the listing from Stella.

Stella sagged in her chair, “I can’t believe this. It was a done deal. That’s the only reason I thought it was ok to be away from home right now. To top it all off I’ve had a horrible headache since I got here.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” I said, “I lost out on a huge screenwriting job today.”

“My project fell through yesterday too.” Jodi said glumly. We sat in silence for a while. Then, it was Jodi who put it together. “Does it seem weird to you guys that every good thing that was happening to us fell apart within twenty-four hours?”

“It's just a coincidence, Jodi,” Stella said.

“This week there are no coincidences,” Jodi replied. I had to agree with her.

“So, what it is?” Stella arched an eyebrow at us. “Some evil demon is doing bad things to us?”

“Yes,” Jodi and I said together.

Jodi moved over to the counter and came back with grandma's encyclopedia. She flipped through until she found a particular passage and read out loud. “Negs and Djinns: Negative or evils spirits that psychically attack a person or people if it feels a threat. This also can happen even if the entity does not feel a threat. Look for patterns of bad luck or chronic ill health in your life. Negs and Djinns may attach themselves to a person for a long time and measures must be taken to rid oneself of the entity.” Jodi sat down and tapped her forefinger on the page. “See? Grandma says so right here.”

“See, nothing,” Stella scoffed. “This would have happened even if we weren't together, and only because we are together do we see a pattern.”

“Do you have headaches a lot?” Retorted Jodi.

Stella paused, “No, I never have headaches.”

“Yet you've had one since you've arrived,” I pointed out.

“I'm probably allergic to something around here,” Stella turned her head away from us.

“Stella, you might have to bend a little bit,” I was frustrated. “We don’t have much time to figure this thing out. Why can’t you open your mind and even consider the possibility that weird shit really is happening. Stuart Carmen might be attacking us in ways we didn’t expect.” The last came out with more force than I had intended.

Stella swung an arm out as if to gesture to me. Instead, she accidentally knocked over her wine glass. Its contents dumped all over her before falling and shattering on the floor.

Stella stared down at the red wine that dripped down her white blouse and stained the crotch of her cream color pants. Her face turned ashen. Abruptly Stella screamed. “You’re both crazy! What’s wrong with you!” Jodi and I reared back at the violent onslaught. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” Stella shoved her chair back, stormed upstairs and vehemently slammed the bedroom door behind her.

Jodi looked after her, “Wow,” she said softly. “I didn’t see that coming.” John found a broom and swept up the broken glass. Then we quietly talked about ghosts, murder and Ley Lines. Around midnight we made our way up to bed.

After my turn in the bathroom I returned to my bedroom and climbed into what had proved to be an incredibly comfortable bed. I tapped the framed photo of James sitting on my bed stand to say goodnight to him.

But despite the comfy bed I was kept awake as thoughts about the day ran through my head. Eventually I dragged the armchair over to the window, curled up in it and stared out at the darkened garden below.

The music started around two a.m. It was soft at first. Fragmented bits and pieces were drifting in on the wind. Straining to catch the notes I thought the song seemed strangely familiar. I opened the window higher to see if the music got louder. Instead, it now seemed to be coming from downstairs.

Quietly I opened the bedroom door. The moon cast enough blue light through the windows for me to make my way down the hall and stairs. Standing in the darkened kitchen I could hear the music more clearly. I was almost certain that I knew the song but couldn't be positive until I heard it better.

Goosebumps rose on my arms. If I was right—why was it that song?

Maybe some kids were having a party. I couldn't imagine why a teenager would play such an old song though. Barefoot, I went outside. The music was still faint but got louder when I descended the three stairs from the porch to the lawn. The warm grass tickled my feet. As I moved toward the oleanders and the fence line the music became louder. If I moved away from one particular place along the fence there was only the sound of crickets.

I walked back to stand where I could hear the music best.

A lone butterfly drifted down by my face. Looking up I saw that hundreds if not thousands of white butterflies were now floating in the moonlight a few feet above my head. The music was strong and clear. So I did what any girl would do if she heard a special song play just for her in the middle of the night. I danced on the lawn accompanied by the butterflies swirling around me.



James had come to visit me.

When the song ended, I was breathless. After flinging myself on the grass I gazed up at the starry sky. The butterflies had disappeared into the shadows of the trees. It was such an old song, much older than James and me. But when James and I heard it one night in a little bar on Rush Street in Chicago we couldn't stop dancing. We asked for it to be played over and over again.

It wasn't the version by the Jackson Five it was the older one from Bobby Day. It was such a silly upbeat song, that later, when I was a bit down, James would always sing it to me.

And it never failed to make me happy. "...all the little birds on J-Bird Street, love to hear the robin goin' tweet, tweet, tweet, Rockin' Robin..."

Then, as I lay in the long grass, I felt a phantom hand slip into mine. Gently my hand was squeezed. Smiling with joy I sent my love and thanks up to James and the night sky. When I finally made my way inside to my bedroom, I fell asleep immediately.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The sun shining through the window was high in the sky when I opened my eyes the next morning. I was still on Los Angeles time that was three hours earlier. Without an alarm clock I wasn't exactly an early riser. Throwing on some jeans and a t-shirt I brushed my teeth and headed downstairs.

The smell of fresh coffee wafted from the kitchen. Searching through cupboards I found a coffee mug poured myself a cup and wandered out to the veranda. Jodi and John were on the lawn. I smiled. Jodi was teaching John Tai Chi.

Eyes closed and barefoot Jodi went through a flowing series of motions. John, in his undershirt, was trying to copy her movements but he wasn't very successful. Jodi opened her eyes, saw me wave to her, and trotted up to the veranda with John trailing behind.

"This is great coffee, Jodi." I asked, "That barista job paid off."

"I can't take credit," Jodi said. "That's all John's work."

John waved a modest hand, "I'm pretty good in the kitchen."

He picked up his dress shirt where it was draped over the back of one of the wicker chairs. "I'll be back in an hour. I'm going home to get some more clothes."

"What about your dogs?" I asked, curious.

"My neighbor is taking care of them. They're fine." John was already striding across the lawn to the front walk. I hoped the oleander bushes hadn't grown through the gate again.

"I'll have breakfast ready for all of us when you get back, John," Stella called to him. I thought that was a nice gesture on her part. After he left Jodi sat in one of the veranda chairs, pulled her bare feet up and wrapped her arms around her knees. After what I had experienced the night before I wondered if Jodi or Stella had had any weird occurrences.

"Did anything happen last night?" I asked.

Jodi unexpectedly glared at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Speechless I realized that I had really put my foot in it. I hadn't meant to imply that Jodi had hooked up with John.

"She probably means what you think she means, Jodi." Stella got a dig in. Oh no, I hadn't meant any of that at all. My good mood from last night was evaporating. We were suddenly on very thin emotional ice.

Jodi slapped the palm of her hand down on the wooden table with a resounding clap, "God damn it!" Her eyes were brimming with tears. "I'm not a slut!"

With a quivering voice Jodi continued, "Stella, you've been calling me that since I was in high school!" Tears ran down Jodi's cheeks, "Why are you so mean to me?"

Stella stood over her with her arms crossed. "You did lose your virginity when you were only fifteen years old."

"So fucking what?" Jodi cried. "So do a lot of people. Does that make me such a bad person that you would say such awful things to me my whole life?"

"I would be horrified if daughter had sex at that age," Stella said.

“Your daughter is almost fifteen now how do you know she that hasn't?” Jodi flung back. Stella stepped up to her and slapped her across the face. Jodi's head snapped to the side.

Stella calmly stepped back, “You wait until marriage and that's that.” Jodi buried her face in her hands, and sobs heaved her shoulders.

“Stella! That's enough!” I raised my voice. I certainly hadn't waited until marriage to have sex with James and I was damn happy that I hadn't.

Jodi stood very still in the middle of the kitchen. “You tried to ruin my life.” She said quietly to Stella. Her voice became stronger and firm. “I had sex with one boy, once. I was fifteen. He told everybody. Suddenly the entire school is making up stories saying I screwed the whole football team. You could have told everyone that it wasn't true. You could have stuck up for me. But you didn't. You acted like I was an untouchable slut. You made my life hell in high school.” Jodi was shaking with fury now. “You didn't even ask me! You didn't even ask me what happened or if it was true. What's worse you decided that I was, at the age of fifteen years old, a solid core whore and have treated me that way ever since.”

Jodi turned to stride out of the room but stopped to turn back at the doorway to evenly say to Stella. “I've had two long term relationships since then. But you wouldn't know that would you? Because you decided that, when I was just a kid, you knew exactly what I was. And you never even bothered to wonder if you were wrong.” She quietly turned and left the room.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Stella sat back in her chair pulled out her phone and started texting as if nothing had happened. What in the hell was wrong with this woman? How could anyone be so cold? Inwardly seething, I stepped out onto the veranda to calm down. Stella, I thought, the always perfect Stella.

I had stuck by Jodi, defending my little sister to the best of my sixteen-year-old ability. Now I ached inside for Jodi. I wondered what made Stella so rigid, so ramrod straight in her pursuit of perfection.

Certainly it wasn't our parents. Our parents were schoolteachers. As we grew up, they took off every summer. They threw on their Peruvian ponchos, beat-up Birkenstock sandals and organic hemp-made backpacks. Then they left for third world countries to dig water wells, plant seeds and generally try to save the world.

They told us that it was far too dangerous to take three young girls with them. Later, I always thought they just really wanted the time together by themselves. We didn't even think about it at the time though. We absolutely loved spending the summers at Grandma's. But all of that ended after the summer of '99. Why had it ended, I wondered?

Inside the kitchen, Stella had set the butcher-block table and was busy at the stove. "I'm making blueberry banana pancakes," she said softly. Blueberry banana pancakes used to be Jodi's absolute favorite breakfast. I had never known the words "I'm sorry" to come out of Stella's mouth. But in her own way Stella was trying to apologize to Jodi.

Wandering out to the front entry hall I opened the door and sat on the front steps with my face tilted towards the sun. Five minutes later I heard John's car pull up next to the curb. Standing up I shaded my eyes with my hand. Betty had arrived on foot at the same time as John and the two spoke briefly out on the sidewalk before starting up the walk. Betty was holding Stella's sweater in her hands. Stella must have forgotten it at the B.L.T. last night.

"More people," Stella exclaimed as she came up behind me. "John could have called to tell me." Annoyance tinged her voice, "There will never be enough food! Take them into the parlor, would you?"

I turned to tell her we had plenty of food but she was already gone. I greeted Betty and John. John was now dressed in his version of casual; a yellow golf shirt with its three buttons tightly buttoned up and tucked into a pair of high-waist jeans. He had on a black belt along with his black dress shoes. He looked as though he was half prepared for a deposition and half prepared for a barbeque. In his own odd way though he was kind of cute.

I showed them to the front parlor. Betty chose a chair so fast that I could guess she had been habitually sitting there for years. Jodi wandered in a few minutes later, I gave her an understanding hug, and she nodded her thanks to me. We made small talk with Betty.

Seems she walked three miles every day so dropping Stella's sweater off wasn't a big deal. A ninety-year- old walking three miles every day? "If I get tired I just sit down on the curb," Betty mentioned. "Someone always stops and gives me a ride home."

Stella wedged the parlor door open with her foot then made her way in. One hand held a platter of pancakes, the other held sandwiches. "I hope they like peanut butter and jelly but I've never met a kid that didn't like peanut butter and jelly," her brows knit together. "Unless they're allergic to peanut butter.

"Stella," John said, "what are you talking about?"

Stella laughed, "The kids. Are they allergic?" She smiled down towards the rug. When she looked back up her smile faded as she took in our faces. We were staring at her, jaws open, as though she had just sprouted a third arm. Slowly she came to a realization. "Oh my God," Stella dropped the plates scattering food across the floor.

## MIM

The train trip from Colorado to Chicago was uneventful. Mim alternately dozed or stared out the window. Once in Chicago Mim sat on a bench in Union Station until her connecting train to Holland, Michigan boarded. She didn't want to spend any money on food because she had no idea how much a taxi would cost from Holland to Muskegon. She inwardly cursed herself for not thinking to pack food before she left home.

Finally, Mim settled into her window seat on the train to Holland. The seat was big and comfy and she played the game *Bloodthirsty Bunnies* on her phone to pass the time. The car had several other passengers and Mim figured she could act like she was with one of them if needed. "Ticket." The conductor swayed in the aisle with the movement of the train. Mim scrolled on her phone then held up the screen showing the QR code that was her ticket. The conductor zapped it and moved on. Then he paused and turned back to her with some amount of concern. "Are you traveling alone?"

"No, my mom is in the bathroom." Mim lied easily. The conductor nodded, pressed the button that opened the metal doors between cars and exited. Mim, after making sure the doors had closed, gathered up her backpack and headed towards the back of the train. She passed from one train car to the next looking for a crowded one so she could blend in with a crowd but the rest of the train seemed deserted. She finally just took a seat in an empty car. While trying to



shove her backpack into the overhead luggage rack she started as two hands appeared above her head to finish stowing the backpack.

Mim turned to find a middle-aged man. "You looked like you needed a little help." The man smiled at her. Mim paused and moved away from him. She didn't respond. Stranger Danger had been drilled into her head since kindergarten. She slid in to take the window seat.

Unfortunately, in the empty train car, the man sat down in the aisle seat next to her effectively pinning her in. "So where are you going?" He asked pleasantly.

"Michigan." Mim was short. She didn't want to encourage conversation. Half rising up out of her seat she peered over her shoulder hoping someone else was coming down the aisle. No one was.

"Michigan. I like Michigan. I've been there a few times." The man tapped his fingers on his thigh. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

Mim edged away from him until her shoulder was pushed up against the window. "You can't smoke in here. It's against the law."

"Right, right. I forget sometimes." The man reclined his chair and shut his eyes. Great, Mim thought. This creep is going to sleep and I can't get out around him. She was going to have to wait for her chance to escape. Mim knew she could have screamed to try and get help. But it wasn't like the guy had done anything worse than sitting next to her and she didn't want to draw attention to herself.

Half an hour had gone by when she saw Henry walking down the aisle of the train lurching from side to side with the motion. He stopped at Mim's row and grinned at her. "How's it going?" Mim checked to be sure the man next to her was deep asleep. She didn't need him hearing her talk to Henry's ghost.

In a forced whisper she said, "How does it look like I'm doing? I'm trapped in here by this creep." She gestured to the sleeping man next to her. A bit of drool ran down his chin.

Henry cocked his head, puzzled. "What creep?"

"This guy! This guy sitting right next to me. Who else would I mean?" Mim said with irritation.

"Mim, I don't see anyone sitting next to you." Henry replied slowly. Mim stared at Henry. Then she stared at the man.

It was another ghost.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I had never seen anyone actually faint from fright before. Stella was the first. John and I picked up her arms and legs and dragged her unceremoniously over to hoist her onto the love seat. She was heavier than she looked. Jodi picked up the plates and the food that had rolled under the couch and table and took them to the kitchen. When Stella's eyes fluttered open she bolted upright and looked frantically around the room.

"Where did they go?" She asked us.

"You don't see them here anymore?" Betty asked intently.

"No." Stella paused to accept a glass of water that Jodi had brought back with her. She took a sip in a quaking voice said, "I saw them coming up the walk outside with you and John and then they were in the parlor."

"They live here, Stella." Betty said gently.

"Your grandmother spoke to them often. You, however, are the first to actually see them."

"What did they look like?" John asked. "Did they say anything?"

Wiping her hand across her forehead, Stella's voice steadied a bit, "They were laughing when they came up the walk, but they didn't say anything to me. There was a girl about four years old and a boy that was about nine."

Stella described the kid's clothing. The little girl had on a long yellow flannel nightdresses with ribbon at the neck and bottom. The boy had on a long-sleeved ribbed t-shirt and long johns. "The clothes looked old-fashioned. I thought they were in a school play or something," Stella explained.

"Who are they?" John asked not really expecting an answer. Unexpectedly Betty walked to the bookshelves and ran her finger along the spines. Eventually locating what appeared to be a scrapbook she pulled it down and brought it to the parlor table. As she opened it, I could see newspaper clippings pasted onto the pages.

Betty flipped through it quickly. She seemed to know what she was looking for. "My own mother was born here in Muskegon in 1909. When this house burned, killing the children, in 1921 it was quite the scandal. She saved all of the newspaper clippings. After Gertie moved into this house I gave them to her."

Peering over her shoulder I saw that most of the clippings were from The Muskegon Chronicle. But others were from The Detroit Times, The Grand Rapids Herald and The Detroit Free Press. Most of the articles featured the same black and white photo of the house's third floor and cupola engulfed in flames. Ok, so it was a bad house fire. But why would a house fire make statewide news I wondered?

That question was quickly answered as we read the various articles. The gist of it was that the eldest son, Henry, set the fire in order to murder his younger brother, William.

The fire wound up also killing him and a younger sister named Jennifer. The source of this news was a live-in maid who breathlessly told her story to any news outlet that would listen. And, it seems, all of them did. The maid said that she was walking down the stairs at about ten p.m. that fateful night when she met Henry who was coming up the stairs. Henry was furious about something that William had done. "His very words were," the maid said to the reporters dramatically, "I'm going to kill William if it's the last thing I do!"

The newspapers hashed and rehashed every possible rumored detail about the boy. Public opinion quickly condemned fourteen-year-old Henry as a disturbed murderer. Neighbors received their fifteen minutes of fame with tidbits such as, "I always had a funny feeling about that boy." The parents of the children eventually moved away to another state.

"That kid must have been really disturbed," Jodi shuddered, "to kill his own brother and sister." John nodded his head in agreement. Then he looked nervously over his shoulder like the ghost of madman Henry would appear at any moment.

Betty laid a hand on Jodi's shoulder. "You need to understand something, because that's not what happened at all." She sat down at the parlor table with us, closed the scrapbook firmly and pushed it aside. "Your grandma Gertie spoke regularly with the ghosts of William and Jennifer. William told her what actually happened that night." Betty proceeded to tell the real story.

Henry had made himself a skateboard out of a pair of roller skates and a section of lumber. It was a new fad back in those days and Henry was very proud that he had made it himself. William had begged Henry to let him use the skateboard. Henry repeatedly said no. He didn't want his younger brother to break his new toy.

One day William took the skateboard without permission. Not knowing how to use it William promptly fell off. The board then flew under the wheels of another new invention of the day—a car. William was scared. He did what most any scared little kid might do. He gathered up the broken pieces of the skateboard and hid them. It was that night that Henry had, after searching high and low for the skateboard, found the destroyed evidence in the boat house. Betty paused in the telling of her story. “Could I get a glass of water?” She asked.

John stood up to oblige while I took the opportunity to ask, “You said grandma spoke quite a bit to William and Jennifer. Did grandma Gertie ever talk to Henry?”

Betty shook her head no. “She tried to contact Henry’s ghost for all the years she lived in this house. But she was never successful. Henry never spoke to her.”

John returned with the water and after Betty had taken a few sips Jodi asked impatiently, “So what happened that night?”

Betty continued with her story. Henry had indeed met the maid on the stairs that long ago night. He had, in fact, said he was going to kill William. Betty waved her hand in the air, “But he said it the way anyone would say it about someone they are angry with. It’s not meant literally. Henry wasn’t actually going to kill William. He was just mad.”

Betty was clearly getting tired but she gamely continued. William had told Grandma Gertie that after Henry spoke to the maid on the stairs he had then stormed into William’s bedroom.

“Wait,” I said, “How did William know what Henry told the maid on the stairs?”

“Henry told William after their deaths and they witnessed all of the hysteria in town.” Betty replied. She continued with her story. “Henry shouted at William that night about the broken skateboard. Young William apologized profusely and burst into tears. Henry calmed down, sat next to William on his bed, and put his arm around his younger brother’s shoulders to comfort him. They hugged and made up. William promised to help make Henry a new skateboard and Henry then went to bed in his own bedroom.

That’s when William’s gaslight flickered and went out. William didn’t know that he was supposed to flip a switch on the wall to stop the flow of gas from the pipeline. Having just made up with Henry, William didn’t want to annoy him again by asking for help.

So, as William searched for matches in the dark, the gas flowed into the room. When William lit the match near the open gas line an instant fireball set the house on fire.

Betty looked down at her liver spotted hands sadly. “It was a terrible, tragic accident. And poor Henry. He was blamed and called a murderer. All because of one maid’s hysterical story. It’s astounding how someone’s life can be defined and destroyed by a singular event. And one that isn’t even true.”



## MIM

Mim gently touched the sleeping man with her forefinger. He felt real enough. "Are you sure you can't see him?" She asked Henry.

"Yeah, I decided now would be a great time to mess with your head." Henry rolled his eyes. "No, I can't see him. You can. Therefore, he is a ghost."

"But he feels real." Mim protested.

"I feel real to you too." Henry responded reasonably enough.

Mim leaned away from the man sitting next to her. "Eww, why is he showing up now?"

"Wake him up and ask him." Henry said.

Mim glared at Henry. "What? Like just casually ask a ghost what he's doing?"

"Yeah." Henry pulled a candy bar from his pocket. "Want a bite? I snagged it from the snack car."

Mim shook her head no. "You shouldn't steal."

"How am I supposed to pay?" Henry shrugged. Mim leaned forward to study her seatmate a bit better. He looked normal enough. He had brown hair with a slight widow's peak and a heavy paunch spilling over his belt. Taking a deep breath Mim poked him in the forearm. He grunted and his head lolled to the side but he didn't wake up.

"I didn't know ghosts slept." Mim looked up at Henry.

"We don't need to," Henry regarded the sleeping man, "but sometimes it feels good. Same thing with eating." Henry took another bite of the candy bar and after swallowing said, "Poke him harder."

Mim gathered up her courage and shook the man by the shoulder. His eyes opened. Yawning he mumbled, “Oh sorry, do you need to get out?”

“No,” Mim stammered. “Well, yes. But that’s not why I woke you up.” Henry watched Mim closely. He stood less than two feet away from the man’s aisle seat.

“Ask him why he came to you.” Henry instructed.

“Shut up.” Mim hissed over the man’s head. The man turned his head towards the aisle. “Who are you talking to?” He asked.

“Sorry, nobody.” Mim replied. It was apparent the man could not see Henry. As Henry had told her, ghosts who die at different times can’t see each other. “Uh, I had a question.” The man’s eyes narrowed a bit and he stiffened. Mim pushed on, “Yeah, um, who are you? What do you want?” The man unexpectedly leaned back in his seat and let out an uproarious laugh.

“What do I want?” He said through his laughter. “What do I want?” He turned in his seat to face her. Mim shrank back as his face began to melt and run like wax revealing a skull.

His body morphed and stretched upwards until his head touched the top of the train car. Mim cowered in her seat. His skull grew and twisted grotesquely as it turned orange and purple. Then he swooped down and forward until he was inches from Mim’s face. “You’re MINE!” The ghost hissed and spit. “You’re *MINE*!”

Letting out a scream of rage he spewed horror after horror out of his mouth to spill all over Mim. Mim was swamped in images of death and demons. She brought her knees up and tucked her head into them to escape. But it didn't help. The images were now in her mind's eye; people screaming in agony on bloody battlefields, a freshly guillotined head its' dead eyes staring up at her, a woman's teeth abruptly exploding into shards. The horrific images swirled around her like a whirlwind. Her hair whipped around her face with the force of the winds. High pitched screams of agony enveloped Mim.

Whimpering, the little girl squeezed her eyes shut tight praying for it to be over. When a hand grabbed at her shirt she tried to crawl down into the floor space between the seats to escape. The hand grabbed at her again and this time lifted her halfway up.

"Come on!" she heard Henry's voice dimly through the roar of the demons. Opening her eyes she saw that Henry was leaning over the train seat in front of her. He was trying to hoist her off the floorboards. Frantic, Mim leapt headfirst over his row. She tumbled sideways and scrambled to get to her feet. Then she ran up the aisle as fast as she could.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Betty said thoughtfully, "Stella wasn't seeing spirits before so why is she seeing them now?"

Jodi had her laptop open and was flying through Google. She read aloud, "...if someone suddenly starts seeing metaphysical entities when they have not seen this type of phenomena in the past, typically something traumatic or dramatic has occurred to awaken this awareness."

We all turned to look at Stella who simply hunched her shoulders in bewilderment. "Honey," Betty gently laid her wrinkled hand on top of Stella's. "You need to think back over the events of the past few days and think what could possibly have awoken your psychic skills." With that, the elderly woman stiffly got to her feet and set off on foot after refusing a ride home. "Call me if anything exciting happens though." She implored as she left.

Stella refused to speak any more about seeing the kids. She just told us that they had disappeared and she wasn't about to go and try and find them. Then, several minutes later, she announced she had never even seen any kids. It was all a mistake.

"Stella, you did see kids." Frustrated, my tone was sharp.

"It was a hallucination. I've been having strange headaches lately." Smoking furiously, she sat down in a wicker chair and crossed her legs. Her top leg jittered up and down. I jerked my head at Jodi to indicate she should follow me into the house.

Back in the kitchen I paced back and forth as Jodi opened the fridge to get a bottle of kombucha. Confronted yet again with Stella's denials I wondered what kind of psychological block was going on with her. "Why can't she just acknowledge reality?" I moaned to Jodi. I paused to consider my words. "Or unreality as the case might be. I mean it's obvious she's experiencing this psychic stuff."

"Metaphysical." Jodi replied as she uncapped her drink.

"What?" I stopped pacing.

"Metaphysical stuff," Jodi stated. "It's actually a more proper word for this than psychic." She took a sip. "Or maybe the words are interchangeable. I should look that up."

Barely listening I continued my pacing. "If she can talk to ghosts then she could just ask Grandma what to do. Hell, she could even ask Stuart Carmen what the problem is and we could all make nice." I threw myself into a kitchen chair. "Why can't she admit what she sees?"

"She's scared." Jodi stretched to get a glass from the cupboard.

"How can you drink kombucha?" I shuddered.

"How can you not?" Jodi clinked ice into her glass and poured it in.

"So what's she scared of?" I sighed.

Jodi sat down next to me. “Do you remember how we used to take grandma’s sailboat out on Bear Lake?” I did remember. Stella, Jodi and I would troop down the rickety railroad tie steps to the beach below Grandma’s house dragging our beach towels and life jackets. The boards of the dock would be so hot from the sun that we’d hop and tip toe on our bare feet while being mindful of random nail heads sticking up.

At the end of the dock was an old boathouse. We’d enter into its dim light and Stella would pretend to shove a laughing Jodi into the water of the boat well.

Every summer it was the same ritual. We’d tilt the little sailboat down from where it had leaned against the wall during the winter and drop it into the water of the boat well. Then we’d pull the mast down from the hooks on the side of the building. As we fitted the sail into the slot on the mast we would scream as a year’s worth of spiders and dirt flew out at us as the sail unfurled.

The sailboat was a little Sunfish about twelve feet long meant for two adults. Sailors would sit on the side of the boat with their feet in the foot-well. Stella and I would jam Jodi into the foot-well so we all fit. Stella always took the tiller and I would push the wooden centerboard down into its slot as soon as the water was deep enough. The sail would fill with warm winds and I remembered the feeling of freedom as we flew along the shoreline. We’d had hours of fun together on that boat.

I turned my attention back to Jodi as she said, “There was one time that Stella yelled out “Hard-a-lee!” and the boat turned to come about. But one time I stood up at the wrong time and Stella yelled, ‘Watch the boom!’”

I started to chuckle. I remembered this incident but I let Jodi finish her story. “I didn’t know what a boom was, so I thought there was going to be an explosion.”

“Oh God, it was so funny.” I was laughing now.

“And I jumped overboard,” Jodi continued, “and then I gulped in a bunch of water. And even though I had a life jacket on I completely panicked.” Jodi was starting to laugh along with me.

“You tried to climb back on the sailboat and we were trying to help you and the whole boat tipped over.” I wiped away tears of laughter, “We all wound up in the drink. Thank God Stella knew we had to swim around and stand on the centerboard to get it back upright.”

“Do you know what Stella said to me once we got back on the boat and I couldn’t stop crying?” Jodi leaned towards me. I shook my head no. “She said if you pretend it didn’t happen, then it didn’t happen.”

There was a long pause as I absorbed this. “Are you saying something traumatic happened to her? But she’s pretending it didn’t?”

Jodi gave a little shrug. “Maybe she pretended at first. Maybe now she just can’t remember it or repressed it.”

“How did you get so smart?” I asked.

Jodi smiled. “Lots of meditation.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Jodi glanced out the window. “What's John doing?”

I turned to look out at the lawn. John was on the far side with his back to us. He held something in his hands as walked in seemingly random directions. Two steps one way, then a pause, then three steps another. Then he turned and marched with purpose fifty feet along the edge of the lawn.

I followed Jodi outside. She grabbed her laptop, skipped down the porch steps and ran across the lawn to join John. They sat under a tree and conferred for a minute or two. Then Jodi stood and waved two objects over her head.

“I give, what is it?” I said, shading my eyes against the sun.

“How should I know?” Stella snapped from where she was still sat in the wicker chair. Okaaay somebody was in a bad mood.

Leaving Stella to her own thoughts seemed like a good idea so I got up and crossed the vast expanse of lawn. Beyond it, and down the hill, Bear Lake sparkled in the sunshine where water skiers were getting in their last hurrah before summer came to an end.

Jodi and John sat cross-legged with their heads together studying Grandma’s map of Ley Lines. John had removed it from its frame and the two of them handled the fragile paper carefully.



Curious, I picked up the two pieces of metal lying near them in the grass. They were slender round metal rods. One end was bent at a ninety-degree angle that had a wooden handle. "They're divining rods," John looked up from the map to explain.

"Where'd you get them?" Jodi asked as she took them from me.

"Agard's Lawn and Garden over on Ottawa Street," John offered. "It's that little red clapboard place that's been there forever." John continued, "People use divining or dousing rods to find water but apparently they can also locate Ley Lines."

Jodi leaned back against the tree with her laptop propped up on her knees. "According to Google Earth, two significant Ley Lines cross right here on the property." John skootched over so he could see her computer screen too. "It looks like it's here on the lawn somewhere." John touched his forefinger to the screen. "Can you zoom in more?"

Jodi shook her head. "Nope, that's it."

Laying back in the grass and idly watched the clouds I let myself luxuriate in the memory of the previous night. Suddenly, it hit me. James had shown me exactly where the Ley Lines intersected. The intersection was the spot where I had heard the music the loudest. "I bet you that I already know exactly where the Ley Lines cross." I rolled over on my side and propped my head up on my hand.

John squinted at me then accepted the challenge saying, "You're on. I'll bet you a dollar. I'll close my eyes and you go mark the spot where you think the Ley

Lines cross and then we'll see if the divining rod agrees with you."

Jodi held her hands over John's eyes but I still made them turn around away from where I was headed. Without hesitation I went straight to the spot where the music had played for me clearly the night before. It was about ten yards from the fence line in the shade of the Oleander bushes and about twenty yards off the corner of the boat house.

Looking around I found a small twig. Bending it I laid it on the spot where I had danced with James. Then I ran back to where Jodi and John sat. "All right, go for it."

John stood up with his divining rod and meticulously started crossing the lawn in a methodical manner. The rods were supposed to cross when they found where the Ley Lines crossed. John was getting nothing but he was far away from where I'd left my twig.

Jodi and I both lay back in the grass. The wind was picking up and the clouds were starting to move faster across the sky. A thunderstorm must be coming in and I hoped that it did. I missed having any kind of weather in California. The seasons in Los Angeles are marked by the angle of sunlight changing ever so slightly. I was starting to doze off when I heard John call out, "It's right here. The Ley Lines cross here!"

Jodi and I jumped up. Jodi shaded her eyes as she gazed towards John and called, "How do you know it's not just a spring of water?"

“It’s not a spring of water.” I grinned. I could see that John was exactly where I had left my twig. We ran to John where he excitedly showed us how the divining rods violently crossed when he stepped over one small patch of land.

Smiling I pointed down, “You’ll find a bent twig right there.”

John bent down picked up the twig and looked at it in wonder. “How did you know?”

Not wanting to share my secret visit with James I simply shrugged and smiled, “Maybe I’ve got some psychic abilities after all.”

“Then this is it! The intersection of the Ley Lines! This is where you and your sisters are going to work on getting rid of Stuart.” The smile on John’s face made me understand how invested he had become in our mission. Bless his heart he was trying to help—and he had.

A thunderclap made all of us jump. John hurriedly gathered up Grandma’s map. Jodi, computer in hand, was already sprinting for the veranda as the fat raindrops began to fall. The house was now dim with the clouds and the falling rain. Jodi suggested we try and contact Stuart but Stella said she had another headache and needed to lie down.

I climbed the stairs and entered my room. It was a good day for me to work on my latest film script. Lying on the bed I propped my laptop up on my stomach and put my air pods in. My computer was set to a random shuffle of music I liked. I had worked for about twenty minutes when one of my favorite songs came on.

*“...And she was lying in the grass. And she could hear the highway breathing...”* It was a Talking Heads song from the eighties.

I paused what I was doing and looked out the window at the falling rain. Setting my laptop aside I reached over and picked up the photo of James and me.

He looked so young and carefree. We both had been. Our first kiss was in the spring of my junior year at Michigan State. Spring was a time when girls are laying out in their bikinis just because the sun is finally out. It didn't matter that it was only fifty degrees. Guys played Frisbee to impress them. James and I had our first kiss at a local bar called Crunchie's. We had sat side-by-side in a wooden high-backed booth painfully aware of each other as our friends laughed and drank beer on the other side of the booth.

*“The world was moving, she was right there with it and she was.”*

After laughing at some joke we had smiled at each other. Then we simultaneously came together in a kiss. James took off his baseball cap and held it in front of our faces to shield us from the view of others. Not that anyone was paying attention to us in the raucous bar. We'd been inseparable since that moment.

*“And she was moving very slowly. Rising above the earth.”*

Unwanted, the image of his car deliberately swerving off the road to hit the tree then flipping over and over down the hill came into my head. That's what the police said had happened. His parents blamed me for James' death. All our friends blamed me for James' death.

*“Moving into the universe and she's drifting this way and that.”*

I blamed myself for it too.

*“Joining the world of missing persons and she was...”*

I must have drifted off to sleep because when I woke up I saw two hours had passed. I pulled my air pods out and saw the rain was still coming down.

Stretching, I looked up. “What the hell?” Orange crayon marks were everywhere on the walls. Most of the bold marks were way up high where you would have needed a tall ladder to reach. I ran to the hallway and called the others.

Stella came from her bedroom. Jodi and John came from downstairs. Motioning them into my room I pointed out the orange scribbles. It wasn't like you could have missed them. Scribbles were everywhere. Stella turned on me.

“Did you do this?” She accused. “Because it's a really juvenile trick to get me to talk to the kids.”

“No!” I protested.

How could she think I would do such a thing? Besides how was I supposed to have scribbled eight feet above my head?

“Someone is ma-aad,” Jodi pronounced, “and it looks like the kids.”

“What do they have to be mad about?” I asked.

“Did you change or move something in this room?” Jodi asked.

I thought about it. Yes, I had dragged the little armchair from its normal spot to over by the window. While Jodi looked with interest at the chair and John studied the crayon marks Stella wandered around the room. Before I could stop her, she picked up the photo of James and me from where I'd left it on the rumpled bed covers. She regarded it.

"God Frances, seriously? You still drag a photo of Jimmy around with you everywhere you go?" She tossed the frame casually back on the bed where it clattered against my laptop. "That's a little sick, don't you think?"

There was something in the way she said it. There was something in the way she tossed the photo. Maybe it was because James had visited me the night before. I couldn't take it.

"Get out of my room!" I grabbed her by the back of her white shirt and heard it tear as I yanked her bodily towards the door. She twisted and managed to grab a chunk of my hair. Grabbing at her arm I pushed her away as I demanded, "Don't ever talk to me about James again! Don't even think about breathing his name out of your mouth again." I could barely control my rage, "And his name IS NOT JIMMY!!"

Now John and Jodi were between us pulling us apart. I barely remember the rest. John took Stella by the elbow and gently moved her out of the room. Jodi led me to my bed and made me lie down. Gently she set the photo back on the bedside stand. Then Jodi sat next to me stroking my hair for a long, long, long time.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

John yelling up the stairs woke me out of a sound sleep. "Hey, get dressed. Jodi's waiting in the car." Groaning I swung my legs out of bed. I'm not a morning person. I'm not even a night person. I'm more like an afternoon person. Still, I quickly got dressed and after brushing my hair and teeth I joined Stella on the front walk to hurry to John's car at the curb. I was still upset about her cutting remarks the day before but decided to act like nothing had happened.

Getting into the front passenger seat I heard Stella snark as she opened the car door to get into the back seat with Jodi, "Of course Frances would take the front seat." Closing my eyes I breathed deeply. After getting over my initial anger I thought about it. Stella was right. I had taken the best seat without asking. Deciding to play it off I joked over my shoulder, "You didn't yell shotgun." I was rewarded with a half smile from Stella. "Where are we going?" I twisted around from the front to ask.

"To Albert Conroy's house," Jodi declared.

"And that is...?" Stella was rubbing her temples.

"Grandma's gardener." Jodi replied.

"You called the number on that business card." I stated it more as a fact than a question.

Jodi sat back. "That card found us twice. And you were the one who said that this week there were no coincidences." Jodi sat back. "He seems pretty anxious to see us."

She didn't sound like her usual chipper self and I cranked around in my seat to look at her.

"You ok?" I asked.

“Yeah.” She replied morosely. We all eyed her. Jodi definitely seemed off her game. “What?” she asked defensively. Then she shrugged her shoulders, “It’s no big deal. Something went wrong again at work and I’m bummed out about it.”

“What could possibly go wrong at a yoga studio?” Stella chuckled.

“That was two cities and two jobs ago.” Jodi nibbled at a cuticle, “I’m kind of a writer and artist now.” She didn’t elaborate and we dropped the subject. John drove into the bigger town of Muskegon. Turning on to a small street he made a few more turns, then slowed the car and leaned across me to see the street numbers.

“That’s it.” He pointed to a small clapboard house with a tidy yard out front.” Pulling over he parked at the curb.

A man observed us from his screen door. We walked up the concrete sidewalk to his house as a dog barked furiously from inside. “Hello, ladies. I’ve been expecting you.” He opened the screen door, “Took you long enough.”

As I passed by Mr. Conroy to enter I had an odd sensation that I knew him from somewhere. That was impossible unless I remembered him from when I was a small child? That seemed unlikely.

“Hello, Mr. Conroy?” Jodi said loudly. “I’m Jodi Payne, you worked as a gardener for our grandmother for many years.”



"I'm old, dear, not deaf." The man said as we pushed away the Jack Russell terrier that was jumping relentlessly at our legs. Standing awkwardly in the living room we saw there weren't many choices for seating. The four of us squished together on the couch while Mr. Conroy eased himself into the matching brown plaid Lay-Z Boy recliner.

Leaning back he popped up the footrest by pulling on the lever on the side of the chair. His skin was weathered and I figured he must be around eighty years old. Picking up the TV remote control he turned off *The Price Is Right* with a liver-spotted hand. "It was so much better with Bob Barker," he remarked as he turned away from the television set. "You probably don't remember me. But your momma sent Gertie your school photos every year." He gestured at Stella. "And you, you're the spitting image of Gertie at that age."

We didn't quite know what to say so he stroked the dog's head and waited. After some seconds he inquired over his bifocals, "What can I do for you?"

Jodi opened and shut her mouth twice. I realized she hadn't come up with a plan for this. What were we supposed to do? Announce that we were sent to him by our dead grandmother? We were going to sound like lunatics.

Of course, that is exactly what Jodi proceeded to do. She explained about the business card and the ghost-busting, Stella being pushed down the stairs and the oleander bushes growing faster than possible. The more she talked the more bizarre it sounded.

Mr. Conroy most certainly was thinking that he should never have opened his door. When Jodi took a pause in her breathless story, he held up his hand. Jodi stopped and we all waited for him to say something.

“Your Grandmother had the gift,” he said. “I took care of your Grandparent’s yard, and was their handyman, for close to fifty years and there’s not much I don’t know about that house.”

I said hesitantly “Mr. Conroy, our grandma wants us to get rid of a ghost named Stuart Carmen. Did you know him?” I stopped short of telling him that grandma had murdered Stuart.

“Call me Albert.” He didn’t answer my question. Instead, he hoisted himself up with the help of a cane and with a visible limp crossed the room. His fingers flicked through different books piled onto the bookshelf before deciding on one. It appeared to be a ledger.

“I kept careful records of all of my jobs.” He licked his forefinger and flipped through the pages. “Including planting those oleander bushes at Gertie’s. I didn’t understand much why she wanted them.” Albert shook his head. “But she said someone in the neighborhood should have them because that’s how the street originally got its name.”

Scanning a page Albert stopped short. “Here it is. The oleander bushes were delivered on August twelfth of ‘99. They were big saplings.” We made interested murmurs but didn’t understand what he was getting at. Albert sat back down and continued flipping through pages. “Here, I have pictures.” He turned the ledger towards us.

A black and white photo showed a woman standing next to an open trench, apparently being prepared for the oleander planting, alongside a fence. I recognized both my grandmother and her fence.

“May I keep this?” I asked. Not many photos existed of my grandmother at that age.

“Sure, sure.” Albert waved a hand as I tucked the photo into my purse. “I always took photos of my work progress” Albert pulled the ledger back. “Never know when someone will complain I wasn’t doing the work.” Paging through the ledger he pulled another receipt out and handed it to Jodi who was seated nearest to him. Jodi squinted to make out the scrawled writing. She told us that it was a receipt made out to Grandma Gertie for dirt and fertilizer.

“Look at the signature.” Albert urged. Jodi scanned the receipt quickly then let out an exclamation. Albert leaned back a bit smugly.

Jodi continued, “It’s signed by Stuart Carmen and it’s dated August 15, 1999.” There it was. Stuart had definitely been at grandma’s house the summer of 1999.

Digging into my purse I found my cell phone and handed it to Albert. “We had an incident that I recorded. It might have to do with Stuart. Will you watch it?”

Albert took my cell phone and looked at it in wonder. “If this isn’t the darndest thing.” I thought he meant the recording until he turned the phone over and over. “A phone that’s a video recorder. Amazing what they come up with these days.”

“Albert,” I gently prodded him, “the video?” Albert replayed the short video three times. Clearly we heard the disembodied voice say, “You’re mine”.

Taking a sip from his coffee mug Albert paused before responding. “If you’re asking if that’s Stuart’s voice, I can’t say. I never heard anything like that in the house. When Stuart’s ghost was around you’d know, because there would be these black wisps of smoke. Then your grandma would inexplicably fall down and get hurt or a big vase would fall off a shelf next to Gertie and shatter. Things like that.”

He laughed ruefully. “As for these little bubbles—orbs, you call them—those are spirits. The sparkles though, I call ‘em Angel Lights. I always thought those were angels. I always felt happy when they were around. But I guess they could be any random spirit that wandered into the house. A lot of them did you know.”

“Spirits? Like each one is an individual ghost?” Jodi was incredulous. Muttering more to herself she said, “Jay-sus, do we have our work cut out for us. There’s a hell of a lot of ghosts in that joint.”

“These orbs show up a lot in photos,” he went on. “Course most people say its dust mites lit up by the flash but I could see them with or without a camera.” Albert shifted the dog in his lap.

“Are they all trying to hurt us?” Jodi anxiously twisted the fringe tufts on the couch.

Albert paused to consider. “It’s pretty rare that a ghost has nasty intentions. Several times Gertie was in danger but Stuart’s ghost was the only one that was trying to hurt her.”

“Albert,” I ventured “we need your help. We think something or someone sent us to you. Can you help us?”

“Of course,” Albert responded. “I told you already, I was expecting you.”

## MIM

“Holy shit holy shit holy shit.” Mim squatted on the floor of the train’s tiny bathroom bracing her back against the wall. Her arms were wrapped tightly around herself as she tried to make herself as small as possible.

There was nowhere to sit. The toilet seat didn’t have a lid. And she might be terrified, but she sure wasn’t going to sit her butt down on the pee drenched floor. She thought ruefully that it must difficult for a guy to aim at the toilet when the train went around a curve.

There was yet another knock on the door. “Occupied.” Mim called out shakily. The knocking stopped.

Henry leaned against the door facing her. “I think it’s safe for you to go back to your seat.” Henry suggested for the fifth time.

Mim shook her head furiously from side to side. “I’m not going back until we get to Holland. If I hadn’t left my phone on my seat, I wouldn’t go back at all.” Mim chewed at a fingernail a habit her mother hated. “Check the lock again.” She instructed Henry. Henry didn’t even bother to look at the door.

“It’s locked.” He folded his arms as he regarded his frightened friend. “You know that if that ghost wants to find you a locked door isn’t going to stop him.”

“If you can’t see him how did you know I needed help?” Mim mumbled.

“You screaming and cowering away from something was a pretty good clue.” Henry responded.

Mim didn't answer at first. Then she raised her head. "Is this what my mom is up against?"

"I don't know." Henry confessed. "Tell me again what the guy looked like." Mim described the man in as much detail as she remembered. Henry pondered for a moment. Then it was like a light went off in his head. "It might be Stuart." Henry was thinking hard. "Gertie never told me what Stuart looked like. I just knew he made her life hell as a ghost."

"Why isn't he at Gertie's house then tormenting my mom and aunts instead of me?" Mim moaned.

"You must be special." Henry grinned at her trying to make her laugh. She didn't. "Did you know you look just like her?" He asked.

"Who?"

"Gertie. Henry mused, "There's a photo of her on her piano when she was about your age. Take a look when you get there." Thankfully Mim heard the call announcing the train was pulling into the station.

Unlocking the bathroom door she stuck her head out and looked both ways before exiting. She made her way back to her seat and pulled her backpack off the rack. After a few frantic minutes she breathed a sigh of relief when she found her phone on the floor several seats behind the one she had vacated. A few minutes later Mim hopped off the train and stood on the lonely, dark platform in Holland, Michigan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Albert followed us in his truck back to Grandma's house. When we arrived the oleander bushes had yet again wound through the gate and lock and now towered over the fence. "I'll be damned," Albert took off his cap and scratched his head.

"You're a gardener," I nudged him. "Can you get the branches loose?"

"I'm retired." Albert leaned against his truck and crossed his arms. "But there's a chainsaw in the truck." I guess age did have some privileges. John sighed and leaned over into the bed of the truck to pull out the saw.

Jodi and I were pulling at the branches without much effect when Albert called to us. "You know that stuff is poisonous, right?"

Thanks for the helpful tip, I thought. A branch snapped back and hit me in the face. "Yeah, but how fast could it really kill us?" I asked as I continued to wrestle.

"Mmm, just the smoke from a bonfire made of oleander can kill you." Albert said mildly. "Chewing on the branches will kill you even faster. Getting sap on yourself will kill you too. Just a little slower."

I released my hold on a branch and quickly wiped my hands on my jeans. Jodi did likewise. John searched again in the truck bed and pulled out some work gloves. Pretty soon he had the gate freed up and Jodi and I raced into the house to wash our hands.



The buzz of the chain saw let me know John was still working on the oleander bushes. Strolling halfway down the walk I waited until the sound had died down. "John," I called. "Where's Stella?" With a gloved hand John pointed to the side of the house. I crossed the grass and around the corner of the house where the rhododendron bushes hid the veranda from view.

I stopped when I heard Stella singing. It was a camp song my sisters and I knew well. Over the years we had all learned it around the campfires at Camp Pandalouan. The camp had stood on the shores of Blue Lake since the 1920's. Generations of Payne relatives had gone there for a week every summer.

"Barges, I would like to sail with you. I would like to sail the ocean blue," Stella crooned. "Barges are there treasures in your hold? Do you fight with pirates, brave and bold?"

I crept quietly around the bushes until I had a view of the veranda. Stella was rocking in the wicker chair. Her arms were positioned as though she was holding a child. Her hand patted a phantom child's leg. "Shh, sweetie. Dry your tears. I know, I know, I'll try to help." Stella said softly.

Quietly I mounted the three stairs and stood in front of Stella. Finally she realized I was present. She looked up at me her eyes shining with tears. "Her name is Jennifer. She's four years old and she misses her mommy and daddy."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I held my breath. I didn't want to disturb Jennifer and Stella. Stella simply kept rocking and crooning with her head tucked on top of a phantom little one. Then, Stella said as if responding to someone, "All right sweetie, I understand. You go find your brothers, but I promise I'll help you be with your mommy and daddy," she watched as a little body I couldn't see slipped away from her. I felt a faint whoosh of air by my leg.

"Stella?" I fell to my knees in front of her, "Stella, are you alright?"

Her eyes focused on me. "I'm perfectly fine, Frances. You know what? I *am* a medium, and that poor little girl and her brothers need me to help reunite them with their parents," she said. "What are we going to do?"

I sat back on my haunches, "Jodi thinks if we can help them into the white light, they can find their parents."

"Then we'd better go talk to Jodi." Stella said firmly, getting to her feet. We entered the screen door into the kitchen where we found Albert sipping iced tea with Jodi at the table. John was busy at the stove. "Jodi, we have to help some kids get to heaven so they can find their parents," Stella announced.

Jodi looked at me and made a drinking motion with her hand meaning 'is she drunk?' I shook my head, no. Stella related what had happened. The little girl Jennifer had taken a shine to her. The night before Jennifer had come to her to snuggle in bed.

“You met little Jennifer,” Albert exclaimed. “How wonderful.” We all turned to look at Albert. “How is she? Since Gertie passed, I didn’t know what was happening with them.”

“You know about the kids?” Jodi was astounded.

“Sure.” Albert inclined his head. “Gertie, Betty and I held a séance every Sunday. Gertie spoke often to Jennifer and her brother William. Henry never spoke though.”

“You were the man in my vision!” I suddenly exclaimed. Now I realized why Albert had looked familiar. He was the man I had seen listening to Grandma Gertie talk about the psychic Edward Cayce. Betty must have been the other woman.

Albert regarded me. “What kind of vision?” I quickly described my experience. “Sounds like either Remote Viewing or Retrocognition,” Albert mused as Jodi shot me a triumphant look. “Where’s Gertie’s encyclopedia?” Jodi ran to get the encyclopedia from the parlor and returned to set it down in front of Albert.

Stella had been standing by the counter with her arms crossed. “This is fascinating and all, but we’ve got to help the kids get to heaven.” She said impatiently. “Is there anything in that book about that?”

“No,” Jodi admitted. “I’ve gone through it twice. There’s nothing in there about how to get rid of Stuart’s ghost much less how to get kids to heaven.”

“Dinner’s ready.” John set a stack of plates on the table.

“There’s no time for dinner,” Stella practically stomped her foot. “We have to help the kids.”

“Gotta eat,” Albert responded mildly. “The kids have been waiting a hundred years. They can wait a few more minutes.” Reluctantly Stella joined us at the table. John had made Dijon chicken with a side of cranberry sauce and an organic salad with homemade salad dressing. I noticed Jodi pat John’s hand in appreciation then leave it on top of his, a moment longer than needed. They shared an intimate smile.

“I would have made french bread but I didn’t have time to let it rise properly today,” John said through a mouthful of chicken. We ate wedged in around the butcher-block table. John had stuck a candle into an empty wine bottle.

“John, I mean, this is stellar,” I said after my second helping of everything.

“It’s nothing,” he demurred. “I make something like this every night at home for myself. It’s nice to cook for other people.”

After dinner Stella jumped up and announced we had to work on getting the children to heaven. Albert wiped his chin with his napkin before replying, “Can’t.”

“Why not?” Stella face twisted like she might cry.

“We need Betty and Betty’s in bed by now.” Albert rose and pulled his car keys out of his pocket. “It’ll keep until tomorrow.” As he was leaving he stood a moment next to my chair. “You try getting a vision again. If you get scared just imagine a rope anchoring you to the present.”

After helping with the dishes Stella excused herself to go upstairs. I curled up in the chair by the fireplace. John had lit a fire and it blazed happily. Who cared if it was August? In my mind a fire is always nice. Jodi read Grandma's encyclopedia at the parlor table while John flipped through the photo album again.

With my eyes closed I blocked out all thoughts and focused on my breathing. Almost immediately I started to get a floating sensation. Slightly panicked I sat up straight with my eyes wide open. The sensation stopped. The floating itself had been very pleasant. I soon realized that it was the idea that I might leave my body but not be able to come back.

Remembering Albert's advice, I imagined a rope starting at my head traveling along my spine and straight down into the earth. I mentally anchored myself. Then I let myself drift on my imaginary rope.

It no longer seemed like I was in my body. It felt like I had moved into a different time and place and was part of an event as it happened. Twelve-year-old Stella and nine-year-old Jodi were in Grandma's kitchen. Stella had the door to the freezer open.

"There's only one cherry Otter Pop left and I get it." Stella was holding the box of ice pops high over Jodi's head.

"No! Mine! Mine!" Jodi's stretched her hands up and jumped trying to get the package out of Stella's hands.

"Stop teasing her, Stella!" A man turned from the sink to chide. He had a slight widow's peak and a paunch. "Give her the cherry one."

Jodi grabbed at the Otter Pop Stella had just torn open and suddenly there was a mess of red sticky syrup all over Stella's white jeans. "These are brand new!" Stella cried as she looked down at her ruined white jeans.

The vision stopped right then as though a switch turned off. I became aware again of the sensation of floating. Opening my eyes, I intuited my 'rope' and following it I made my way back to the room.

Breathing deeply I gently brought myself back into the present. Slowly I opened my eyes and saw that the fire was still burning in the fireplace. Looking at the clock I expected that hours had gone by. Instead, only two or three minutes had elapsed. How was that possible? It felt like I had been gone for eons.

When I felt more like myself and not half drugged from my vision, I told Jodi and John about it. As expected, Jodi didn't remember some incident from years past about Otter Pops. What possible significance could that seemingly minor event hold now? I wondered. Maybe I'd just wandered into a brain fart of a vision. "Did you get a good look at the man?" John asked.

"I need to look at the photo again but I'm pretty sure it was Stuart." I replied.

"You really do have Retrocognition." Jodi was excited. "You know how some psychics can see the future? That's Precognition. What you have is apparently even more rare. You can actually see events from the past."

I curled up even tighter in the chair. “That’s great but it’s not helping us much.” Instead of being thrilled, as Jodi expected me to be, I felt a heavy weight. If I had that kind of skill, why couldn’t I see what really had happened to James that long ago fateful night?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

With no skid marks on the road to indicate that James had tried to brake, the police had questioned me about the argument James and I had before he roared away from my apartment.

Why had James veered suddenly off the road? It was a road he knew very well. He was completely sober. The car was mechanically sound. There were no skid marks. Did he do it on purpose, they asked? Was it a suicide?

No, I had cried. He wouldn't do such a thing. He wouldn't have done that to me, but he especially would not have done that to his parents.

We just had had a stupid, huge, shouting, emotional argument. We were infuriated with each other. I wanted to move to Los Angeles as I had a job lined up. But James still had a year of school left. He wanted me to stay with him and was devastated when I said no. When I wouldn't budge on my decision he had slammed out of my door and his tires sent up smoke as he squealed out of my driveway.

It must have been an accident. Even if it was an accident everyone blamed me for causing James to drive too fast and lose control of the car.

The questions remained and James' family never spoke to me again.



I cried and longed for James every hour of every day. I was literally eaten up by my guilt about his death and the loss of the love of my life. I dropped to ninety pounds. It took me four years to finally rebound back to my normal, healthy weight. I now lived with a constant emptiness in my soul that I never knew how to fill.

Why could I never get over James? I had played every scenario out in my head over and over. If we had gone forward and James hadn't died and we had gotten married, well, then what? He was on track to be a doctor. I was on track to be a writer. Looking at it in a hard, cold light I could see that it might never have worked out. We might have gotten married, grown estranged and then divorced.

On the other hand we had adored each other and could speak freely about anything. We were kind and loving to each other. That's when I would imagine our three kids and a perfect life.

But it didn't happen at all. It all stopped in mid-stream. We didn't complete our path. I would never know how our relationship might have evolved and I had never once stopped missing James. All I knew was that there was a constant dull ache in my heart.

I had been trapped in that feeling, unable to move forward, since that awful night that James died. I had dated a couple of men for a few months or so. But I couldn't get by my longing for James. Consciously I put the memories into the box where I kept them sealed up in my head. For some reason coming to grandma's house had laid raw my very soul when it came to his death.

When the doorbell rang, I said I'd get it. Albert probably had forgotten something. "I guess the oleander bushes are behaving themselves." I remarked as I walked through the front hallway to the door. "They let Albert back through the gate." Upon opening the door, I stood in shocked silence at who was in front of me.

"Hi." Mim said.

"Hi," I said faintly. Just when you think one shit show is over another one begins. With Mim still standing on the front porch I yelled over my shoulder. "Stella, it's for you."

I heard Stella descend the stairs and walk up behind me. "Who is it?" She stopped short as she gazed out at the front porch. Her eyes widened. She opened and shut her mouth.

Then she finally got out, "Henry?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Hello, Stella.” Henry responded.

“You can see him?” Mim mouth gaped open. Stella’s attention snapped back to her daughter.

“What in the world are you doing here, young lady?” She asked angrily. I didn’t blame her for being mad. How had a fourteen-year-old girl made it halfway across the country by herself?

Stella grabbed Mim’s arm and yanked her inside. Holding Mim by both shoulders Stella shook the girl hard. “You could have been murdered! Or kidnapped! What were you thinking?”

Instead of cowering and apologizing Mim gazed at her mother steadily. “You can see Henry.” Stella dropped her hands abruptly and stepped back at the look on her daughter’s face. Mim’s fury engulfed her little body. “You said ghosts didn’t exist! You told me only crazy people thought there were ghosts. You screamed at me about it. You hit me when I said ghosts were real. And you knew they were real! You knew!”

Stella covered her face with her hands. “I didn’t know! When I couldn’t see Henry any more I thought I had imagined him the whole time.” Stella was crying now. “I thought I was crazy. I was scared you were crazy too.”

The anger seemed to go out of Mim as she finally heard what she knew to be the truth. After a beat I helped Mim gently propel her distraught mother into the parlor and over to the sofa.

Mim sat quietly next to her as Stella sobbed. "I'm so sorry, Henry." Her tears ran down her face and dripped off her cheeks. "I just couldn't see you anymore." Jodi sent me a look and I shook my head at her. I couldn't hear what Henry was saying either, but I knew that this was very real for Mim and Stella.

"How do you two even know each other?" Mim looked back and forth between Stella and where Henry, I presumed, stood. A silence ensued as apparently Henry was saying something. Mim, realizing the rest of us didn't know what was happening, explained. "He says that he and my mom used to play together when she was little."

"Stella's imaginary friend." Jodi murmured.

Mim continued, "But at the end of that last summer you all came here, Stella suddenly couldn't see or hear him anymore." She turned back to Henry. "Aw," Mim said softly to the ghost, "don't cry." She turned to her mother. "Why did you leave him? He was so lonely without you."

Stella shook her head and addressed not Mim but the ghost. "I stopped believing you were real." Another long pause ensued.

Mim softly explained to Jodi and me, "He wants to know why."

Stella closed her eyes tightly. "I don't know why."

Mim murmured. "Henry is saying that he would visit my mom often, wherever she was, hoping she could see him again. But she never did. Then mom had me. And when I could see him, it made him really happy." She added, "Henry has been my very best friend for absolutely forever."

As my sisters and I sat in stunned silence John, as usual, was the practical one. He took this moment to interject, “Mim, does your father know where you are?”

Mim turned and seemed to see John for the first time. “Who are you?”

“Lawyer,” John was succinct. “Where does your dad think you are?” He repeated.

“Oh my gosh, Ashland!” Stella’s hand rose to her mouth. “He must be worried sick.”

“If he was worried sick,” Mim pointed out, “he would have called you by now. Anyway, he probably thinks I’m still at Cynthia’s house.”

“How long have you been gone, Miriam!” Stella’s face was reddening.

Mim looked down. “Maybe ‘bout twenty-four hours? Ish?”

Stella’s face was stormy. “We’ll discuss this later. I’ll call your father.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket made her way out of the room into the hall. Then abruptly she turned on her heel, paused, and came back into the room. We braced ourselves as she approached Mim. Mim stood defiantly as Stella abruptly stopped in front of her.

Suddenly Stella burst into tears. Sobbing she grabbed Mim to her in a tight hug. “I’m proud of you. You did all of this on your own. But what if I’d lost you?” Stella rocked Mim back and forth in her arms. Mim’s own arms tentatively rose to wrap around her mother’s waist, then she rested her head against her mother’s chest.

Finally they broke apart. Gently, Mim wiped the tears from her mother’s face. “Why are you even here?” Stella managed to gulp out.

“Henry told me you needed me.”

Stella paused a long moment then she slowly nodded her head. After squeezing Mim’s hand she went to the kitchen to call Ashland.

“Mim,” Jodi asked, “How did you get here?”

Mim explained and said her last stop was the train station in Holland. At first I thought she meant she’d been in Amsterdam or something. Then I remembered Holland was a small town south of Muskegon. How had Mim gotten the last thirty miles to Muskegon? Which is what I asked her.

“I hitchhiked.” Mim said casually. Jodi, John and I gasped in mutual horror. She really could have been kidnapped or murdered. At the look on our faces Mim laughed. “I’m just kidding. Do you think I’m a moron? I’ve seen Dateline too, you know.”

She told us that she had Uber’d to Muskegon. She and Henry had rejected the first driver basically for being male. The second driver was deemed ok. She was a grandmother who talked about fishing for lake perch during the entire drive. Mim wound up being six dollars short to pay the fare, but the woman had dropped her off in front of the house anyway with a friendly, “Be careful, sweetheart. And don’t forget the basic worm is the best bait for perch.”

Mim glanced over to where I assumed Henry sat on the couch. “I don’t think your little sister should be playing with that.” I didn’t understand what she was talking about until I saw the pages of Jodi’s sketchbook lifting apparently by themselves. The sketchbook was lying on the table directly in front of Jodi and she watched in amazement as the oversized pages rose and turned. Neither of us could see the little girl.

“It’s ok,” Jodi was smiling in delight, “she can’t hurt anything.” The pages stopped flipping. I walked over to see what drawing had gotten little Jennifer’s attention. It was Jodi’s sketch of the sticks or weeds from my vision of the wall behind my grandmother.

Mim came and leaned against Jodi to also see the drawing. Then she looked down. She cocked her head as she apparently listened to Jennifer. Turning back to us Mim said, “Jennifer wants to know when you’re going to finish drawing the rest of the horse.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We were stunned and our faces must have shown it. “What?” Mim looked at us quizzically. She looked back and forth between Jodi and me. We were so gob-smacked we couldn’t get a word out for a moment.

“A horse?” I finally asked wonderingly. “What makes her think it’s a horse?” Mim knelt down presumably to be at eye height with Jennifer. She listened intently then looked up at us.

“She says it’s a picture on the side of the house.” Mim listened again to her ghost friend. “You drew the mane of the horse.” I looked back at Jodi’s sketch. It did look like the flowing mane of a horse. But what kind of picture would be on the side on the house? And if there was a picture wouldn’t we have seen it?

John had been listening intently. “Can she show us where the picture is?”

“Jennifer says it’s dark outside and she’s afraid of the dark.” Mim informed us. “She doesn’t want to go.” That settled that. There’s not much arguing with a ghost particularly a four-year-old ghost. In any case Mim hadn’t slept in over a day and Stella insisted she get to bed. Stella said she would show her daughter up to the last empty bedroom located directly above the parlor.



As they ascended the staircase, we heard Stella ask, “Miriam, what are you wearing?” Mim mumbled something we couldn’t make out. We heard Stella again, “Is that a nose stud?” Again, Mim mumbled. Then, after a long pause, we heard Stella say gently, “You look nice.”

Figuring there wasn’t much more we could accomplish we decided to call it a night. The next morning the oven timer dinged just as I entered the kitchen. I poured myself some coffee as I watched Jodi open the oven door and poke a finger at some biscuits. “Three more minutes.” She closed the oven door again.

“Since when are you a baker?” I teased.

“Since never. John made them. He asked me to check on them.” Three minutes later Jodi pulled out the biscuits. I nabbed a hot biscuit right out of the pan. “Don’t eat them all,” Jodi warned. “Albert let me know that he and Betty will be here soon. Save some for them. John just went to wake up Stella and Mim.”

“What’s the plan for figuring out what the horse thing means?” I played hot potato with the biscuit between my hands until I got to the table.

“We’re going to talk about it when everyone is here.” With a spatula Jodi was shoveling biscuits out and loading up a platter. I spread a huge hunk of butter on my biscuit. Then for good measure I added John’s homemade blueberry jam he had brought from his house. Ahh, carbs. On the eighth day God created wonderful carbs. I promised myself I would go running later knowing full well I wouldn’t.

Heaven. I mean, there is heaven and then there is heaven. This biscuit was unlike anything I had ever tasted. It had a crispness that I crunched through into the soft stuff underneath. Butter and jam dripped down my chin. I didn't care. I was in bliss.

John came into the kitchen. He was dressed and freshly shaved with his hair still damp. He immediately crossed to the stove to inspect his biscuits.

"John!" I practically gasped. "These are—I mean these biscuits are amazing! What do you put in them?"

"I have a secret ingredient," John buttered a biscuit of his own.

"You make them with love?" Jodi asked.

"No, I make them with lard." John laughed through a mouthful.

"Like Crisco?"

"Nope, good old-fashioned lard. You pour all the fat from whatever you are cooking into a metal coffee can. Say it's the fat from bacon or steak or whatever, it all goes in there. I don't know why it has to be a coffee can, but it does. Preferably an old, blue Maxwell House coffee can. All that fat mixes together and then hangs around for weeks or months till you need it. That's the way my grandma taught me and I'm not about to change things up."

Mim entered the kitchen bleary eyed with hair that looked like Mardi Gras. She poured herself some coffee and took a seat next to Jodi.

"Coffee?" Jodi looked at her niece. "At your age?" Mim shrugged.

“Cream and sugar?” Jodi shoved both across the table towards Mim who shook her head and continued drinking it black.

With my own coffee I wandered out into the bright sunshine on the veranda. Stella followed me a moment later with her own biscuit. She was careful to hold it in front of her so the jam wouldn’t drip on her pristine clothes. Even her white jeans had a razor crease in them. “Morning.”

“Morning,” I settled down in my favorite chair and pulled out my cell phone to play Words With Friends. It was my turn to play the puzzle. Unknown people and I were neck and neck for who would win the game.

Several new letters dinged into place at the bottom of the puzzle. I looked at them twice and blinked. In order, they spelled I-M-J-A-M-E-S.

I’m James.

What a bizarre coincidence. Shaken by seeing James’ name I hit the reshuffle button for the letters. The letters jumped and reshuffled themselves.

They landed in the exact same order.

I-M-J-A-M-E-S.

An excited tingle flooded through my body.

“Frances?” Stella barely spoke above a whisper. I ignored her as I continued to stare at my phone.

“Frances?” Stella was more insistent and reluctantly I looked up to where she stood. Stella’s eyes were fixed above my head. She stood frozen as if any movement might scare a deer away. “Frances,” Stella whispered, “James is here.”

As she spoke, I felt something softly brush my cheek. Then I felt it again. The touch was pure love flowing from my cheek to flood my body. I shut my eyes to focus on the sensation. “James?” I whispered.

Stella’s eyes hadn’t moved from the place above my head. “James,” Stella’s voice was soft, “why are you here?” She reached out to take my hand.

I felt two phantom hands touch my shoulders from behind. It was then that my mind spun away. Everything around me disappeared. Suddenly I was a passenger in the front seat of James’ car. Its headlights illuminated a dark road cutting through the forest on either side. I recognized this stretch of road. James and I had traveled it hundreds of times together, but I’d never taken it again after the night James died.

The car wasn’t traveling at an unusually high rate of speed. Glancing over I couldn’t make out the driver in the darkness. I could only see the driver’s hands on the steering wheel. A ring glinted and I recognized it. It was James’ class ring.

Without warning, just as a curve to the left appeared, a dog darted across the path of the car. The hands wrenched the wheel hard to the right to avoid hitting the dog. The car sped directly into a large tree. As it then flipped over and over down the steep embankment flashes of white light from the one unbroken headlight crazily illuminated tree branches.

Then, nothing but blackness.

Slowly I opened my eyes. Stella was still standing where she had been. But now she was looking straight at me. Tears rolled down her face.

“It was,” she started to say and then we finished the words together, “a dog.”

Stunned, neither of us moved for a long moment. Then unexpectedly Stella leaned down and hugged me. Stella had never hugged me before. My arms slowly lifted to return her embrace. Stella then with an understanding look left me to be alone. I took several deep breaths and exhaled slowly trying to center myself.

James hadn't killed himself because of me. It was an accident. It was a tragic, horrible accident. It wasn't caused by speeding. It wasn't a suicide. It wasn't caused by me. And with that realization, the weight of a thousand years fell away from my soul.

Closing my eyes I mentally thanked James. I thanked him for finding a way to tell me it wasn't my fault. I thanked him for the love he had shown me then and now. When I was finished, I felt one last soft touch upon my cheek and I knew James had heard me.

Then, he was gone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was a while later that I heard Albert and Betty talking with Jodi in the kitchen. I had been basking with my face turned towards the sun. With a lighter heart than I had felt since James' death I went to join them. Jodi immediately came over and enfolded me in a long hug. "Stella told me." She whispered in my ear. For the second time that day I returned a very welcome, warm hug from my sisters. We rocked back and forth as I melted under Jodi's hug.

We had agreed to try to send Henry and his siblings to heaven today. Betty and Albert thought it would be a good trial run for when we figured out how to get rid of Stuart's ghost. Betty and Albert had been doing séances with my Grandma Gertie for decades we now knew.

"Betty," I was stuffing my face with yet another biscuit, "why didn't you just tell us you and Albert did séances and stuff with Grandma? I mean, we've been talking to you for days about Stuart's ghost."

"I promised Gertie I wouldn't." Betty held up her crochet. "Do you think this looks big enough for a baby's head?" Stella reached over the table to take the half-finished cap.

"This is too small," Stella turned it over in her hands. "Maybe you can unravel part of it and start over?"

"Betty," I was getting impatient. "Why did you promise Grandma you wouldn't help us?"

Betty sighed, took the cap back from Stella and began unraveling its yarn before replying. "I would think that was obvious."

Albert who had been standing by the window surveying the yard turned around. "The whole point was that you had to figure it out for yourselves. Once you contacted me then I knew I could bring Betty in and we could help you from there."

"Told you Grandma was giving us a test." Stella muttered.

"Yeah, but so far she's been right." Jodi poked Stella in the arm. "Except about me anyway. I don't seem to have much of anything psychic."

"Oh, boo-hoo." Stella said mildly, "I'll trade you. You can talk to the ghosts instead of me."

Betty gathered her crochet and stuffed it in its bag. "Speaking of which it's time to get on with things."

"We still need Jennifer to show us where the horse thing is." I pointed out. "We can't send her to heaven yet."

Betty and Albert exchanged a look. Then Albert said, a little tartly I thought, "Are you girls not getting it yet? Gertie is helping you with clues. Jennifer gave you clue. You have to use your psychic skills to take it from there."

"Screw that," Jodi responded. "We can just ask the kid and save ourselves some time."

"Stella has already informed Jennifer neither she nor her brothers can help in your mission any more than they already have." Betty stated. Wow, I thought, this Betty knew how to play her cards. She knew Stella wanted the kids reunited with their parents as soon as possible and she also knew Stella wasn't keen on our mission in the first place.

Jodi looked accusingly at Stella. “You told them that?” Stella nodded. “Whose side are you on?” Jodi yelped.

“I’m on the kid’s side,” Stella was calm, “And I think Albert and Betty are right. If we want to get rid of Stuart’s ghost we have to do it the way Grandma wanted us to.”



## MIM

"But I don't want you to go." Mim wailed. She was sobbing and had flung herself face down on the parlor couch. Henry perched on the edge of the couch patting her back. His siblings, William and Jennifer, sat solemnly cross-legged on the floor.

"You were there for me when I wet my pants in first grade and when I didn't make the cheerleading squad and when Mallory passed mean notes about me and that time when I pulled off an Ollie on my skateboard." Mim was crying so hard her eyes were swollen and her nose was running.

"Maybe I can come visit," Henry said gently.

"You know you can't," Mim sobbed even harder.

"I don't know that," Henry soothed, "neither do you."

"It's probably a lot harder," Mim wailed. I came up behind Stella who had been watching Mim and Henry from the doorway. I said quietly. "We should get started." Stella nodded without taking her eyes off her daughter.

"Mim, I will always be your friend." Henry said. "But my sister and brother and I have been waiting here a very long time. If we have a chance to be with our parents we want to go." Mim's response was to jump off the couch and push past Stella and me.

Stopping in the hallway she turned back to her mother. "This is your fault. If you hadn't told Henry's parents what really happened the night of the fire Henry wouldn't want to go to heaven." Then she stormed up the stairs and slammed the door of her room directly above the parlor.

Stella leaned against the doorjamb and stared at the floor. I asked my sister softly, "How did you talk to Henry's parents?"

"I didn't, I don't know how." Stella confessed. "I just told Henry I did."

"Why would you do that?" I was astounded.

"Because I'm a parent." Stella replied with calm certainty. "And any parent knows what their child is or isn't capable of. I'm willing to bet that Henry's parents never believed he set a fire. They may not have known what really happened. But I promise you they never believed it was Henry's fault."

We were interrupted as the rest of our group arrived. Entering the parlor Albert and Betty instructed me and my sisters to sit at the round parlor table. Albert sat on one of the uncomfortable Eastlake antique chairs while Betty and John took a place on the couch.

"Just a second," Stella said. She went out into the hallway to the foot of the stairs. "Miriam," she called up the stairs. No response. "Miriam!" Stella was louder this time. Still no response. "Miriam please come say goodbye to Henry." Silence. "Please!" Stella implored.

“No!” Mim’s response thundered down the stairs. Stella came back into the room wiping tears from her eyes. She knelt in front of an empty space that I assumed was Henry. “She won’t come,” Stella said quietly. “But I know she loves you.” After a beat she stood up and took her place at the table with Jodi and me.

“Please join hands,” Albert said to us. We did as we were told. I squeezed Stella’s hand and she gave me a sad smile. Very softly, almost rhythmically, Betty began speaking. She told us that upon death a strong white light shines down upon the departed soul. Loved ones who have already passed stand at the other end of this light to guide the soul into heaven.

Sometimes, Betty continued, a soul is too frightened to enter this passageway. Or the soul loves someone so much on earth that soul can’t bear to leave. The white light eventually disappears. And without help and guidance the soul can’t get to heaven.

Betty then instructed my sisters and I to push all other thoughts out of our minds. We were to focus on creating the passageway for Henry and his siblings to enter heaven. Betty told us to imagine pulling down white light from heaven into the tops of our heads which was the Crown Chakra. Once we intuited and felt the white light stream into our head we were to allow the light to fill every inch of our body.

A silence ensued with only the sound of our breathing. “I think maybe I feel it.” Jodi whispered.

I opened one eye. “Shhh!” I focused hard on bringing the white light into my Crown Chakra. But I didn’t feel anything. More long moments passed before I felt Stella drop my hand.

“It’s not working.” Stella leaned back in her chair. “What are we doing wrong?”

“Something is interfering.” Albert said. “Stella, are you sure you want the kids to go to heaven?”

“Yes,” Stella was firm. “They need to be with their parents.”

“Someone is intentionally or unintentionally blocking the white light.” Betty said. My sisters and I looked at each other.

Then simultaneously we all looked up at the ceiling towards Mim’s bedroom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Henry told Stella he was going up to talk to Mim. He'd now been gone a long time. Long enough that John was playing Bloodthirsty Bunnies on his cell phone and Betty, Albert, Jodi and I were playing cards. Stella stood by the bay window staring out at nothing. Once in a while I saw her pat the air as though she was caressing a small head. Jennifer must be near her I thought.

John finally set his phone aside. "You know, the main objective here isn't to help the kids. It's to get rid of Stuart Carmen. You are losing time every second you are focused on something else."

"Maybe he's right," Jodi said reluctantly. I agreed faster than I should have. As much as I wanted to help the kids I didn't want to risk losing the inheritance of grandma's house. Inwardly I felt guilty that I would put my own needs ahead of some poor little kid ghosts. Then again, I consoled myself, they didn't have rent payments to make.

Stella turned from the window, "John's right. We should..." She stopped short. "Miriam?" Miriam stood at the doorway then entered the room slowly. Her eyes were red from crying.

"I talked to Henry." She took a deep breath. "He said I was being selfish."

Stella walked across the room and pulled her daughter close in a hug. Mim looked up at her mom. "I'm ready."

Albert and Betty vacated their chairs at the table. Betty then patted a place next to her on the couch and Mim joined her. I noticed that Betty reached over to take Mim's hand and squeezed it. Mim gently squeezed back and didn't let go. Stella told us that Henry, William and Jennifer were waiting by the parlor table. She smiled as she explained they were beyond excited to finally see their parents.

Stella, Jodi and I sat down at the table to once again join hands and close our eyes. Betty repeated her instruction about the white light. Again, nothing seemed to happen. We held hands for what seemed like an eternity, but I couldn't feel the white light as hard as I focused. I sensed my sisters couldn't either. It was Betty who finally told us to open our eyes. We dropped hands and I shook mine out.

"Something isn't working." Jodi complained. "Mim are you blocking us again?"

Mim shook her head. "I don't think so."

Albert turned to speak to Betty, "Maybe Gertie was wrong about those three." He jerked his head towards me and my sisters. Jeez, thanks, I thought. Nothing like a vote of confidence.

Betty paused to consider. "One of them could be lessening the power of the others." She mused.

Albert nodded slowly. "Maybe. Or maybe they just need a little extra fire power."

Betty shook her head. "I'm too old to do this anymore, Albert. You know how much it takes out of me."

“I didn’t mean you, Betty.” Albert pointed at Mim. “I meant her.” Mim, bewildered, looked back and forth between the elderly people. Then she looked at her mother.

“You don’t have to, Miriam.” Stella said with concern in her voice. “No one will blame you if you don’t.” Mim looked past the parlor table. She was listening to someone I assumed was Henry. She repeatedly shook her head ‘no’ and cast her eyes downward for many seconds. We waited in silence.

Slowly, Mim stood up from the couch and walked to the table. “Where do you want me?”

Stella smiled softly at her daughter and indicated the empty fourth chair. When Mim took her place our little family joined hands. Almost immediately I felt a strong zing of electricity. It traveled from my head down my shoulders and through my hands. I knew Stella felt it because she tightened her hold on my hand. I opened my eyes just in time to see Mim’s eyes jolt open. She felt it too. I smiled reassuringly at her and closed my eyes again.

This time I visualized the white light immediately and felt it’s beam through the top of my head. The others must have done likewise as Betty then intoned, “Now extend your white light away from your body until it joins with the white light of the others.”

I imagined my white light expanding across the table until my sisters, niece and I were completely engulfed in its glow. Tilting my face upwards, eyes still closed, I intuited that our powerful beam reached high into the sky. I saw two silhouetted figures standing at the end of the light corridor.

Albert, who had been silent until now, spoke to the kids. "Henry, William and Jennifer. The passageway has been opened. Please follow the light."

Not sure what was happening I kept my eyes closed and focused on keeping the beam strong. A moment passed then I saw three little silhouetted figures join the two taller ones. All of them disappeared into the brightness. Then, ever so briefly, one silhouette reappeared. It raised a brief hand before it disappeared completely.

"Goodbye, Henry." Mim whispered.



## MIM

A poke on the side of her face made Mim roll over in bed. After hours and hours, she had finally cried herself to sleep over the loss of her best friend. The poke came again now on her shoulder.

Mim, still sleeping, moved her hand once more to swat at it. When the poke happened again with a bit more force Mim opened her eyes. She couldn't see anything in the darkness. Picking up her phone she saw that it was five thirty in the morning. Dawn was just beginning to break.

Groaning she tossed her phone down next to her on the bed and flopped over to go back to sleep. Then she realized she had caught a glimpse of something odd and sat bolt upright.

"Took you long enough," the girl standing next to her bed said. "Come on, we've got to go."

Mim scrambled backwards across the bed away from the intruder until she hit the bedroom wall. Breathing hard she studied the girl. Once she got a grip on herself Mim decided the girl didn't seem particularly threatening. But, still, it was pretty rude to wake her up this way. "Who the hell are you?" Mim was pissed off. "I'm not about to go anywhere with some freak that just decides to show up in my bedroom."

"Henry sent me." The girl was moving towards the door. "I'm Kiki, short for Kathryn. Come on we don't have a lot of time."

Mim didn't budge. "Prove it was Henry who sent you." The girl spun on her heel to face Mim and put her hands on her hips. Mim could now make out in the dim light that she was a teenager probably about seventeen years old.

She wore white shorts that set off her tanned legs with a neon green t-shirt that said, Frankie Says Relax. Her blonde hair was half piled on top of her head in a teased up bunch with permed curls falling down below her shoulders.

The girl leaned against the door and folded her arms in exasperation. "Henry said you would say that." She pointed at Mim. "You are wearing a blue topaz ring he gave you." Mim curled her hands that were hidden under the bedcovers.

"When did he give it to me?" Mim demanded. "When you were biking and pulling him on his skateboard." The girl responded.

"Where did I do my first Ollie?" Mim demanded.

"I have no idea." The girl threw up her hands. "Get your butt out of bed and move!"

Mim scrambled out of bed, pulled on some jeans and a t-shirt, and followed the girl down the stairs. She rapid fired questions at the girl. "Why didn't Henry just come?"

"He can't. He crossed over. I'm still here so I can talk to you." The girl was hustling across the kitchen with Mim close behind her.

"Henry can talk to you but he can't talk to me?"

“Right. You don’t have the ability to talk to folks who have crossed over. Just to the ones stuck in the in-between.” The girl practically dragged Mim across the veranda.

“Where’s my mom?” Mim cried.

“She’s going to be fine but you’re not, if we don’t hurry.” Kiki picked up her pace even more.

“Speak less. Move more.”

Mim scrambled to keep up with her. The girl looked abruptly up at the sky then broke into a dead sprint. “Move! Or your ass will be grass just like mine was.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Far off in the house I heard a phone ring yet again. Pulling my pillow over my head I was irritated. Mim must have a lot of friends. Her distinctive ringtone had been sounding off and on for what seemed like hours now.

Her ringtone was the unmistakable opening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Dammit there it went again. Blindly I reached over to fish for my own phone on the bedside table.

I called Mim to tell her to turn her ringer off. Her phone rang both in my ear and somewhere else in the house. Her voicemail picked up. "Hi, it's Mim. You know what to do at the beep." She must be on the phone with someone else. At this point I figured I might as well get up. Glancing back at my phone I saw it was 8:10 a.m. Damn that kid and her infernal phone.

Wrapping myself in my robe I went out in the hallway to get to the bathroom. Mim's ringtone sounded yet again and I looked upwards. The sound was coming from the third floor. I hadn't dared go back up those stairs since Stuart's ghost had pushed Stella down them.

Standing at the foot of the stairs to the third floor I shivered suddenly. It felt thirty degrees colder than just a few feet away.

I walked in and out of the cold spot. The chill was definitely only in one isolated place. Inexplicably I felt terrified. I dialed Mim's number again. Again her phone rang from far upstairs with no response. "Mim?" My voice quaked as I called up the stairs. "Mim, are you up there?"

Mim did not answer my shout or her phone. Common sense would say I should just march upstairs and find her. Instead I fled all the way down the hallway then thundered down the stairs to the first floor through the living room and burst into the kitchen. John and Jodi looked startled at my entrance.

"Mim's cell phone is ringing!" I gasped with fear in my voice. When they continued staring at me from their places at the table I realized how crazy that statement sounded. I sank down in a chair at the table and told them what had just happened. I finished with "Why would she be up there? And if she is, why isn't she answering her phone?"

"Where's Stella?" Jodi asked. "Mim is probably with her." She had barely finished her sentence before I was hustling back upstairs. Bursting into Stella's room I found it empty. Her cell phone lay in the middle of her neatly made bed. I yelled down the stairs for John and Jodi to join me.

"See, see, I told you!" I said as they entered Stella's room. I pointed to Stella's phone. "Why would Stella leave her phone? And why is Mim's phone in some weird place upstairs?"

"What kid doesn't have their phone attached to them at all times?" Jodi shivered, "And if they went somewhere they would have told us."

A few minutes later we stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to the third floor. “Wow, you weren’t kidding Frances.” Jodi wrapped her arms around herself, “It’s freezing right here.”

“That’s a sign of an otherworldly presence in the house.” John stated. At Jodi’s incredulous look he added, “I’ve been studying.”

“Why the hell would a ghost cause a cold spot? Don’t they have anything better to do?” Jodi strained up on her tiptoes to hold her hand to a ceiling vent. “It’s not on.” She looked around the hallway but there were no windows to speak of to cause a draft.

Mim’s phone rang again from above us. John, Jodi and I crept up the stairs like we were trying to sneak up on an ax murderer. Jodi led the way. At the top landing she took a deep breath and opened the door to the pink parlor. As with Stella and me the last time, we had to take a few steps back so the door could swing out over the stairs. Cautiously we all entered the room. By now the phone had stopped ringing.

“Call the phone again.” Jodi whispered to me. I’m not sure whom she thought might overhear her and I didn’t want to know. I hit re-dial on my own phone and we heard it ring.

John looked up at the ceiling. “The phone is in the cupola.” He walked out into the hallway and scanned the ceiling. Seeing what he was looking for he strode to the end of the hall, grabbed a cord that was wrapped on a cleat mounted to the wall, and pulled. The ladder that led to the cupola descended from the ceiling.

There was no way Mim would know about that kind of ladder, I thought. Jodi must have been thinking the same thing. "I'll go." With my palms sweating and heart pounding I climbed the ladder. A warm breeze rushed down at me from the cupola's wind vents. Sticking my head up into the floor opening was the scariest part.

But no one or anything attacked me and upon nervously scanning the tiny space I saw the little room was empty save for the piles of dried leaves and dirt that had blown in through the vents. The tiny cupola had a rough wooden floor. Its sides were constructed of exposed, ancient boards with the slats opening outwards about halfway up to the roof as air vents. The ceiling was a pyramid shape made of the same wood.

In a corner I saw Mim's pink cell phone half buried in the dead leaves. Hoisting myself up and into the cupola I walked over to pick it up. Just as I was about to touch the phone Beethoven's Ninth Symphony rang out.

I screamed and backed away from it until I hit the opposite wall. Then with adrenaline pumping I leapt down the ladder, missing several rungs, ran past Jodi and John and just kept going.

Vaguely I thought I heard someone running after me. Once I was outside I stopped, bent over with my hands on my knees, to catch my breath. Jodi stopped next to me and patted my back. "My God, Frances! What was up there?"

"Her phone! It started ringing just as I was about to pick it up!"

Jodi stared up at the now menacing cupola from her place on the lawn. “Where the hell are Mim and Stella? And where’s John?”

One question was answered a few minutes later when John came out of the open front door to join us on the lawn. He had something in his hand. “How did you get that?” I pointed at Mim’s cell phone.

“After you and Jodi ran screaming like maniacs, I went up there and got it.” John said simply.

“Weren’t you scared?” Jodi’s voice quavered.

“Yes. But logically Frances hadn’t screamed until the phone rang. So it was doubtful anyone else was up there.” John was studying the phone until Jodi snatched it away from him. “Her call log says someone called seventeen times since this morning. That number just says, ‘Unknown Caller’.” Jodi scrolled further.

“Then there are a couple of calls from Frances.”

“What do you mean?” John asked out of the blue.

Jodi stared at him. “What do you mean, what do I mean?”

John furrowed his brow, “You just said that we might need sage and lavender.”

“No I didn’t.” Jodi regarded him curiously.

John pulled at his ear. “That’s so weird. But I’ve had all this popping and pressure in my ears lately. It’s screwing up my hearing.” He then started when he glanced over at the fence line. The oleander bushes



towered over us and had grown at least six feet overnight. They were now easily ten feet high. “Damn it. I bet they grew through the front gate and lock again. I have to call that lawn guy and hope he can get out here.” He started to pull out his own cell phone when Jodi gasped.

With a trembling hand she held out Mim’s phone to show us several recent photos. They were all taken at Grandma Gertie’s house. Various photos showed Mim sleeping in her bedroom. Some photos were of Mim out on the broad lawn with Bear Lake behind her. Those appeared to have been taken from high up in the cupola.

“Did you take these photos of her?” I looked at Jodi. She mutely shook her head as she shivered involuntarily in the bright sunshine.

Slowly I came to a conclusion. “Mim and Stella are in real danger.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“We need to call the police.” Jodi’s voice quavered.

“What are we going to tell them?” John snapped in an unusual manner. “That a ghost took Mim? And Stella while he was at it?”

“No,” Jodi was crying now, “But what if something bad happened to Stella and Mim that has nothing to do with all of this? Like they were kidnapped? Or hit by a car?”

As this made sense and actually gave me something constructive to do I volunteered to contact the one hospital in the area. I called Mercy Hospital and after getting transferred around a bit discovered that no unidentified teenager or adult had been admitted to the hospital nor was anyone named Miriam or Stella.

With that option exhausted I did call the police. They were now on the way to the house. When John trudged back across the lawn from searching the ancient boathouse Jodi and I looked out at him hopefully but he shook his head.

“I think,” I hesitated as I stood out on the lawn facing John and Jodi, “we have to call Stella’s husband. He needs to know they are missing.”

I tried to look up Ashland’s number but both Stella and Mim’s phones were locked with a passcode. After a few attempts using birthday combinations I gave up. “How am I supposed to call him?” Frustrated I shoved Mim’s phone in my back pocket. “Neither one of us has his number either.”

“I don’t feel right. I’m going to meditate.” Jodi called over her shoulder as she rounded the corner of the house and crossed over the wide side lawn.

“Oh that’s freaking helpful!” I yelled sarcastically after her. When she turned around to look at me reproachfully, I felt bad. “I’m sorry! I’m just nervous.” Jodi nodded, put her hands together in a prayer, and bowed slightly.

As I was climbing the steps to the veranda I turned to look back. Jodi was now sitting cross-legged in the lotus position out on the lawn. The backs of her hands rested on her knees loosely cupped open. I’m sure it was no coincidence that she had chosen the exact intersection of the two Ley Lines as her meditation spot.

John was furiously stirring something in a mixing bowl when I walked in. Cooking seemed to be his stress outlet. “Did you get ahold of Stella’s husband?” He asked. I explained that I couldn’t find his phone number. John stopped his stirring.

“Tonight is the sixth night of the deadline your grandmother set for us. I mean, you guys. By 9:48 a.m. tomorrow your inheritance goes to the Muskegon Museum of Art. We have limited time to find him.” John ferociously stirred a pot on the stove. Then he shouted, “Stuart knows that if you and Jodi don’t have Stella then you can’t get rid of him.”

“Why are you yelling?” I asked quietly.

“Because,” John turned away with his hands clasped now on the back of his head, “because I’ve been hearing these voices and I think I’m going crazy!” I sat down at the kitchen table and gestured for John to

join me. Reluctantly he sat down. I grasped his hands.

“John, has this ever happened before?” Best to be careful here. For all I knew the guy was a schizophrenic who heard voices every day.

“No, no, never before a couple of days ago!” John was beside himself. He closed his eyes, lowered his head, and seemed to be trying to get himself together. I kept silent. A moment later he raised his head and spoke more calmly. “There’s this whole conversation I can hear. Like there’s a TV on somewhere but there’s not. It’s in my head. And I don’t know how to turn it off.”

Jodi entered the kitchen took one look at John and asked, “What happened?”

“I’m hearing voices.” John said miserably. Jodi furrowed her brow in concern then yanked a chair out to sit at the table with us.

“Jodi,” I said while still hanging on to John’s hands, “look up his symptoms and see if you can find out what it is.” Jodi dutifully flipped open her computer.

I turned back to John. “You aren’t nuts, at least not on this front. People can suddenly develop psychic abilities for a lot of reasons. I mean, look at Stella.

John sighed heavily then stood up. “My orange glaze will be ruined if I don’t stir it every few minutes.” He crossed over to the stove and as he began to stir, I saw his shoulders visibly relax from being hunched up around his shoulders.

Jodi was peering at her computer screen. “I think it’s clairaudience.” She read aloud. “A Clairaudient is defined as somebody who can hear sounds that are different than an ordinary experience such as hearing voices of dead people.”

I eyed John. He didn’t turn from the stove. Jodi continued, “Or if you want to go old school with the ever reliable Miriam-Webster, the dictionary definition is, “...the power or faculty of hearing something not present to the ear but regarded as having an objective reality.” Jodi leaned back in her chair. “That seems like a complicated way to say some people hear other people talking in their heads but they aren’t a nutter-butter.”

“I’m not turning crazy?” John asked hopefully.

“I won’t go that far,” Jodi gave a smile that John did not return, “it’s just that there might be another explanation.” After pulling Grandma’s encyclopedia towards me across the table I ran my finger down the table of contents then flipped to the correct page.

“Grandma says that clairaudience can be when a dead person is trying to tell a live person something important. John,” I leaned back in my chair, “have you asked these voices who they are?”

John rapped the spoon more sharply than needed on the edge of the saucepan. “Of course not. It’s not like I want to hold a conversation with them. Besides I only hear a full sentence once in a while.”

“Maybe you’ve become a medium.” I said. “I saw a TV show with a medium and he said that he heard voices all the time until he learned how to shut them out when he didn’t want to hear them.”

“I don’t want to hear or talk to dead people, period.” John said flatly as he took the saucepan off the hot burner. “If you want to be helpful maybe you could try and remember how that guy figured out how to shut the voices off.”

“Do you hear that?” Jodi tilted her head. We all stopped to listen. A muted voice from outside was shouting to be let in.

“Thank God,” John muttered “You heard that too.”

“That’s the cops,” I explained, “I called them.” The three of us trooped out the front door and down the walkway.

“North Muskegon Police,” came a voice from the other side of the oleander covered gate.

“Yeah, this is going to take a minute.” John replied as he wrapped his dishtowel around his hands for protection while yanking at branches.

“What’s going on with these bushes? The whole town is talking about them.” The officer stated. “You should call Don Stamford to clear this out.” By now John had a patch cleared so that we could see the police officer’s face. John finally yanked the gate open and the police officer introduced himself. “I’m Officer Dour.”

“Where’s Marv Anderson?” Jodi asked.

“He retired years ago.” The officer said as we walked back to the house. In the kitchen I explained that our sister and niece had been missing for, we figured, about fifteen hours.

While asking questions the cop wandered around the kitchen. “Is there anyone they would have gone to visit?”

“No,” I said. “We aren’t from here.”

“Yeah, I heard,” The cop paused to look back at his notes, “Miriam came here by herself from Colorado.” Officer Dour looked at us intently. “That’s usually called running away. There’s a chance she ran away again.”

“Mim didn’t run away. She ran to us.” I pointed out. “And Stella knows we have a deadline to get rid of...um, stuff here.”

Officer Dour tilted his head at my hesitation. “Get rid of what kind of stuff?”

“Stuart.” Jodi piped up, “He’s a ghost. We have to get rid of him or we don’t inherit the house.”

There was a long silence at the table. Officer Dour flipped his notebook shut and methodically set his pen down on top of it. “Gertie put you up to doing that, huh?” He chuckled.

“Sounds like her. Nice lady but a little south of being all-there.” He tapped his temple. Then he gestured towards the coffee pot. “Getta a cup, here?” I rose and poured him coffee while he spoke. “There have been rumors about a ghost in this house for going on decades.”

I prayed Jodi would keep mum about grandma Gertie murdering Stuart. It would be just like her. I shot her a warning glance as she started to open her mouth. Thankfully, getting the message, she closed it again. Officer Dour continued, “It’s all nonsense.” He chuckled. “Folks, we’ll do what we can. The thing is, it appears the mother and daughter are together. Therefore, they aren’t exactly missing. Let’s give it a few more hours and see if they turn up.”

The lights in the kitchen flickered slightly but the cop didn't seem to notice. "Don't listen to all that gossip. Sure, go ahead and do your ghost thing if that's what Gertie wanted. But there's nothing more dangerous in this house than dry rot." The lights flickered again. "See, now look at that." The cop sipped his coffee. "You probably think the ghost just did that to the lights instead of the old electrical wiring."

Just as he finished speaking the light bulb directly over the table exploded with a ferocious blaze of electrical sparks. Shards of glass rained down on us. Jodi and John jumped up to cower near the kitchen counter. I stumbled and knocked over my chair scrambling to get out of the way.

Oddly Officer Dour hadn't reacted at all. We stared at him still sitting at the table. He wildly held our stare with his own. He couldn't seem to move. His mouth gaped open as if to speak but no words came out. His chair was slowly being tilted back on its rear legs by an unseen force.

The chair then stopped and hovered at a steep angle for a full five seconds. Officer Dour was tilted backwards just inches off the floor. Then the chair abruptly fell crashing the policeman down to the linoleum and shattering the chair's ladder back.

I gasped in horror. John ran to help the cop who was struggling to get to his feet amidst the broken pieces of wood. "Are you alright?" John asked the man. He was now bent over breathing heavily with his hands on his knees.



“God Almighty,” he managed to get out. “God Almighty, what the hell happened? I couldn’t move. It’s like some... some *thing* had me paralyzed while it was tipping me...” He trailed off trying to gather himself together. Finally with shaking hands he gathered up his notebook and pen from the table. He paused to look down at its remains lying on the floor. “I’m real sorry about the chair.”

We led him towards the front door. By the time we got there, Officer Dour had convinced himself that he had tipped over backwards in the chair at his own reaction to the shattering of the light bulb. “Best get that electrical checked out.” He said weakly as he departed.

He hustled down the front path. When he arrived at the front gate, unmindful of his bare hands, he ferociously pulled at the oleander branches that had grown back through the hinges and lock. With the gate finally free he fled to his cop car and roared away.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Shaken Jodi, John and I sat side by side on the front porch steps. We were reluctant to go back inside. For long moments none of us spoke. John put his arms around each of us. "They're fine. We'll find them." We still didn't say anything. "Should we go back in the house?" John tried again.

"That's the last place I want to go." I muttered with my chin on my knees and my arms wrapped firmly around my shins.

Abruptly Jodi said, "I feel this weird terror inside me. Does anyone else feel that way?"

"No shit, Jodi, I think we're all scared." John gave a wry smile.

"No, like seriously terrified. Like trembling, middle of the night, a-stranger-is-in-the-house scared."

"No." I looked at her curiously. "Mostly I'm scared like I don't want to go back in that house. But it's not like what you describe."

"I've been feeling this way for a whole day now." Jodi turned to me, "I can't lose the feeling. Sometimes it gets weaker but then inexplicably it just hits me really hard all over again. It almost feels like it's not my fear."

"I have no idea of what you mean by that," John said. "How could it not be your fear that you're feeling?"

"I don't know," Jodi moaned. "I just feel really weird."

“Has this ever happened before?” I mumbled from my hunched over position.

“Not usually. But it hits when I’m in crowds of people. It could be happiness or confusion or anger or kind of any emotion.” Jodi was breathing heavily now. “I’ll be perfectly fine then I’ll feel some bizarre anger or weird laughter come over me for no reason. This time it’s fear and it’s really intense. It’s beyond anything I’ve ever experienced.”

John was already flipping through Grandma’s handwritten encyclopedia. With his finger tracing down each page he read quickly. Closing the book he shook his head, “I looked fast but I don’t see anything that explains this.”

“We don’t have much time,” I pleaded. “Jodi’s emotion must be a clue.” Jodi’s response was to suddenly bolt into the house. John and I raced back into the house after her. Slamming the heavy wooden door behind us we saw Jodi in the hall, leaning over with her hand to her chest and breathing heavily. After a pause she looked up. “It’s gone. Well, not gone. But it’s a lot less powerful.”

“What is?” I was bewildered.

“The feeling. The feeling of terror. Have you not been listening to me?” Jodi snapped. I realized just how scared Jodi must be. Jodi rarely if ever snapped at me or anyone.

Softly I said, “We’ll figure it out, Jodi. Just hang in there.”

John grasped each of us firmly by the elbow and propelled us around the shattered glass and splintered wood near the kitchen table towards the side veranda. "It's a mess in here, go out there while I sweep up." Jodie and I stepped to go outside.

"God! It's back again!" Jodi swatted at her head like she could pound the feeling out of her brain. Then she grabbed my hand in a white knuckle grasp. "I'm so scared. I'm so scared." She repeated wildly.

"Jodi," I lay my free hand on the side of her face. "Jodi, take a deep breath." Jodi obeyed. "Now breath it out slowly," I instructed. "Everything will be all right." I didn't know if everything would be all right but it was the best I could come up with. Jodi exhaled slowly. Then she scrunched down in her chair cowering like a little girl. Something dawned on me. "Jodi, you said the feeling of fear went away once we got into the house. But it's back now that we are outside again."

Jodi stared at me wide-eyed then as realization dawned on her. Leaving the screen door rattling behind her she ran back into the house. Following her into the kitchen, I found her with her back pressed hard against a wall breathing heavily. "The feeling of terror is much less in here."

"Jodi?" John was still holding the broom and dustpan. He set the items down to stride over to her. "Jodi, are you ok?" When Jodi didn't respond John enfolded her in a hug and Jodi hung on to him. "You're safe, Jodi," I heard John murmur to my sister. "I'll make sure you're safe."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I paced the kitchen. “Jodi, do you think you feel more fear the closer you get to something?” Jodi looked at me, puzzled. “You know, like that kids game of you’re getting colder or you’re getting warmer, warmer, hot.” I asked.

“Maybe,” Jodi said doubtfully.

“Let’s go outside and try it.”

“Why would I want to find something terrifying?” Jodi countered.

“Because it might help us find Stella and Mim.”

I marched to the light switches by the screen door and flipped on the outside lights.

“I don’t want to do this in the dark.” Jodi shied away from the door.

“I just turned on the flood lights,” I said reasonably. “We’ll be fine.” we gathered outside.

Standing in the middle of the lawn Jodi shivered. “The terror is definitely back.”

“Take a few steps in different directions and see if it’s stronger anywhere.” John said tentatively.

Jodi dutifully did so. Then she stopped, “I don’t know! It all just feels like one terrible feeling.”

The lawn was lit with bright artificial light. But its shine fell off into blackness near the oleander bushes. It didn’t matter that I knew this was a very safe town. I feared something that was a supernatural being not a real person. I left them and walked further down the lawn towards the lake. I stared into the darkness. Something was moving.

Suddenly the oleander bushes reared up towards the night sky and then dipped to stretch fingerlike branches towards me almost touching my face.

Instinctively I backed up several steps until I tripped and fell down on my rear. From my prone position I blinked several times and the illusion—if it was an illusion—receded just as quickly as it had started. The branches sucked back to the fence line.

I looked over my shoulder but Jodi and John hadn't noticed. Trembling, I hurried to cross the lawn to join them. "Jodi, try standing where the Ley Lines cross." I heard John instruct. "Then turn in a circle slowly so you face all points of the compass."

As she moved to the intersection of the Ley Lines I could see she was very pale and sweat beads had formed on her upper lip. She began to slowly turn as John told her. "Is the feeling stronger when you are facing any particular direction? Focus, Jodi, focus." John said in a commanding tone I hadn't heard from him before. Jodi shut her eyes as she turned slowly in a circle. "Try tuning it in like you would a radio dial." John commanded.

John and I watched her as she stopped, seemingly sensing something, then continued her circular path. Then, she stopped again and retraced her steps. She subtly moved inches left then right then left again. Then she opened her eyes and pointed. "Over there." She pointed at the carriage house. Without warning, she staggered forward and collapsed in a heap, unconscious.

“Jodi!” John shouted and ran to kneel at her side. He cradled her head as I picked up her wrist and felt for a pulse. Her pulse was beating as fast as hummingbird wings.

“Should I call 911?” I asked.

“No, I think she’s coming around.” John said just as Jodi groaned and opened her eyes. She tried to sit up.

“Easy, don’t try to get up yet.” John soothed. She lay back on the ground and looked into John’s eyes.

“Did I find anything?” She asked weakly. “Maybe.” I said softly. I left her in John’s care, who was helping Jodi into the house, as I ran to find tools for my mission.

Under the kitchen sink I found a pair of yellow rubber gloves. After I shut the cabinet door I paused. Then I reopened it and grabbed the spray can of ant poison. In the hall closet I reached up and pulled the big Sears flashlight off the shelf where it had always resided. Last I searched through the kitchen junk drawers until I found what I wanted. A lighter.

I strode down the veranda stairs and across the lawn hoping I showed a lot more confidence than I felt. I’m not sure to whom or what I was trying to show confidence to, but my stomach was churning.

I stood at the intersection of the Ley Lines just as Jodi had. It was the identical spot where James and the butterflies had visited me just a few nights before. Now, it seemed years ago.

Facing the direction that Jodi had pointed I took in what was in front of me. There was, of course, the old carriage house. Beyond that, was the wrought iron fence where the oleanders grew. And further beyond that were the steps down to the beach and Bear Lake.

Imitating Jodi I raised my arm and pointed towards where she had pointed. Had I drawn a straight line from my finger to the next object in front of me it would be the far, right hand side of the carriage house.

Resolutely I marched along my imaginary line until I reached the wall of the carriage house. Clicking on the flashlight I ran the beam along the rough brick wall. There was nothing of note. Damn. I was going to have to go inside. Taking a deep breath I approached the wooden door. The metal doorknob was shaped like a screaming gargoye head.

Nice. That's all I needed to further creep me out right now. As I had expected I saw that young tendrils of the oleander bush had newly intertwined themselves through the keyhole and around the handle. After yanking on the yellow kitchen gloves I gingerly poked at one of the oleander tendrils with my forefinger. It recoiled from my touch like it was alive. Startled, I recoiled back as well.

Pulling the collar of my t-shirt up over my nose I reached into my pocket and pulled out the lighter. Then I picked up the can of ant spray poison from where I'd left it on the ground.



Flicking the lighter I held the flame up in front of the spray can nozzle. Holding my breath I depressed the nozzle. Immediately I had a blowtorch of flaming poison. As I aimed the flame at the oleander tendrils some seared and went up in smoke while other retreated from the flame back inside the keyhole from which it grew. Turning my head I avoided as much of the oleander smoke and ant poison mist as I could.

With my lungs exploding I finally dropped everything and ran several yards away where I exhaled and breathed fresh air in deeply. After waiting a few moments for the air to clear near the carriage door, I approached.

Without the oleander branches threaded through the mechanism the knob turned easily. I put my shoulder to the door to shove it open. My hand shook noticeably as I shone the flashlight ahead of me and stepped inside. The wooden floor was covered in a layer of dirt and dust. A spider web wrapped itself around my head. Brushing wildly at my face I nearly dropped the flashlight.

Nothing unusual seemed to be inside. I thought about the imaginary line from where both Jodi and I had pointed. If the line had gone through the wall it would have ended up...where? I turned the flashlight to the opposite wall. It was just an empty space save for a couple of old gardening tools leaning in the corner. Maybe the imaginary line went through the carriage house and led beyond it.

Exiting the building I made my way around to the back fighting through overgrown oleander bushes. Without warning, I stumbled and fell heavily over something lying in my path. Landing in the moist dirt and grass on my hands and knees the flashlight flew from my hands. It rolled crazily but it revealed what I had tripped over. Stella lay prone in the dirt. Her clothes were cut and torn and her face was dead white.

Oleander branches wrapped around her body tightly cutting into her skin. I crawled over to her body. Her lips were blue and she didn't respond to me. "Stella! Wake up! Please wake up!" I sobbed as I touched her face. Frantically I dialed John. The call didn't go through. There was no signal.

Scrambling to my feet I ran as hard and fast as I could back to the house.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Stella now lay on the couch. John and I had worked frantically to untwine the oleander branches wrapped around her. Clear headed John had had the presence of mind to bring a serrated kitchen knife with him. Sawing through the vines he tore the vines from her body. He hoisted her up under her arms as I took her ankles and we lugged her across the lawn. Several times we lost strength and dropped her on her butt. Struggling we eventually got her up the porch stairs.

Once in the house I stripped Stella of her clothes and, with a bowl of hot water, soap and dishtowels I grabbed from the kitchen, I washed the poisonous oleander sap off her. John ran to get fresh clothes and returned with my ancient Michigan State University t-shirt and a pair of shorts. Stella's own formerly cream colored t-shirt and white shorts were in a crumpled dirt and grass stained heap on the floor.

"I don't know where Jodi is," John said with concern. He stood with his back to us as I dressed a limp Stella.

I struggled to pull the t-shirt over Stella's head. "I texted her that we had found Stella when we were out on the lawn. But there's not great cell service out there. I think she's out looking for Mim."

When I was finished dressing Stella, I told John he could turn back around. He and I stared down at Stella on the couch. She seemed to be breathing normally. "Is she going to be alright?" I clutched my arms across my chest and ran my hands up and down my forearms.

“She seems stable.” John said. “But maybe we should take her to the hospital.”

I cocked my head. “Her color is coming back. I’ll stay with her. You go find Jodi.”

John headed for the door then abruptly turned around with the door half open. “How did Jodi point you in the direction of Stella?”

“She’s an empath, John.” I explained. “Empaths are very finely tuned when it comes other people’s emotional state of being. They absorb those emotions. Jodi felt Stella’s fear.”

“And you know this, how?”

“Not from grandma. I don’t think she talked about this.” I replied. I hadn’t heard about empaths from some tattoo’d hippie chick who sold crystals on the Venice Beach boardwalk. A very down to earth businessman had told me that he was an empath. He had explained how he didn’t understand how he could be feeling fine one second and then suddenly feel irrationally angry or sad the next. One day he ran across an article on empaths and realized he was absorbing other people’s emotions.

Something struck me and I asked him. “Why were you suddenly Mr. Take Charge when you were talking to Jodi out on the lawn?”

John considered before he spoke. “The voices in my head until that moment were a jumble like when you’re at a big party and everybody is talking at once. Then one voice cut through loud and clear. She told me how to instruct Jodi.”

I sat up. “Was it grandma Gertie?”

"I don't know." John still had his hand on the doorknob. "But this voice was pushy. She kept yelling in my ear for me to be more forceful with what I was telling Jodi.

I almost smiled. "That's grandma Gertie."

"I guess you sisters come by it honestly then."

John said. The old grandfather clock ticked away in the corner. I studied its familiar dial from where I sat. Painted on its face was a whaler ship in a gale force storm. Battling a giant wave the ship heaved on its side.

"Did you wind the clock?" I asked John curiously.

He glanced over at the clock. "No. Why?"

I felt a shiver run through me as I looked back over at the grandfather clock. "Because when we got here I noticed it wasn't running."

John's mind was elsewhere. "Stella or Jodi wound it then." He then left to go look for Jodi. Walking over to the wall I studied the clock. I knew my sisters hadn't wound the clock because I hadn't been able to find the key. I ran my finger over the glass door that protected the clock's round face. The little hand was on the two and the big hand was on the five. It was two-twenty-five in the morning.

Stella stirred slightly on the couch behind me. She still looked frail but some color was returning to her cheeks. The afghan had slipped off her a bit and I moved to pull it back over her. Unexpectedly Stella's eyes opened and she tried to speak. A glass of water was ready on the side table and I held it up to her lips. Weakly she brought up a hand to help hold the glass as she drank. "Try to sleep," I urged "you've been through a lot."

“Did you find Miriam?” She asked.

“Not yet, but we will.” I told her with more conviction than I felt. “Jodi and John are out looking.”

Stella was silent for a long moment. “How much time do we have left?” She then said with more strength than I thought she had.

“Until Stuart has to be gone?” I glanced up at the clock and gave a start. Goose bumps ran up and down my arms raising the hair. The hands had inexplicably turned to nine forty-eight.

That was the exact time that we needed to complete our task by. Stuart was toying with us by moving the clock’s hands. I felt an inner fury build inside of me. This spirit or ghost or whatever anyone wanted to call him had taken Mim and Stella. He was terrifying my family. Now he was taunting us.

“We have until morning.” I said slowly in response to Stella’s question.

Stella struggled to sit upright. “Then we have to get moving.”

“Stella, you’re not in any shape to—” I started but Stella cut me off.

“To what? To save my daughter? To take down the horrible being that just held me captive, paralyzed and terrified?” Stella cried. Then Stella swung her legs over the side of the couch with determination in her eyes.

“Get Jodi and John and let’s do this.” She was firm. “It might be the only way to get Miriam back.”

“Stella!” Jodi’s voice came from the doorway to the parlor. “Oh my God! You’re ok!” She came in followed by John.

“Did you find Miriam?” Stella demanded. Jodi crossed the room to sit gingerly on the edge of the couch next to Stella.

Jodi’s grasped her older sister’s hand, “No, Stel. But we will.” Then Jodi asked the question we all had been wondering. “Stella, what happened to you?” Stella took a deep breath then her story poured out quickly. She had been asleep in her bedroom when she woke up hearing Miriam call out to her. She followed the sound her child’s voice. Mim was crying out ‘Mommy, mommy! Help me, Mommy!’

Panicked, Stella found herself outside. Mim was crying out near the oleander bushes on the far side of the carriage house. Pushing the branches upwards hoping to find Mim underneath, she had only found Miriam’s cellphone. The cellphone was chirping away with her daughter’s voice but when Stella tried to talk to Miriam she only got silence. Stella said that was the last thing she remembered for quite a while.

She stopped to take a drink of water. Droplets of sweat trickled down the side of her face even though it was a cool night. Then Stella went on to tell us that when she finally came-to she was paralyzed and bound tightly by the oleander branches. The big bushes hid her from view. I thought about how many times we must have walked right by her in our search.

“Why didn’t you call out?” Jodi rubbed Stella’s hands.

“I couldn’t.” Stella stifled a sob. “I tried to, but no sound came out. I couldn’t move my arms or legs. It was horrible. I was so scared.”

“I know,” Jodi said gently “I felt your terror.”

“I must have gone in and out of consciousness.” Stella continued while giving an involuntary shiver. “I remember the branches suddenly let go and they pushed me forward dumping me on the ground. Some were still wound around me but I was too weak to get them off.”

“That must be right before I found you.” I said. Inwardly I was wondering if when Jodi, earlier out on the lawn, pointed in Stella’s direction it had somehow broken Stuart’s power. “Why did the branches release you?”

Stella abruptly threw the blanket off her lap and stood up. “To take Miriam instead. The branches must not have had enough power to hold two of us.

We’re going to find her. Then we’re going to send that motherfucker Stuart to hell.” She marched out of the room yelling back to us, “Who put me in this fucking ugly t-shirt? I’m going to change.”

John, Jodi and I sat in silence. Then, it was Jodi who said out loud what we were all thinking.

“Stella just cussed.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

With no better ideas of how to find Mim we followed our one last clue in the hopes it would lead us to her. We had to find the horse on the side of the house. The four of us trooped outside and split up. John and Jodi took the far side. Stella and I trudged along the brick four-story behemoth scanning the wall up and down. The exterior of the house was mostly row upon row of neat, red brick so it wasn't hard to quickly search. Nothing even vaguely resembled a horse.

Aiming her flashlight upwards Stella pointed to the cupola. "Is that anything?" She indicated a white pattern with the beam of the flashlight.

I looked up, "No, that's just some stain." We met up with Jodi and John at the back of the house. They hadn't had any luck either.

"We shouldn't have sent the kids back without getting more information," Jodi moaned. "I mean, all we got from Jennifer was that it was on the side of the house. It's obviously not here."

Stella didn't seem to be listening. The sky was just beginning to lighten with the first glimmers of a new day as she gazed out over the darkened lawn.

"Maybe it's not this house," Stella said back to us over her shoulder, "maybe it's that house." We looked to where she was pointing. It was the carriage house. Covered with oleander and ivy from its foundation to roof I hadn't even been able to tell if the

carriage house was made of brick or wood when I first arrived.

We made our way to the two-story building. As we circled the carriage house John attempted to pull some foliage off a wall but the tiny hooks of the ivy and oleander plants were deeply embedded in the brick. The plants had claimed this place for at least a hundred years and they weren't going to let go easily now.

"I saw some garden tools inside the carriage house," I said. "I'll get them." As I rounded the corner to get to the door, light was beginning to break over the horizon. It must be around five a.m. I thought. Four hours and forty-eight minutes left.

This whole exercise had long ago ceased to be about selling the house and getting money. I was in a fury that Stuart's ghost had Mim. I was beyond angry at what he had done to me and my sisters. His ghost absolutely must be exorcized forever.

The carriage house door miraculously wasn't covered with oleander branches but it was stuck again. I bounced my shoulder off it a few times and finally got it wedged open. As I had remembered several gardening tools were leaning in the corner. I grabbed as many as I could carry and made my way back to the group.

Stella wanted to help but we were worried she was still too weak. She sat cross-legged on the grass a few feet away watching us. I handed John a hacksaw and Jodi some hedge clippers. Grabbing a long handled, three prong hoe I dug in between the wall and the ivy to try to tear the branches away.

Stella's eyes fell on the hoe. Madly she began crabbing backwards on her butt away from it. "Stel! Stel, what's wrong?" I cried. Stella was whimpering and I knelt down next to her to hug her. Brushing her hair out of her eyes I held her face between my hands. "Stella, what's wrong."

Stammering, Stella said "Where did that come from?" Puzzled I turned to look at the garden tool. It was just a plain old, ordinary cultivating hoe. "I got it out of the carriage house." Stella was shaking.

"I'm sorry. I'm fine." She attempted to brush a strand of her hair off her face. "I don't know what came over me."

Jodi's sudden shout of triumph drew our attention. She and John had uncovered something. With my hand under Stella's elbow to support her we joined them. Jodi had revealed a white round stone set into the brick wall. Carved into the medallion was the image of a wild, running horse. Its' mane spilled and flowed. The rising sun sent shafts of light directly across the marble carving.

We had discovered the place that Grandma had wanted us to find.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jodi began running her fingers along the medallion's edge where the stone met the brick. "What are you doing?" I watched her curiously as she pressed on the stone eyeball of one of the horses.

"There must be a hidden compartment or something." Jodi grunted as she lifted on her tiptoes to reach the top of the medallion's edge. We lost precious time and our fingers became raw and bloody while searching the stone carving for a hidden button or spring or lever that would lead to a secret compartment. We even resorted to pulling at the large square stone to see if we could bodily move it out of the house's brick wall. It didn't budge and we finally collapsed, panting, onto the lawn.

"John why can't you just ask grandma what to do?" Jodi moaned.

"I've tried!" John exclaimed. "It's just a jumble of voices. I can't make anything out." He pulled out his cell phone and checked the time. "It's 7:21 a.m." He announced. "We have two hours and twenty-seven minutes left."

"Does the timeframe apply to finding Mim?" I asked John anxiously. "Does Stuart get to stay permanently if we don't accomplish getting rid of him in the next two hours?"

John answered, "I don't know. Simply put, once 9:48 a.m. rolls around you will no longer own this house. What happens after that..." He gave a futile shrug.

“Let me try something.” I had a thought. “Everybody be quiet for a sec.” Crossing to the white stone carving I closed my eyes and consciously slowed my breathing. I mentally anchored myself to the ground beneath my feet. Then I asked God, Grandma, the Universe or whomever might be listening that I be able to see what Grandma was doing when she last visited this stone.

I got nothing.

“Stella, it gets stronger when you hold my hand or touch me.” I stated. Stella rose from the grass and came to touch her hand to my back. Cautiously I placed the flat of my hand on the carving. As with my vision with James, my mind immediately spun to a different place and time. The vision was cloudy at first. I got impressions of foliage then a hand reaching out to the stone. The hand held an item that glinted.

I tried to focus in on the object but couldn’t see it. The hand then brushed dirt off the bottom right side of the carving and seemed to insert the object into a place that I, yet again, couldn’t quite see. Then it all went to darkness.

Without opening my eyes I willed the vision to play again for me. Holding my breath I waited. I was rewarded with the images repeating once more. This time I focused on the object in the hand from the very beginning. For just a split second it came into focus.

I recognized what it was. With no warning I spun back to the present. It happened so fast I felt dizzy. Blinking I was slightly astonished to find myself still standing with my hand on the carving.

“I know what to do. Wait here.” Leaving them behind I raced across the broad lawn, into the house and up to Grandma’s bedroom. Her jewelry box was still on the bureau. Panting and out of breath I riffled through it while scattering items everywhere. I finally found what I was looking for—an old-fashioned hatpin.

Back down on the lawn I quickly explained what I had seen in my vision. Jodi frantically began brushing away decades of dirt lodged at the bottom of the square stone. “I think this might be it.” She exclaimed. I leaned in to examine her find. Sure enough there was a perfectly round, tiny hole cut into the border of the stone.

I placed the sharp tip of the hatpin into the hole and pushed it inwards. Nothing happened. I pushed the pin in even further and finally was rewarded with a loud click. Unexpectedly the stone carving rolled forward and, like a filing cabinet, revealed a drawer behind it. I held my breath as I peered into the wooden drawer.

There it was.

My Grandmother’s white ceramic cookie jar with painted roses rested inside. Gently I lifted it out and cradled it in my arms. Jodi, John and Stella huddled around me. Jodi carefully lifted the lid off the cookie jar and a small blue book was revealed.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Jodi opened the little book. The first several pages appeared to have been ripped out. But what was written down on the remaining pages were specific instructions telling us how to send Stuart's ghost away forever.

Crowding together we scanned the instructions. Then we all groaned at the same time.

"It makes sense," I rubbed my eyes "except for the little fact that we need to be with one of Stuart's bones when we do the ritual."

"God, why is Grandma making this so hard?" Jodi muttered. "Why bother hiding the instructions if she isn't going to help us find the body?"

"She is." John had continued flipping through the notebook. Now he held the book up opened to the inside of the back cover. A Polaroid was taped there. Jodi and I crowded around him to see it. The photo revealed the framed map of the Ley Lines that hung in the parlor.

Simultaneously John, Jodi and I got its meaning. We grabbed our garden tools and sprinted over the lawn to the intersection of the Ley Lines. Jodi dug deep with her shovel. Next to her I struck the three-prong hoe into the ground to loosen the dirt. John was on his hands and knees shoving the dirt back from the deepening hole. Stella stood just to the side, arms crossed, clutching herself.

We hadn't dug long when Jodi suddenly stopped and peered into the hole. Part of a black plastic trash bag was revealed. John knelt on the grass, carefully loosened the dirt with his hands, and pulled the bag out. "That couldn't possibly be big enough to hold Stuart's skeleton." Jodi regarded the bag doubtfully. John picked frantically at the knot made from its plastic handles. Finally the bag was opened and John eased the contents out.

A pile of crumpled clothes landed on the ground. Stella knelt and pulled something from the jumble. The cloth was deeply stained with what appeared to be blood.

"Wow," I breathed. "Grandma hid the evidence of her murdering Stuart." Stella stared at the cloth.

"Grandma didn't murder Stuart." Stella said quietly. "I did."



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Stella,” I protested, “that’s impossible. You were only twelve-years-old!” Stella didn’t seem to hear me. Her eyes were transfixed on the cloth.

As if in a trance she softly said, “I tried and tried to get the blood out of my white jeans. I scrubbed at them until my hands bled from the bleach. But I just couldn’t get them clean again.”

She bent down, picked up the cloth and held it out in front of her. It was a pair of jeans that were white at one time. The jeans were tiny and only big enough to fit a twelve-year-old. Its rear, crotch and thigh area were stained a faded rust brown.

“Is that Stuart’s blood?” Jodi breathed.

“No,” Stella shook her head. “It’s mine.” After a beat she dropped the jeans back to the ground and buried her face in her hands. Jodi and I wrapped our arms around Stella. We didn’t know what she was talking about but we knew something very bad had happened that August so many years ago. We led her back into the house and to the parlor couch.

John ran into the library. “I found this inside the garbage bag too.” He held out a thin packet. It was wrapped several times in wax paper and fastened with a thick twine.

Stella looked at the packet numbly. “I know what it is.” She stared out the window. “Look at it but be quick. We have to find Mim.”

The three of us exited the parlor as the grandfather clock struck nine a.m. Stuart’s ghost had reset it yet again to taunt us. We had forty-eight minutes left to get rid of his malicious spirit.

Jodi unceremoniously ripped through the twine with a serrated knife. The wax packet opened and several pages fell out. They were ragged along their left side. John took the papers and held them up to the inside of the blue book we'd found in the jar. Their edges were a match to the torn out edges that remained in the book.

The pages were from twelve-year-old Stella's diary. I took the first page, read it, then passed it to Jodi who in turn read it and passed it to John. We continued this way until all five short pages were read.

"Oh my God," I said softly. "Poor Stella." My heart cried for what Stella as a small girl had endured. The pages were dated August of 1999. Childish handwriting revealed a terrible, very adult truth. The pages of the diary started innocently enough. Stella was excited to have just gotten a coveted pair of white jeans from J.C. Penney's.

The next page detailed how she and Jodi, fighting over a cherry Otter Pop, had spilled its red juice on the knee of her new jeans and she was angry with Jodi. The diary then seemed to pick up some time later that same day. The pen color was different and the handwriting shakier than before.

Stuart had approached Stella and told her he had a cleanser in the carriage house that would get rid of the stain. He instructed her to come with him. Once in the carriage house he told her she would have to take off her jeans so he could wash them. When she demurred, he became angry and threw her down to the dirty wooden floor.

I closed my eyes to try and shut out the details I had read of the rape. It had been violent and brutal. Stella wrote that she lost consciousness at the end. When she came to, she was alone. She had struggled to put her white jeans back on and was horrified at the blood that poured out her.

Stella had run back to the house and, unseen, made it to the upstairs bathroom where she tried and tried to scrub the blood out of the pants.

The diary ended with that entry.

John, Jodi and I sat stunned at the kitchen table. It didn't seem right that the sun happily streamed in through the windows. We were startled out of our thoughts by Stella's voice. She stood in the kitchen doorway. "You read it?"

We nodded.

"Then let's go get rid of this fucking bastard. I think it's the only way to save Mim." Stella turned on her heel and let the screen door slam behind her.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

We immediately followed her outside. With a force I hadn't heard from her before she announced, "We still have thirty-seven minutes to get rid of Stuart's ghost. It's the only way to find Mim."

Still stunned by Stella's revelation I said weakly, "We don't know how to find Stuart's body."

"The trench!" Jodi startled us with her outburst. "When we visited Albert he gave you that photo of Grandma next to the open trenches he'd dug for the oleander bushes." We all turned to look at the oleanders. It made sense. It would have been difficult for a healthy adult male to dig a grave by hand much less an elderly woman. But luckily for Grandma there was a ready made burial spot right when she needed it.

"She pitched him in the trench and then shoveled dirt over him." Jodi finished triumphantly.

John scanned the long fence line. "Yeah, but where?"

Stella, who hadn't said anything during the last few minutes, was now looking closely at the Polaroid photo of the Ley Line map. Stepping carefully she oriented herself along the path of one of the Ley Lines. Then she walked forward with determination towards the oleanders at the nearest fence line.

"He's right there." She pointed at a spot under the oleanders and next to the wrought iron fence.

"What makes you think he's right there?" John looked a little queasy.

“Because it makes sense.” Stella said firmly. “Grandma wouldn’t be able to push that wheelbarrow very far from the carriage house door and she’d want to remember exactly where she put the body,” Stella pointed at the ground, “and she’d remember where a Ley Line intersected at the fence line.”

“Do we really need to dig him up?” Jodi asked nervously.

“That’s what grandma instructed.” Stella said firmly. John and Jodi began furiously throwing shovelfuls of dirt out of a growing hole. They were a couple of feet down when John leaned on his shovel, “Are you positive this is the right place?”

“It’s the right place.” Nothing in Stella’s tone left any room for debate and the two of them continued digging. When the hole was about three feet deep Jodi suddenly shrieked and scrambled to get out of the hole. She ran to stand several yards away. I peered into the hole. The skeleton of what appeared to be a hand was protruding through the dirt and the roots of the oleander bush.

Nervously I asked, “We need a bone? Like you actually have to be holding a bone?” Stella nodded while studying the instructions in the blue book. Her look at me left no room for argument.

John squeaked, “I am not helping with the desecration of a skeleton. I’m probably already going to be disbarred or something.” He retreated over to Jodi’s side. “Frances you do it.”

“Why me?”

“Because Jodi and I dug the hole. It’s your turn.” John retorted.

As I approached the edge of the hole Jodi speculated darkly, “Do you suppose Stuart’s blood watering the oleanders is how he controls them?”

“Do not freak me out any more than I am already freaked out.” I snapped. On the soles of my sneakers I slid down the side of the hole. I fell forward landing half on top of a bony forearm.

“Ew, oh my God.” Jodi held her hand to her mouth and looked like she was going to pass out. John paled next to her. On my hands and knees, I almost had my face in the bones.

“Does anyone have gloves or anything?” I yelled up to them.

“Frances! Hurry up we don’t have time for that!” Jodi shrieked.

Taking a deep breath I reached for one of the skeletal bones on the hand. The forefinger snapped off with surprising ease. With the filthy bone in my grasp I scrambled back up and out of the hole. I handed the bone to Stella who accepted it calmly. In turn she handed John the little blue book. He began reading out loud the instructions Grandma had written in her spidery style.

“My beloved grandchildren, be strong. This will not be pleasant, but it is necessary. Sit down where the Ley Lines intersect. This will provide you with additional power. Stella is to hold Stuart’s bone in her pocket.”

Stella tucked the skeletal finger into her front jeans pocket and dutifully my sisters and I moved over to the intersection of the Ley Lines and sat down. John continued to read as he stood next to our circle.

“With the three of you holding hands Stella must call the spirit of Stuart to the group.”

We joined hands as Stella took a deep breath. Then closing her eyes she hesitantly began. “Stuart Carmen please come to us.” She repeated this several times but nothing happened.

“We can’t do this without Mim. We need her energy.” Jodi said nervously.

“Grandma said the three of us can do it,” Stella was adamant, “we can do it.”

John said in a voice just above a whisper, “Gertie just told me you can’t be a pushover. You have to command him.” Stella nodded that she had understood him and closed her eyes again.

“Stuart Carmen I command you to show yourself. I command you to come to this circle.” Stella’s voice was stronger now. “Stuart Carmen, I am Stella Payne. I am the person you violated and the person who ended your life. I command you to appear!” I felt a slight breeze and heard the wind began to stir the branches of the oleander bushes.

“When Stuart appears say a prayer of your own to force Stuart’s departure from the house and this earth.” John’s finger traced along Grandma’s writing in the blue notebook.

“Stuart Carmen I command you to appear now.” Stella’s voice now snapped out each word like a whip cracking. Glancing over at the fence I saw the tops of the bushes bending violently.

The wind picked up more strength and Jodi's hair began whipping around her face. Looking upwards at the tall trees growing in the next-door neighbor's yard I shivered when I saw that their leaves remained completely still. The wind was only blowing violently through grandma's property and around our little group. John bent forward into the wind trying to stay on his feet. Our hair lashed our faces.

Stella's eyes were still closed. But Jodi, John and I froze in terror at what we saw. Heavy ceramic roof tiles were ripping off the roof and being swept up into the wind. They shattered like shrapnel as they hit the ground near us. Thick branches from the tall oak trees were snapping and thudding to the ground landing perilously close to us.

Down by the little beach the water of the normally placid Bear Lake was whipped into a frenzy. Towering waves rose to crash relentlessly against the boathouse. It shook and swayed in the onslaught. Boards on the dock tore up one after the other and flew into the vortex of the wind. It seemed the old boathouse would collapse completely into the water below.



## MIM

“Stay away from the window.” Kiki shouted above the wind. No sooner had she uttered those words than the glass exploded from the force of the water slamming against it. Water and glass shards shot in every direction around Gertie’s safe room. The boathouse shook violently. Floorboards, sucked up by the wind, were flung around the room.

Mim was in a tiny alcove built into the attic space of the boat house. Through rotted holes in the floor Mim could see straight down into the churning water of the boat well. Grabbing the cot that Kiki said Mim’s great grandmother used, Mim turned it on its side to take cover behind it in a corner. She clung tightly to its frame so the cot wouldn’t chatter across the floor away from her. When a piece of splintered lumber pierced the thin mattress like an arrow Mim ducked down even further and squinched her eyes shut.

“You really should see this, Mim.” Kiki yelled over the din. “It’s unbelievable.”

“You’re already dead,” Mim screamed back. “I’d prefer to stay alive.”

The boathouse suddenly groaned to one side and Mim fought to keep from sliding across the floor. “I think we just lost a piling.” Kiki peered out of the space that the window used to occupy.

Mim didn’t bother responding. An enormous wave had wrenched part of the siding off the boathouse and water crashed over Mim’s head. Mim desperately wiped water from her eyes trying to see. “What happened to spirits not being able to cross moving water?” She yelled to Kiki.

Kiki yelled back, “They can’t. But Stuart has been storing up negative energy for decades so he could kill your mom! His powers must be stronger than the water now.”

“Mom needs me!” Mim shouted. She slid on her butt over the slick floor to escape the boathouse.

Kiki blocked her way. “You’re not going anywhere.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

My sisters, John and I could physically see the wind that encircled us. A colossal tornado of black and purple streaked around our little circle. I pulled back as a grotesque, tormented face formed in the wind that flew by me. Jodi and Stella instinctively tightened their grip on my hands and we held on to each other for dear life. John was hunched forward against the wind as he gripped the blue notebook tightly.

“Stuart Carmen, I send you to meet your fate. Stuart Carmen, go to the devil or go to God,” Stella chanted, “I send you to meet your fate.”

As she continued chanting something was happening to Stella. She began coughing, interrupting her chanting. Her body doubled over and her head nearly touched her knees. Still she fought on. “Stuart Carmen, I command you to meet your fate.”

The disturbing face I had just seen was no longer a small part of the tornado. It now *was* the tornado. The face loomed over us. As Stella continued chanting with her eyes closed I looked up to see the face contort and twist as if in pain.

Then, it stretched down to open its gaping mouth and roar at Stella’s small figure sitting on the grass. Stella held firm even as a sixty-foot oak tree exploded into shards at the far end of the yard.

Stella was struck across the side of her head by a large branch. I ducked my head down and away from the onslaught of splintered wood arrows. Jodi cried out as she was hit violently in the back with a broken roof shingle. The roar from the grotesque face continued until I thought my eardrums would burst.

Stella coughed and coughed until I nearly broke our circle of hands to help her. Somehow sensing this she raised watery eyes to me and shook her head 'no'.

Then she violently threw up on the grass in front of her. When she finally caught her breath she continued and her voice did not waver. She was preternaturally calm as though there was not a malicious otherworldly force threatening her. "Stuart Carmen," She intoned yet again. "You may not remain in this house or on this earth. With God and the Universe and my sisters I command you to hell!"

The face twisted and turned skywards. With an ear-splitting shriek, the tornado spun violently faster. Suddenly the earth began to rumble below us. Like an earthquake the ground shook us violently. Before our eyes a deep crack running along the Ley Lines opened up across the lawn. The apparition was powerfully sucked down into the deep crevice. Then, as suddenly as they had opened, the Ley Lines closed again leaving no trace.

Slowly my sisters and I released each other's hands. I rubbed my hands together to get the circulation back from their painful grip. Stella turned her head slowly from side to side as if feeling out her surroundings.

For several minutes the four of us experienced a stunned silence. Slowly I heard the birds begin to chirp again. Stella opened her eyes and in a dazed fashion took in the three of us.

“He’s gone.” Stella’s voice betrayed exhaustion. Simultaneously my sisters and I reached out on our knees and the three of us fell into a sobbing hug with our arms wrapped tightly around each other. We hung on in shocked relief.

John fumbled to look at his phone. Then he announced. “9:47 a.m. You made it.”

The only response was from Stella. In an anguished sob that rose to a wail Stella cried, “Where’s my daughter?”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The yard was littered with debris. Felled trees, deep roots torn out of the earth, lay across the lawn. The oleanders had been stripped of their leaves and flowers.

Glancing down at the lake I saw that the boathouse was mostly collapsed. The water was now calm and the happy bits of sunlight that caught on its ripples seemed out of place compared to what we had just endured.

I almost turned away when the sunlight on the water stopped me. What did it look like? Studying the pattern it suddenly hit me. It looked like Jodi's sketch flipbook of my remote viewing vision. We had thought my vision looked like wood. And I now understood that the curvy bits of light was the reflection of sun on water. Only one building was on the water—the boathouse that had fallen halfway into the lake.

"I think I know where Mim is," I was already starting to move towards the beach. Stella attempted to get up but immediately staggered and fell back. John knelt down to check on her. Following my lead Jodi and I ran hard across the lawn, helter-skeltered down the railroad tie steps to the beach. Hopping precariously from one remaining board on the dock to another we saw the doorframe was twisted at an angle with the door hanging open.

John came panting up the dock as Jodi and I had far outsprinted him. "Stella's going to be ok. I came to help."

We entered the boathouse cautiously. It creaked and groaned. It was going to collapse any minute. I waited for my eyes to adjust. Jodi picked her way around the boat well to the other side where there was a smashed out window that had faced the water. Sunlight flooded through the hole in the wall. Reflecting off the water in the boat well it sent light reflections across the walls. It looked exactly like the light patterns I had seen in my vision.

The room was empty. The narrow boardwalk around the boat well had been lifted by the force of the waves in several places and stood at crazy angles. Jodi bravely got down on her stomach and peered underneath it. With her head just above the water she scanned left and right under the boards.

She shook her head when she got back to her feet. John had turned on the flashlight on his cellphone and aimed it at the rafters of the peaked roof.

“We were in here a million times as kids we would have known if some kind of storage space was up there.” My voice quavered. It was then that his light fell on the peak of the roof that was furthest from the shore. Jodi and I gaped at what we saw.

John turned to us, “It must have been built after you were kids then.”

Parts of the small enclosure were demolished and what was left of it hung at a steep angle. “Jodi, give me a boost.” I demanded.

Jodi intertwined her hands in front of her. Putting my foot into her hands she shoved me upwards. That vaulted me on to the deeply slanting floor of the little attic room. I crawled across it on my hands and knees praying it wouldn't collapse. Despite the bright sunshine outside the enclosure was deeply shadowed. Through the gloom I made out a small figure crouched in the corner. Her head was down and her arms were wrapped tightly around her knees.

Mim looked up at me with shining eyes, "Is my mom ok?"

I crossed the small space to sweep Mim up into a tight hug. Brushing a wet lock of hair out of her eyes I called to the others. "Mim's here. She's alive."

"Thank God." Relief flooded Jodi's voice.

Mim asked again in a small voice, "Is my mom ok?"

I put my chin on top of her head. "She's just fine, baby. She did it. We did it. Stuart's ghost is gone for good." I didn't ask her why she was in the boathouse. That could wait until we reunited her with her mom. Back on shore we slowly stepped up the beach stairs. The magnitude of what had just happened was hitting us.

When Mim saw her mom across the lawn she broke into a sprint. Mother and daughter enveloped each other in a bear hug that lasted until the rest of us made our way over to them.



Mim supported her mom as we all walked slowly back to the house making our way around the debris and giant tree branches lying in the yard. In stark comparison the inside of the house was as calm and orderly as we had left it. Stella and Mim wouldn't leave each other's side and sat close together at the table.

Stella held her daughter's hand as Mim told us what had happened to her. A ghost named Kiki had brought her to the boathouse. It was our grandmother's hiding spot as evil spirits normally cannot cross moving water. That made the boathouse a perfect safe room. Kiki hustled Mim there for safety because Stuart's ghost was about to go on a rampage.

When Mim tried to leave the boathouse Kiki blocked the door. She shouted that was exactly what Stuart wanted. He wanted Mim to go to Stella. If Stella had seen Mim appear in the middle of the tornado she would have dropped our hands to run to her daughter. That would have broken our psychic powers and Stuart would have destroyed all of us.

A thought struck me. "We found your phone in the cupola. Why was it up there?"

"I don't know." Mim replied.

"Stuart took her phone," Stella shuddered, "and pretended to be Mim calling out for me. Then he used it to taunt us."

It was Jodi who saw Mim's ring first. "Mim, where did you get that ring?" I looked down at Mim's hand to see her wearing the blue topaz promise ring James had given me. Tears sprung to my eyes. Thank God, my treasured ring was back.

“Henry, gave it to me.” Mim was puzzled.  
“Why?”

“That’s a ring my boyfriend gave me a long time ago.” I said slowly. When she started to take the ring off, I shook my head. “You keep it, Mim. I think it belongs with you now.”

John coughed politely to interrupt. “Excuse me ladies, but we do have one last problem. What are we going to do with Stuart’s skeleton?”

## CHAPTER FORTY

“Can someone explain what’s going on?” A dirty and disheveled Officer Dour stood in the kitchen holding his police hat.

“There’s a body buried in the backyard.” Jodi was already pouring the officer a cup of coffee. The cop seemed to barely register her statement.

He took a deep breath and indicated one of the kitchen chairs. “This thing safe?” I nodded yes and Officer Dour sat down heavily. “The entire town witnessed that incredible storm. It only happened on this property. They’re terrified.” He rolled his coffee mug between his hands. “I don’t know what’s going on here but it’s not normal. But I just told everyone that it was an isolated waterspout. They seemed alright with that answer.” His hands were trembling, sloshing coffee out, and he set the mug down on the table.

“Have we ever had a waterspout on Bear Lake before?” John inquired.

“No, never. But they bought it because there actually *was* a waterspout.” The cop ran a hand through his hair leaving it askew. “You know, the volunteer fire department and Don Stamford and I tried like hell to get through the gates to help you.”

He shuddered, “But it was like the oleander bushes were alive. The branches actually seemed like they were fighting us.” When he finally seemed to get his wits about him, the officer remembered to ask about the body. “Is it somebody you know?”

“Sort of...” I hesitated.

“Just start at the beginning.” The officer fumbled to pull a notepad and pen out of his pocket.

Stella turned to her daughter. "Miriam, you need to leave the room."

Mim got a set to her chin that I recognized from Stella. "No." Mim said firmly. "I want to know." Stella sent Mim a long, steady look. They locked eyes. Finally, Stella relented. She sat heavily down in a kitchen chair with Mim standing close to her. Stella took a deep breath and began her story.

Stella told us that up until the moment the garbage bag was opened on the lawn she had remembered absolutely nothing of the rape or the murder. The memories had been buried deep inside of her.

After the rape in the carriage house Stella did everything possible to avoid being in Stuart's presence. Stella faked being sick so she wouldn't have to sit at the dinner table with him. She made excuses to not drive anywhere in the car with him. Stella would tell Grandma Gertie that she preferred to bike the five or six miles to a friend's house.

One late afternoon grandma sent Stella to the garden to pick tomatoes for the dinner salad. Thinking that the men who were planting the oleander bushes were still near the garden, Stella went to do the task. She didn't know the workers had gone home for the day.

Stuart had apparently been watching for his opportunity and came out from the main house. Stella started to run but he chased her down and dragged her into the carriage house. She began to cry and Stuart hit her hard in the face. She staggered backwards hitting the wall.

As Stella related it, Stuart turned his back to her to unbuckle his belt. That's when her hand touched the handle of the three-pronged hoe leaning in the corner. Without thinking Stella picked it up and swung the hoe like a baseball bat as hard as she could. Stuart was turning back towards her when the three prongs caught him piercing his neck. Blood spurted and gushed out and Stuart collapsed on the floor.

Hysterical, she ran out of the carriage house only to run headlong into Grandma Gertie out by the garden. Grandma had come to see what was taking Stella so long. Stella dragged her grandmother by the hand back to the carriage house. She clung to the door frame, crying and watching, as her grandmother checked Stuart's pulse.

Stella remembered her grandmother kneeling in a pool of Stuart's blood while she pressed her fingers to his wrist. After a moment she had dropped his arm and slowly walked over to hug Stella.

In heaving sobs Stella had told her grandmother the entire story. The Otter Pop, the white jeans, the rape, the diary, the killing. Faced with Stuart's dead body Grandma apparently didn't need much time to think things over. She instructed Stella to run inside, find clean clothes for both of them and to also bring back her blood-stained white jeans and her diary.

Stella did as she was instructed. When she got back to the carriage house Grandma had covered Stuarts body with burlap sacks. Grandma directed Stella to pick up the man's feet and help her hoist Stuart's body into a wheelbarrow. She remembered Grandma wiping Stuart's blood off her hands on the hem of her apron.

Out on the back lawn Grandma turned on the garden hose and washed the blood off Stella. Afterwards Grandma instructed Stella to change into the fresh clothes right there outside. Grandma stuffed her bloody clothes and the other items into a plastic trash bag. Then she told Stella to run into the house and not look back.

Mim kept her arms wrapped tightly around her mom's shoulders. At times I saw Mim close her eyes in pain for her mother as the truth unfolded. After Stella finished her story she reached out to put an arm around Mim's waist. All of us waited in silence for the officer's response.

Officer Dour tapped his fingers rhythmically on the table for long moments. Finally, he turned to Stella. "You killed Stuart—not Gertie?"

Stella nodded mutely.

Officer Dour tapped his fingers some more. Then he spoke slowly as if thinking something out. "I should take you in, Stella. We should question you and gather all the evidence and have this whole thing go to a proper trial."

Stella nodded reluctantly. This is what all of us expected but it was still hard to hear. I thought about the terrible months or years ahead for Stella who had already been through so much. Her most painful secret was about to be paraded in public for everyone to gossip about and scrutinize.

“This Stuart have any other family?” The cop continued tapping his fingers. We shook our heads no. I counted his fingers tapping out rhythmically. One, two, three, four, over and over again. Suddenly Officer Dour turned his head towards John. “You say you were doing some gardening?” Had this man suddenly lost his mind? Everyone else appeared just as confused as I felt.

“Gardening? No, I...” John stumbled.

“Yeah, you were gardening and found the body, right?” Officer Dour stared him down with a steely gaze. “You found it completely by accident. You have no idea whose skeleton that is or how it got there?”

John caught on before the rest of us. “Um, yeah. I was gardening. And I happened to dig up a skeleton.”

The cop’s big body relaxed. “Let’s just stick to that story.”

I was incredulous. “What? Like John picked the one spot in this entire huge yard to randomly dig a deep hole? And a body just happened to be buried there? Who’s going to believe that?”

Officer Dour was already dialing his phone, “Everybody. Because that’s what we are going to tell them.”

As it turned out in the weeks to come, that’s exactly what happened.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Later, on the same day that we banished Stuart, John set his briefcase down on the kitchen table and pulled out a stack of legal papers. Dutifully we three sisters signed where indicated. When we were finished John announced that Stella, Jodi and I now legally owned Grandma's house. John shuffled the papers to set them straight and returned them to his briefcase.

"There is one more matter," John announced. He proceeded to pull another set of papers out. "There has been an offer to buy this house. It's quite significant."

"I'll be the judge of that." Stella sniffed. I smiled. It was good to know some things hadn't changed.

"I realize you're a realtor, but I don't think you can argue too much with the offer." John handed us each a single page. My eyes immediately went to the number at the bottom of the page.

"Oh my God. Is this real?" My eyes practically popped out. The amount offered was easily double what the house and furnishings could possibly be worth. Stella shoved the paper back at John.

"Somebody is messing with you." She scoffed. "Who in their right mind would offer that much?"

"The buyer wishes to remain anonymous." John replied solemnly. "It's a limited time offer so I suggest the three of you take a few minutes to privately discuss this and make a decision."



Stella, Jodi and I adjourned to the veranda. Mim stayed with John as he started dinner. Stella looked over the paperwork but I gazed out over the lawn. "Look." I pointed. Stella and Jodi looked towards the fence line. The oleanders were now a normal three feet high and seemed to be behaving themselves.

Stella gave a rueful laugh. "Guess we don't have to wrestle with the front gate anymore."

"Yeah." I mused. "It seems kind of sad to sell the house."

"No, it's not." Stella said shortly.

"Jodi?" I queried.

"I think we should take the offer." Jodi said quietly. As I really had no other choice but to take the money the decision was made quickly. We signed the necessary papers a few minutes after Stella reviewed them and pronounced them in order.

"Wow. It's really happening. Grandma's house is gone forever." I gazed around to soak in every detail. Jodi grabbed my pen and was the last to sign the myriad of pages.

We went back into the kitchen and Jodi handed the sheaf of papers to John. "Is it all done?" He nodded. "Like done, done?" Jodi insisted. When he nodded again, she turned back to Stella and me. "The house isn't gone forever. I'm the buyer."

Stella and I were so shocked we were speechless. Even John's mouth gaped open at Jodi's announcement. "Jodi, I believe it's a corporation that purchased the house." John finally gathered himself to say.

“Yes, my corporation, BTB Inc. or as it’s known, Bloodthirsty Bunnies.” Jodi laughed at the incredulous looks on our faces.

“Bloodthirsty Bunnies?” Mim looked up from her phone. “That’s what I’m playing right now.”

“You and every other person on earth.” Jodi chortled.

“But...but you were a barista in a San Francisco coffeehouse last I heard.” I stammered out.

Jodi waved her hand. “I did that during the day. After work I drew Bloodthirsty Bunnies. Then I took night classes to learn how to program and create an App. That took a long time but I finally got the App submitted to Apple and it took off from there.”

“My God, you must have made...” Stella trailed off at the indelicate question.

“One hundred and eighty million and counting,” Jodi finished cheerfully. John looked like he was about to faint. Jodi took his hand and grinned at him. “I’m glad you fell in love with me when you thought I was broke.” Still holding his hand Jodi told us, “We were going to go public with the company. That’s what fell apart for me this past week. So it was kind of a bummer.”

“You could buy the Taj Majal. Why in the world would you buy this house?” I was genuinely curious.

“First of all, I like it here so why would I live anywhere else? Second, welcome to my new venture,” Jodi smiled “The Psychic Sisters Bed & Breakfast. That is,” she looked back to John, “if John will help me.”

## SIX MONTHS LATER

I sat back from my computer where I had been writing the history of our experience last summer. Not for a screenplay but as a record to be placed in grandma's encyclopedia. Mim and her future children might need it.

It was John who had summed it up best. He somberly said the horrible thing that happened to Stella had affected all three of us in one way or another. When Stella was changed from the outgoing, happy girl she had been, to someone harsh and judgmental, it affected and changed Jodi and me too. It changed everything about our relationship. The three of us lost decades of being the loving close sisterhood we had been due to a horrific, unspoken event.

The photo of James and me is now tucked away. In its place on my desk was a new photo taken by John from grandma's little beach. Stella, Jodi and I were sailing the Sunfish sailboat. Mim was crammed into the footwell. Our hair whipped around our faces as we laughed uproariously, heads bent towards each other. It was a caught moment of joy I knew I'd hold on to forever.

THE END

## **Grandma Gertie's (partial) Encyclopedia of Psychic Secrets**

**Angel Lights:** *It is thought that angels or spirit guides will show themselves as sparkles or flashes of light. Different colors may mean different things as silver, green, gold and red sparkles have been observed. Generally it is thought to be either positive energy or a warning.*

**Clairaudience:** *Ability to hear voices and information from the dead.*

**Clairsentience:** *Intuiting an event yet to come in the future. A “gut feeling”.*

**Clairvoyance:** *A psychic ability to read the past, present and future of an individual.*

**Electric Voice Phenomena (EVP):** *Communication from the ‘other side’ through means of an electronic device such as a phone, baby monitor, radio, etc. Typically it is through a listening device not a visual device like a television.*

**Empath:** *A person who absorbs the emotions of others, particularly in public places. A person who can literally absorb the pains both emotionally and physically of others. Empaths have the ability to feel and scan another's psyche both past and present.*

**Ley Lines:** *Unseen lines of energy that are currents that move across the earth much like the air stream currents that occur in the sky. The intersection of Ley Lines is claimed to contribute to enhanced psychic, spiritual and meditation practices. Notable sites built on the intersection of Ley Lines are: Stone Henge, The Great Pyramids of Giza and Sedona Arizona. Some people believe Ley Lines are a map for alien activity.*

**Medium:** *A person with the ability to hear the voices of the dead. The dead send their message, via the Medium, to their living, loved one.*

**Negs:** *A Neg is a demonic spirit that has attached itself to a person. Often the person will experience bad luck, the unwanted feeling of being touched sexually while asleep. Negs often have a gateway opening to attach themselves when a person is inebriated.*

**Orbs (Photo Orbs):** *When these appear in a photo a spirit(s) is present.*

**Precognition:** *The ability to see into the future and predict events particularly through dreaming.*

**Psychic:** *A person who can predict events to come in the future, know what other people are thinking, or to hear or see messages from dead people.*

**Psychometry:** *The ability to glean information of an object's history by physically holding or touching that object.*

**Remote Viewing:** *An ability to see a distant, non-local occurrence happening in the present time regarding an event, person or place.*

**Retrocognition:** *The ability to see an occurrence, local or distant, that happened in the past regarding an event, person or place.*

**Telekinesis:** *A psychic ability to move or change an object without physical interaction.*

**Telepathy:** *The transmission of information from one person to another using only mental thoughts.*

**Teleport:** *The ability to move one's body from one location to another. Typically occurs when in danger and without conscious thought.*