

# A GHOST OF A CHANCE

A VIOLA VALENTINE MYSTERY



CHERIE CLAIRE

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Happy Gris Gris Publishing

A Ghost of a Chance (A Viola Valentine Mystery, Book One)

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**The Cajun Embassy**

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**The Cajun Series**

Emilie

Rose

Gabrielle

Delphine

A Cajun Dream

The Letter

**Carnival Confessions: A Mardi Gras Novella**

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## Chapter 1

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They say there are blessings from Katrina. Mine was I lost my job.

I gaze around at the lush breakfast area of The Monteleone Hotel in New Orleans, enjoying eggs Benedict, crisp bacon and the creamiest grits I've had in years and force myself not to laugh. Life is looking up, despite my lack of job security. All I have to do is get on a plane, make my assignment and my life will resemble this from now on.

"More coffee, ma'am?" I glance up from my newspaper I wasn't really reading and there's a red-headed man wearing a uniform more typical of the 1920s standing beside my table.

And he isn't carrying a coffee pot.

Startled, I shake my head. I've had my caffeine quota for the day, promising my doctor I would stop at two cups in the morning. Of course, I never promised anything about afternoons.

After all, I am a journalist.

"Very good ma'am." He bows and quietly saunters out the cafe door. I'd say float but that's absurd.

"Who was that?" I ask the waitress when she arrives to refill my cup. Despite my promises, I let her.

"Who was what, dawlin?"

After months in Cajun Country, it feels great to hear a New Orleans accent again, people we label "Yats" because they usually begin a greeting with "Where

y’at?” It’s more Brooklyn than Southern, slower and more friendly. Definitely not the Hollywood, Tennessee Williams drawl most people assume to find here sprouting from residents dressed in seersucker and white bucks.

The Yat sends me a puzzled grin with a hand on her hip, the kind siblings bestow on one another. This is New Orleans. We’re all related so why not just act like family.

“Are you all doing a costume brunch now?” I ask, adding, “I’m writing a story on the hotel.”

Dolores — it was written on her name tag right above “Ask About Our Rebirth Specials” — isn’t impressed with my assignment. She grabs one of her purple and gold hoop earrings and pulls, her snide expression unfaltering.

“Did Margaret put you up to this?”

“Who’s Margaret?”

Dolores huffs and walks away, leaving me to ponder what the hell that was all about.

I check my watch. Two hours. I’m meeting Mary Jo, my old roommate from college who is now the PR director of The Monteleone, and then I’m on my way. She’s late, as always, but this will be one of those times I’m not going to hang around, even though she set up my complimentary night at the historic hotel in the hopes I would write a glowing story to help attract tourists back to New Orleans; it’s been months since Katrina and many people still think we’re under water. But today my first press trip as a travel writer awaits and I have a plane to catch.

Finally, Mary Jo appears, wearing her usual navy blue A-skirt and matching button-up sweater, topped by a discreet strand of pearls and cream-colored headband. I almost laugh because she could have walked out of the LSU Delta Gamma house, but her coifed hair and perfect makeup make me feel self-conscious. She waves from the hostess desk and I attempt to straighten out my wrinkled blouse before she sits down.

“What’d you think?” she says before even pulling out a chair.

“Gorgeous as always.” I place a hand over my coffee cup as Dolores arrives, hovering her pot across the table like an alien spaceship and sending me a

suspicious glance. “The customer service is exceptional, Mary Jo McConnell.”

Hearing the name, Dolores jerks to get a better look at my table companion. Mary Jo is clueless, but Dolores suddenly resorts back to her cheerful self. “Would you like some coffee, Miss Mary Jo?”

“No thanks, Dolores. I’m just here to see how my travel writer friend’s stay is going.”

Mary Jo pronounces my new profession like my family does, as if I’ve decided to become a ventriloquist or palm reader for an occupation. I’ve been writing travel stories for years, bringing in extra income to my well-paying newspaper job covering the school board and police beat in deep St. Bernard Parish for the *New Orleans Post*. *The Post* is the smaller city newspaper to the notable *Times-Picayune*. Note sarcasm here: the pay sucked, we were but a shadow to the *Times-Pic* and guess who’s up for a Pulitzer for their Katrina coverage? My twin Sebastian thought my day job would produce fodder for the Great American Novel I was to write and my dad called it “a decent job and I should be glad to have one.” I saw it as newspaper hell.

But I dismiss Mary Jo’s obvious doubting of me making a living at freelance travel writing, instead catching how Dolores is now doubly scared because she’s finally figured out I may write about her. She starts fussing over me and I wonder if, as a travel writer, I will have this power over people from now on.

Cool.

Mary Jo shushes her away and I explain how my suite overlooking Royal Street delighted every sense (all true), the rooftop pool was heavenly (too crowded and noisy but the drinks helped make that go away), my massage the night before couldn’t have been better (again, no lie, although that poor woman got her money’s worth working on me) and two small children kept me up all night running down the hall. I left that last part out.

Either the hotel’s haunted or there are parents here waking from a good night’s sleep that I want to throttle.

Once we get awkward business out of the way and I assure her a story is forthcoming in *Mais Yeah!*, the southwest Louisiana weekly I now write travel for, we catch up on girlfriend news. Mary Jo shows off her enormous diamond

and grabs my day planner to circle the date of her upcoming wedding. Branford J. Whitaker the third, otherwise known as “Brick” — I don’t inquire — heads up his father’s Carnival store, the kind that sells all that China-made crap thrown at Mardi Gras parades, those lovely beads, doubloons, trinkets and the like that everyone kills each other over and then stuffs into attics like Christmas decorations.

“There’s so much money in Carnival,” Mary Jo informs me. “You wouldn’t believe how much those krewe members spend on throws.” She leans in close and whispers with a sly smile, “Thousands and thousands, which is great for the Whitaker family.”

I really shouldn’t have blurted it out, but I had to stop the jealousy rising in my chest. As much as I love my new freedom and finally realizing my dream, I’m scared as hell at the lack of financial security and I’m trying hard not to remember that fact.

“You did what?” Mary Jo asks me, which surprises me as much as TB’s reaction.

“I don’t understand why this is such a surprise.”

“Viola, you’re upset because of the disaster,” she says, patting my hand. “The loss of your house, “It’s a mother-in-law unit,” I answer way too defensively.

My mother calls my home in the neighboring town of Lafayette a potting shed because of its ruggedness — okay, it’s a bit frayed at the edges — and refuses to set foot inside. Which turned out to be a good thing; my parents never visit.

“Deliah said it was a dump.”

“You talked to my mother?”

“I can find you a really nice place in New Orleans....”

“Can’t afford it now that I’ve gone freelance. You talked to my mother?”

Mary Jo takes my hand and squeezes. “We’re worried about you.”

I pull my hand back and offer up my best “life is good, what hurricane?” smile. Nothing is taking me down today. “My landlord is letting me live there free in exchange for keeping an eye on the big house,” I say, trying to eliminate



the defensive edge from my voice. It could have been a closet and I would have eagerly agreed. Well, it kinda is.

“It’s part of the freedom package that’s allowing me to work as a travel writer and not go back to that horrid newsroom,” I continue. “You know how miserable I was.”

Mary Jo tilts her head as if to start a “Yes, but...”

“Did I tell you that Reece, my Cajun landlord, isn’t hard on the eyes?”

Wrong thing to say when you’re fresh into a separation.

“This is all too soon to be thinking of dating your landlord, Vi.”

“Who said dating? He’s married.”

Mary Jo winces. “Maybe you and TB should get counseling.”

“You never liked TB,” I add. “Since when are you taking his side?”

TB stands for T-Bubba. My ex loves to joke about his name, calling himself half Cajun, half redneck since the Cajun “T” stands for “petite,” or “Petite (Little) Bubba.” His father, the redneck half, was Bubba Senior. My mom calls TB a disease.

Mary Jo huffs while shaking a packet of Sweet-n-Low before ripping off the side and pouring the cancerous substance into her coffee. Just watching her sip that pink stuff leaves an awful aftertaste in my mind and I swallow hard.

“A divorce is a pretty big step,” she says. “And you just went through a traumatic experience. You don’t need to pile more stress on your life.”

What’s a little more stress after axing your way through an attic when lake waters rushed through your home, to sit on a rooftop for two days while your government ignored you? Not knowing where your twin brother was for more than a week. In fact, now that Sebastian is working as a temp in the restaurant industry and moving around the Deep South, I still don’t know.

Brat.

“I’ll be fine.” Weirdly enough, I actually believe that, feel infinitely better. The future is unstable but the possibilities are endless.

Mary Jo doesn’t share in my excitement. The light behind her eyes disappear, replaced by a comatose stare she once exhibited when she thought Lampton “Scoop” Mallard over at the KA house was having an affair. Goosebumps run up

my arm and panic fills my chest.

“Is this about Lillye?” she asks quietly.

Time to leave. I check my watch. “I need to go. My plane leaves at ten.”

“Viola.” Mary Jo grabs my hand as I rise. “This is all so horrible. You lost everything and now you’re getting a divorce and living in someone’s potting shed.”

I give her a kiss on the cheek, knowing she means well. I have my photos. Really, what else matters?

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

Mary Jo grins through the tears; she really is a good friend. I give her a tight hug and roll my pink and white polka dot luggage I nabbed at Goodwill to the Honda that TB had insisted I keep (he’s spending his share of the FEMA money on a pickup). I have to stop by the house and give TB the mail, since mail service in New Orleans is spotty at best. Our insurance check finally arrived, so I need to hand it off to TB before I fly out so he can continue renovations.

I drive through the tourist-infested French Quarter amazed at how the lure of Bourbon Street keeps them coming no matter what. Good thing our founding fathers settled the heart of the city above sea level. You’d never know a disaster happened gazing out at the crowds strolling through the ancient quarter, giant drinks shaped like bombs in their hands, those tacky beads around their necks making the Whitakers rich, and silly grins produced when alcohol mixes with the freedom to be whoever you wish to be.

The closer I get to Rampart, however, the more damage I spot, blue tarps on the roofs to keep the rain out, piles of mildewed sheetrock by the curb. I turn and head over to Canal and move toward the lakeside of town, an area called Mid-City where TB and I lived. The waterline is evident here, like a child extended his hand with a pen between his fingers, letting it mark up the sides of houses. The further west I travel, the higher the mark, like I’m slowly descending under water and into hell.

In fact, I am. All that euphoria of staying at the elegant, historic Monteleone Hotel in the heart of the romantic French Quarter disappears and the horror of Katrina stares back at me everywhere. I swallow hard, fighting down the bile

and panic as I gaze at the blocks upon blocks of water-logged homes and the empty shopping centers and dead traffic lights. One corner still sports an abandoned boat from the rescue days. A pack of dogs runs wild down Iberville Street. A billboard blown free of its tethers has landed in a housetop and I see a smiling woman enjoying coffee peeking out by the chimney.

This is what Mary Jo and my mother want me to live in. I vow to hand TB his mail and haul ass to the airport.

He must have heard me drive up for TB is halfway to the curb by the time I turn off the engine. I'm not happy to see him and that old guilt comes back with a rush. I could write a dissertation on why my marriage failed, but sum it up with one sentence: The man aggravates the hell out of me. For years I tried to hide it, put "a nice face on" as my mother would say, but the nastiness in my voice bubbles to the surface and pours out, sometimes in turrets.

Before I'm able to grab the mail and lock up the car, TB's staring at me over the hood. "Mary Jo called in tears, said she's worried about you."

I groan, pushing the lock button on the door; I wasn't able to afford one of those push-button kind you carry on a key chain. I even roll down my windows the old-fashioned way. "What could possibly be wrong?" I ask TB sarcastically, laughing.

"She said you're on your way somewhere."

I don't feel like explaining to the world where I am and what I'm doing because family and friends keep trying to talk me out of it. And get counseling. Both of which I don't intend to do. Even though TB's motivation is to get me back into the marriage, I keep it simple. "I'm going on a press trip."

"Oh yeah, what for?"

Here come the twenty questions. TB's idea of a conversation is asking mundane questions, like a three-year-old following a parent around the house. "What are you doing?" "What's your plans for today?" "What do you want to do for dinner?" "Was that the mail?"

"I got invited to go somewhere, to do a travel story," I tell him.

"Where are you going?"

I shouldn't have blurted it out but my multi-tasking brain is busy focusing on

getting to the sidewalk and not on the elderly man across the street staring. A shiver runs up my spine as I feel those cold black eyes upon me. “I’m heading to Eureka Springs, Arkansas.”

“What for?”

I pull TB through our front gate and head up toward the house, glancing back to see if the old man is still there. He is. And his gaze still bores holes into my back.

“Who is that?” I whisper to TB.

“Who is what?”

A normal person would have had trouble comprehending how TB could have missed this intense weirdo across the street, but TB is regularly clueless. I turn toward the house but pause at the porch and hand TB the mail.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

“Uh, no.” I had seen all I had wanted of our house about a month after Katrina, when they finally let residents into the parish to view what was left — if anything — of their homes. Weeks under water can do amazing things to a person’s belongings, like a stick of butter in the microwave left on high too long. I don’t want to step foot in that house again.

TB marches up the steps. “Want to see what I’ve done with the kitchen? I painted the cabinets and found some nice granite pieces half price.”

I’m not following. “Really? I need to get to the airport.”

He nods but I can tell he wants to talk, try to convince me a legal separation isn’t the best route. Thankfully my trip to the courthouse last week sealed the deal. “Your mother said we need time.”

My head snaps to attention. “What? You talked to my mother?”

“For a woman who routinely left me places as a child because she was too busy practicing speeches for her TV appearances, I doubt she’s worried.”

“You should give her a break,” TB says. “Tulane hasn’t asked her back.”

I’m sorry my mother is out of a job, really, but whose side is she on? She hates TB, convinced I had married beneath me, which is probably true. Now, he’s her best friend?

I nod at the mail in his hands. “The insurance check is on top.”

“I finished the second floor. You’ll hardly recognize it.”

“Uh, huh.” I turn back toward the street and the creepy old man has reappeared on the porch next door. I can’t get to my car, out of the Katrina zone and to the airport fast enough.

“Don’t you want to even look?”

“Nope.” I head to the front gate but I can tell TB is hot on my heels.

“What are you doing again?”

“I told you, a travel writing thing,” I shout out without turning around. I can’t bear seeing that man again, or pondering how a man his age moved so fast. “Like the ones I used to do on the side, although this one is an organized press trip.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Crescent Hotel.” Crap. I feel like Homer Simpson after he says something truly stupid. Why did I just tell TB that? I make it to the driver’s side and gaze up at him over the hood. He stands there like a puppy dog wanting a bone.

“Can I come?”

Travel writers on press trips receive everything complimentary — accommodations, food, plane tickets. Guests are not allowed. Usually, the tourist bureaus foot the bill and they are not about to spend valuable dollars on people who won’t write about the place. I’ve heard about husbands or wives posing as photographers but that’s about the extent of it. TB had accompanied me once on a trip I arranged on my own, and I hated every minute. I wanted to explore, he wanted to drink and sit by the pool. I wanted to enjoy a nice meal and examine the place on my own, he blurted out to everyone that I was there on assignment so every member of the restaurant visited our table. The next time I arranged an excursion I conveniently planned it over a weekend during football season, knowing well TB wouldn’t give up valuable couch time.

“No, you can’t come,” I tell him tersely.

“I could stay in the room, not bother you....”

“No.”

“I could just hang by the pool....”

I hate to do it but the look on TB's face, the putrid smell of mildew and decay and that horrid man's stare make me slip in my car and drive off without another word. I have a plane to catch and nothing is getting me down today, I practically yell inside my head. The guilt is eating me alive and it takes everything not to gaze in the rearview mirror.

"Call your mom," I hear TB shout out, as I turn the corner and head back to the interstate.

I'm late getting to the airport, mainly because my mother called twice and I fumbled with my purse trying to silence the damn cell phone. The distraction made me miss my exit and I ended up circling Kenner needlessly.

When I finally park, get through security and make it to my gate, I have minutes to spare. I drop my bag at my feet, fall into the chair and breathe deeply, startling the well-dressed man across from me whose right eyebrow raises without him looking up from his laptop.

"Finally," I say to no one and the man shifts in his chair. Am I bothering him? Doesn't matter. I'm free of my ex-husband, my overbearing family, my well-meaning friends pushing psychoanalysis and the putrid wrath that was Katrina and on my way to a new adventure and career.

And that's when she started singing.

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## Chapter 2

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A woman about my age, soaking wet, stands dripping in the aisle outside my gate, belting out *You Are My Sunshine* at the top of her lungs. She looks me straight in the eyes, water leaking off the ends of her stringy black hair, puddles appearing at her bare feet, and explains how I make her happy when skies are gray.

I look around to see if anyone else is watching this woman sing the Louisiana state song written by a former governor, her arms outstretched for emphasis when she hits “You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you,” but no one seems to notice her. A mother and daughter play with an American Girl doll to my right, a businessman devours a biscuit and sausage to my left and Mr. Fancy Pants continues reading his laptop.

Usually I ignore the crazies in New Orleans, too, especially in Louis Armstrong Airport where half of the tourists are glazed and hung over and the other still fresh and slobbering from a night on Bourbon Street. The ones arriving have that get-me-a-drink look and who knows what for a motive so their focus is elsewhere. But this woman is soaked head to toe, looking positively frightened or agitated or both and singing as if her life depends on it.

I lean over to search the airport corridors and two cops are laughing over coffee around Gate Number Four. Esther Williams is still singing and neither one looks in her direction. Weird. The gate agents are busy sliding boarding passes into the machine and a security guard drives up in one of those pseudo golf carts

but no one even glances in this poor lady's direction.

Just when I am about to get up and see if I can be of assistance, Mr. Fancy Pants across from me, his head still bent toward his laptop in engrossed concentration, lifts his right hand and snaps his fingers. One simple gesture, and the singing stops.

The woman appears as if she's been slapped, her eyes registering intense pain. She bows her head in failure and moves away, her feet leaving prints as she meanders down the aisle.

I glance back at Fancy Pants, whose hand has returned to his side, his gaze never leaving the screen, until they call Zone Three. He closes his laptop and rises, never glancing in my direction, heading to the ticket agent as if nothing had happened.

When I check back on the wet opera singer, she's gone. Vanished.

Maybe my family and friends are right, I think, wondering where I put that card Mary Jo gave me, the one for the counselor specializing in post traumatic stress disorder. But that woman was standing in the aisle in front of me, singing to the heavens. I know what I saw. And if I'm not totally nuts Mr. Fancy Pants heard her too.

I'm so confused and, like a good journalist, totally curious, but it's time to get on the plane and start my new career. I sneak one last look down the airport corridor, even check for footprints, shake my head and hand the gate attendant my boarding pass.

Once aboard, I have other things to worry about. I end up lodged between an overweight man hogging the armrest and an elderly woman knitting. I practically wrap my elbows around my chest like a true crazy person and attempt to read my "S" book, something light and funny with cartoon women on the cover with words like "sassy," "seductive" and "scandalizing" among the back cover's description. S books make me happy, take me away from waterlines and levee breaches and I'm not going to apologize for it like most women I know and call it "trash." Right now these books are better than Prosac.

I'm so enraptured in the hunk who runs the town newspaper and his fight with the spirited yet intelligent heroine of the mayor's office that we land in the



Northwest Arkansas airport in no time at all, a good-sized facility in a rural area near Bentonville and Rogers, places most people have never heard of unless they work for Walmart. Bentonville was home to entrepreneur Sam Walton who started the multi-national chain and thus the town became the operational hub of the megastores. Because Walton insisted companies move to the area if they wanted to be part of his dream, and all these new businesses plus Walmart need transportation services, the lovely new airport was built.

Too bad New Orleans never had such pull, I think, as I head down impeccable marble aisles toward the baggage claim. The Crescent City had long outgrown its airport and progressive politicians had suggested a larger international airport almost halfway between Baton Rouge and New Orleans with a light rail in between but the idea never took. As usual not enough money. Or forward thinking. Plus, there was that time after Katrina when the airport became a hospital and morgue so right now all everyone's thinking about is getting it back to normal.

I wasn't going to think about New Orleans on this trip, or my flooded home, lack of a steady job and the fact that my electricity would get cut off if my FEMA check didn't arrive soon. Tonight I would sleep between layers of multi-thread linens and indulge in fine cuisine while PR people drive me around, line up interviews and pay for everything. Only in America could writers straddling the poverty line be wined and dined at posh hotels and four-star restaurants in fun destinations.

"It doesn't get better than this," I whisper to myself.

Travel writing was my dream in college, a career I wanted to start the moment that journalism diploma hit my greedy little hands. But it's not something you major in, interview for and start the next day. You could nab a similar position at a magazine or become a newspaper travel editor, and lord knows I tried getting on at Southern Living and the Times-Picayune travel section for years. Or you could do what I did and cover the cops beat in St. Bernard Parish for the New Orleans Post while writing travel on the side for the Sunday edition and a few other small magazines and newspapers.

That's how I met Henry Torrington Wallace. I had driven to Birmingham for

a journalism conference and took some side trips to compile into a feature for the Martin Luther King Jr. birthday weekend. The travel piece garnered a Louisiana Press Award and Henry called to ask if I wanted to join his agency's press trip to Nashville. I wasn't able to accept free trips at the time — against newspaper policy — but I kept his card just in case.

Needless to say, my cops job in St. Bernard Parish washed away, pun so very much intended. Good riddance. Once I got established in Lafayette, Henry was the first person I rang.

"I'm freelancing now for the chain in southwest Louisiana and a few magazines," I told him. "Got any trips in the Deep South?"

Did he ever. I was in business before you can say, "Your hotel room is complimentary."

I grab my polka dot bag and do as instructed, travel to the baggage claim and look for signs from Henry's PR agency, the Wallace Group. As expected, Henry is waiting at the bottom of the escalator, his arms full of press packets. He tilts his chin up at me and I smile, tingling with excitement. I can feel those silky-smooth sheets already, after which I will relax in a bathtub full of free upscale products. For not the first time I wonder if the other journalists — those working at travel writing longer than me or who live in equally nice residences — feel the same rush when they exit the plane knowing what's coming.

"How've you been, Viola?" Henry asks me after an obligatory hug. His agency hails from Tennessee, so he's Southern to the core. He also pronounces my name correctly: VIE-O-LA.

"I'm great, Henry." If only he knew just how, staring down at a press kit announcing "Heaven in the Ozarks!"

"Is this it?" He grabs the handle of the polka dot bag and heads toward the exit.

"I always travel light," I say apologetically. Do other journalists bring more? What's funny is that practically everything I own is in that bag. You know I'm not kidding.

"Am I the only pick-up?"

As soon as I ask, I realize two other travel writers are waiting by the door, a

dark-haired woman dressed in a Talbots-style outfit complete with high heels and several layers of gold necklaces, intent on text messaging on what looks like a Blackberry (I honestly don't know, never had the money to buy one), and an older man in jeans and a Lacoste shirt scoping out the local newspaper container. I smooth down the designer linen shirt I found at Goodwill, sorry for my choice since traveling between those two armrest hogs has rendered it a massive wave of wrinkles. I also worry about my tried and true Converse sneakers my mother calls adolescent. These days, I don't care what my mother calls my clothes but I'm self-conscious around these people.

"Small news hole," the tall guy says without looking up.

I extend my hand. "Viola Valentine."

Tall guy ignores me. "I hate it when they put ads on the front page."

"Richard Cambry," Henry explains, then nods his head toward texting queen. "And Irene Fisher."

"Nice to meet you," I say, but only Irene responds, without looking up.

Ah, a nice polite bunch. We make our way to the van, one Henry has rented for the trip, and the Friendlys deposit their bags at the back while Richard talks about his newspaper days and grabs the front seat. Irene sighs and mutters something under her breath.

"Do you need help?" I ask Henry, who gives me a sweet "Are you kidding, get in the van" look. He opens my door and I do the obligatory Southern conversation, asking about his wife, his job and Henry gives me a quick roundup with a smile.

"Don't we have to be there by four," Richard asks from inside the van. "I don't know, just saying. It has four on the schedule."

Henry smiles politely as only PR people can do; it's an amazing talent they own, being able to offer impeccable customer service in the presence of assholes.

"Be right back," Henry says and heads back inside the airport.

You'd think plum assignments such as these would render people gracious and thankful, but there are jerks in the best of professions, and plenty of folks who need bibs and bottles. Now realize, we must have credentials and extensive

work experiences to be asked on press trips, not to mention there is an art to this craft most people don't understand. No, it's not about writing what you did on vacation. But come on, folks. When someone's paying the bill, lining up interviews and driving you around in a van where you don't even have to wear a seatbelt, the least you can do is be polite and grateful. Leave your whining at home.

I enter the van and park next to Irene, who finishes her text and looks up. "Irene Fisher," she announces, holding out her hand. I skip the reminder that we've already met and shake her hand, but dear old Richard doesn't miss a thing.

"We had introductions in the airport, Irene. If you weren't so busy on that cell phone...."

Richard must be around sixty or seventy with a head full of white hair to back up that statement and he launches into a tirade about young people and cell phones, using a woman not paying attention while driving as an example. From the way he describes this female, I pick up chauvinistic sentiments, not to mention arrogance and conceit. I didn't like him back at the newspaper. Now I really don't.

Irene tunes him out but he keeps shifting in his seat to look at me. Just for fun, I ask if he's married.

"Who knows?" he answers, leaving this balloon of a thought floating above us. As if synchronized, Irene and I gaze at each other and silently vote not to pop that bubble. The pause we offer makes Richard uncomfortable so he launches into a lengthy explanation, mostly about how difficult women are to live with and how his wife is at fault for everything. Irene begins texting again and I stare out the window, noticing how rural the surrounding area is, when who should saunter by but Mr. Fancy Pants. He pauses at the van door with his laptop and garment bag — do people use those anymore? — and leans his head in to greet us.

It's the first time I get a good look at his face, which is handsome with sleek, sculptured lines, a no-nonsense countenance although I detect a slyness lurking beneath. His salt and pepper hair is perfectly combed back, a bit of a white

streak happening around one temple but this guy plays it up, embracing what I suspect is early middle age. His green-gray eyes match the whole ensemble, as if he did it on purpose. My gay-dar is beeping rapidly.

“You all remember Carmine Kelsey,” Henry says, adding for me, “and this is Viola Valentine. The Arkansas trip is her first with us.”

Carmine looks me in the eye for the first time, albeit briefly, raising one eyebrow. The atmosphere feels uncomfortable. I’m not sure if it’s because everyone now knows I’m a newbie to this business or Carmine had witnessed the wet opera singer. I realize someone must move to the back row to accommodate Carmine, so I take the opportunity to break gaze, stumbling into the back, the pieces of my press packet flying all over the floor.

“Nice to meet you too,” he says, which garners a laugh from Richard and Irene, and I immediately dislike the man.

As I rearrange my belongings and attempt to tame my now horribly wrinkled shirt, Henry jumps in the front and off we go. Richard begins a long discourse on the state of travel writing today and Henry politely listens while Irene and Carmine take to their electronics. I want desperately to ask Carmine about the wet apparition in the airport, but on the flip side, from his haughty demeanor and sarcastic snide, I want to cross him off my list with the rest of the van’s occupants.

Instead, I enjoy the rolling countryside of northwest Arkansas with the budding sycamore and maple trees, fields full of rolled hay and nonchalant cows and little rolling streams crossing the highway. We pass lovely farmhouses where people reside with all their belongings, photos carefully preserved in family albums. We pass a small town and I envy the smiling faces of the children riding the streets in their Schwins. A man pumps gas at a self-service, a canoe propped up in the cab of his truck. Two businessmen stand in a parking lot laughing about something. Butterflies flit past enjoying roadside flowers.

Suddenly a malaise so deep and powerful consumes me, knowing normalcy exists outside the borders of my disaster zone. I don’t know why I should be shocked that the rest of the country lives on, but I feel betrayed. I want to be these people. I want to wake up in a bed where all my belongings exist where I

put them the night before.

I close my eyes, remembering why I am here. “This is what you wanted and Katrina gave it to you,” I tell myself.

But I can’t help wanting more, and that black hole that took the place of my heart years ago when Lillye died opens up once more, swallowing me whole.

“Isn’t that right, Viola?”

I realize with horror that Henry has been asking me questions. I wonder how long I have been in the dark place this time.

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re from New Orleans.”

Where once was polite acknowledgement — with a bit of sarcasm from Carmine — there is now complete attention. All eyes sans Henry gaze upon me, filled with a look I have come to abhor. Pity.

I offer up a comforting smile and shrug. Sure, lost my house and everything in it. Car was found seven blocks away. Chimney saved me from blowing into the good state of Mississippi, after which I got this blistering sunburn while sunbathing on the roof for two days. No biggie. Needed a vacation anyway.

Of course, I say nothing. I don’t want to discuss it. Any of it. But the questions fly fast and furious.

“Did you ride it out?”

*Yes, had to, my job at the newspaper demanded it.*

“Did you lose anything?”

*Yes, everything.*

“Everything?”

*Yes, everything but my good looks. The attempt at humor fails miserably.*

“Where are you living now?”

*Two hours west in Cajun Country. In a potting shed if you ask my mom.*  
Again, not even a smile.

“What do you think of Bush and FEMA?”

At this point, I’ve had enough. I don’t want to think about Bush, can’t bear to hear him speak anymore. And FEMA owes me money. More than anything, I don’t want to talk about Katrina!!

“Where are we heading first?” I ask Henry over the cacophony of questions.

Henry explains how we are all checking into our hotels in the Bentonville area for the night and then meeting back in our respective lobbies for a quick overview of the historic downtown and then dinner. I ask him about his family — and yes, I’m repeating myself — but the rest of the van seems to get the idea that the conversation is over. They stop talking to me and I study my press packet for the rest of the trip.

We arrive at my hotel, a chain but lovely with a stone fireplace in the center of the lobby. I marvel at rocks; we have none in South Louisiana. Just mud. I caress my hands over the quartz and swear I can feel the vibrations. New Age people say I’m blessed, everyone else says I’m crazy, but rocks have always spoken to me in one way or another. Most of the time it’s to say, “Take me home,” and I always oblige. My chest hurts as I wonder where all those crystals and rocks I’ve gathered over the years have ended up.

“There’s an indoor pool,” Irene says, breaking my thoughts. “Wanna grab a swim tonight?”

I take one look at the luscious pool with its emerald waters and neighboring hot tub, two sights that would have normally enticed me to indulge, no hesitation at all, but I want nothing of it.

“I’m not a swimmer,” I lie to Irene.

As Irene heads down the hall to the elevators, I take one last look at the pool, swallowing hard to dislodge the lump choking my breath. The wet opera singer waves to me from beside the water.

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## Chapter 3

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A geology lesson in third grade started my rock fascination. When my crazy Uncle Jake who lived in northern Alabama found out, he decided I needed to know where “rocks grew.” In all honesty, it was a chance for he and my Aunt Mimi to get me away from “Sin City,” my hometown of New Orleans where not only care forgot but Christian living as well. Or so they thought. I explained that everyone I knew attended church, but Uncle Jake muttered something about idol worship and the Pope.

My family didn’t attend church. My parents were liberal college professors who claimed religion was a crutch for the ignorant. The fact that she and Aunt Mimi are related baffles the mind.

Days in Wedowee, Alabama, were filled with saying prayers, grace and thanking the Lord for every little thing, even Uncle Jake catching that seven-pound bass in the Fayette County Lake. I didn’t mind because in between church youth meetings and Sunday service, I got to visit the stalactites and stalagmites of nearby DeSoto Caverns, where Aunt Mimi ran the gift shop.

One day, Uncle Jake took me on the tour.

“The best part is coming,” Uncle Jake said in his funny accent, making me wonder for the umpteenth time how Aunt Mimi married a man so distant from my sophisticated mother, a Shakespearean studies professor who spoke like the people on the news and sometimes, when extolling the comedic complexities of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, for instance, would actually sound British.



“How could it get any better?” I asked Uncle Jake, gripping the piece of quartz I had purchased in the gift store, a lovely stone that had beckoned to me the moment I had walked into the establishment. Glistening and smooth, the stone burned warmly in my palm.

“Just you watch,” Uncle Jake whispered.

And then they turned off the lights.

It was darker than any night I could remember, so black nothing anywhere was visible. I waved my hand in front of my face to make sure. Zip.

“There is absolutely no light in this cave,” the tour guide informed us. “People who have lost their way in here many years ago were known to go crazy after just a few hours.”

I could certainly see why. The darkness seeps into your brain, snuffing out whatever light existed in your consciousness.

It freaked out the other tourists, but I loved it. The darkness covered me like a blanket and vibrations of humanity appeared everywhere, charged by the humming of my crystal. I couldn’t see, but rather felt the presence of others, comforting souls who seemed to float by, touching the top of my head like a loving parent. When the lights came back on, the humming stopped.

I later told Uncle Jake of my experience which initiated intense prayer sessions with everyone they knew, arriving at the house to lay hands on me and “wash the demons away.” There was nothing comforting about their clammy hands on my head, nor peaceful with their talk of the devil and “evil lurking in an innocent child.” My crystal disappeared as well — no doubt Uncle Jake or Aunt Mimi hid it or brought it back to the cave.

I couldn’t return to New Orleans fast enough. I called my mother to fetch me days earlier than planned. She acted put out because of her summer school schedule, but she arrived anyway, explaining to Uncle Jake and Aunt Mimi that she needed me at home.

Aunt Mimi suspected, and as my mother was putting the car in reverse to back out of the driveway, came running over to the passenger’s side, placing something cool in my palm. “So you’ll remember us fondly,” she said, looking sad as she released the stone.

I cried all the way home. The church people had freaked me out but Uncle Jake and Aunt Mimi were the first concerted attention I had received from family. They loved me despite my lack of intellect (unlike my sister's high IQ) and sophistication (unlike my brother's beauty and suaveness), and I more than likely hurt their feelings. Plus, I desperately wanted to return to that cave.

They never had children, lived out their lives in northern Alabama which meant I never saw them again; my parents certainly didn't want to visit. When Uncle Jake died, we didn't go to the funeral and later Aunt Mimi checked herself into a nursing home somewhere near Branson, her favorite vacation spot. She resides there to this day. I really need to visit.

I thought of them both the first night after the storm, after hours of blistering heat on the roof and no rescue, when darkness so intense fell upon us and TB curled into a ball and cried himself to sleep. I embraced the blackness that night, seduced by a night filled with stars and the quiet lapping of the water against the side of the house.

I hear that sound again and wake with a start. I've been dreaming about water again. Even though in my dreams the floodwaters stretch out for miles, smooth as a sheet of glass, peaceful and calm, I awake sweating.

I check my cell phone. Five minutes to six. Crap. When did I fall asleep?

I throw on fresh clothes, checking them to make sure the Goodwill smell has been washed off, and attempt to tame my wild curls that inflate like a balloon when it's humid. The Ozark mountain air must be helping for my waves of hair appear almost normal. I quickly add some eye shadow and mascara to accent my deep brown eyes my mother claims are too small and apply a touch of powder to cheeks my mother labels pastey. I give myself a harsh look, reminding myself that I'm not that bad looking. Since Katrina I've lost weight and can now fit into a size ten, first time since high school, and I still have my tan. I almost hear my mother responding, so I grab my cute new hippie purse I found at Salvation Army and rush down to the lobby.

This time, I avoid looking at the pool.

Irene is there waiting, talking to a tall, thin woman in jeans and a top reminiscent of the seventies with long brown hair captured in back by a multi-

colored clip that matches her shirt. She notices me and smiles and I instantly warm.

“You must be Viola,” she says with a Southern accent, pronouncing my name like the instrument. “I’m Winnie Calder.”

“Yes, I am.” I offer my hand. “But it’s Vi-o-la.”

Most of the time I let it slide. People are always mispronouncing my crazy name, but Winnie feels like a friend and I figure she won’t take offense.

She doesn’t. “Sorry,” she says with a laugh. “I never know how to say that name. I always got it wrong when I was studying *Twelfth Night* in high school.”

“My mom teaches Shakespeare at Tulane,” I say with a shrug. “She prefers the tragedies but I have a twin.”

Winnie laughs and I know my first impression was right on. She’s going to be fun. “Don’t tell me you’re a cross dresser too.”

Irene appears lost in this conversation so I explain how Viola and her twin Sebastian become shipwrecked in *Twelfth Night* and Viola wears men’s clothing to protect herself while she searches for Sebastian. It’s a great play, one of my favorites with Viola assisting Duke Arsenio to woo Olivia while Olivia falls for Viola, who’s really a girl in love with Duke. My mother, on the other hand, thinks Shakespeare’s comedies are like religion, something to keep the ignorant entertained.

Henry arrives and we all pile in the van. Since Richard was the last stop on the way in, he’s the first to be picked up. So, naturally, he’s in the front seat. Irene hangs back and whispers to us under her breath. “That man will find every excuse to be in the front. You just watch.”

Winnie laughs, and when Irene makes no attempt to enter the rear of the van, opens the side door and crawls into the back seat. I wonder if sitting in the second row, which takes little effort in and out of the van, will be Irene’s MO as well. Just for fun — or possibly because I’m feeling desperately out of place and in need of a friend — I join Winnie in the back.

Of course, I stumble once more, snagging my purse on the second-row armrest, which sprays the belongings all over the back floor. I ungracefully swing my butt to the seat and pull my shirt down which has risen above my

waist exposing my lovely white interior. I would laugh if this happened once and a while, but unfortunately it's my MO.

Winnie helps me gather the contents of my purse and is about to remark on the incident — or ask just why the hell I'm in the back to begin with — when I interrupt, asking, "So, where are you from?"

"No place Mississippi." She laughs heartedly. "Some place I'm sure you've never heard of."

She's probably right but I pride myself on knowing the South. It's my travel writing specialty, although mostly because I can't afford to go too far afield. "Try me."

"Duck Hill." She pulls it out long and slow for emphasis, so it emerges like several syllables instead of two. I don't know if she's doing that on purpose or it's her accent hanging thick. She pauses, watches my face, a smirk lingering a few seconds away.

"Okay," I finally answer. "You got me."

Winnie laughs and it feels good to hear it. I suddenly realize how starved I am for female friendship, the kind where you meet up for margarita specials, talk for hours and laugh in ridiculous ways, margarita salt coming out your nose.

"It's tiny." She leans in close and whispers, "Our claim to fame is we instigated the anti-lynching bill in Congress."

I winch. "Not exactly a tourist destination, I guess."

"Hard-ly," she replies in a singsong fashion. "But I live outside of Oxford now. I met my husband at Ole Miss and he got a job as the planetarium director at the local science museum. I write and raise kids — both the human kind and the ones that bleat — and he plays geek to other people's kids."

"Sounds cool."

She shrugs. "Can be. You have any kids?"

I shake my head, wondering if Lillye would be the age of one of hers if she were still alive. Pushing that thought deep inside — I'm weary of being depressed and the thought of having fun with another human being is too enticing — I keep the mood light.

"Just me. I got rid of my husband."

Winnie bends her head to one side, studying me. “I hope that was a good move.”

“Oh yeah,” I say with the same slow Southern style, which makes us both laugh. Yep, we’re definitely on the same wavelength.

“What are you girls talking about back there?” Richard calls out from the front.

“You, of course,” Winnie answers.

“We want in on the jokes,” Richard demands.

She turns to me and rolls her eyes.

“Have you traveled with him before?” I whisper.

“Twice.” Winnie’s eyes widen as she shakes her head. “If they would have told me he was on this trip, I wouldn’t have come.”

“Really, what are you two talking about?” Richard asks again.

“How much we love traveling with you, Richard,” Winnie yells out, and I can’t help laughing. “Where are you going next? I want to make sure I go too.”

Richard completely misses the sarcasm and spends the rest of the trip to downtown Bentonville relating his travel writing itinerary for the next few months, a full schedule of hiking in Sedona, Civil War history in Virginia, a quick trip through Washington, D.C. to do a piece on a Smithsonian building being refurbished and then on to China. He pauses when he gets to the last destination, waiting for us to ooh and ahh. When we fail to give him the right reaction, he explains how he nabbed this impressive trip overseas and the big-name publication he’s selling the article to. I giggle watching Winnie mentally log this information, nodding her head back and forth like those dogs you place on windshields.

“Oh goodie, we’re at the Walmart Museum,” she interrupts when Henry pulls next to the five and dime that Sam Walton owned almost fifty years prior, the launching point for the international phenomenon which made Sam and his offspring billionaires.

Henry pauses outside the building that is now closed and gives us a history of Sam Walton, how he started working in retail with J.C. Penney, then owning a Ben Franklin Store franchise known as Walton’s 5 & 10. Inspired by the success

of discount chains, he offered a similar business practice to the folks at Franklin, who turned him down. Walton then went on to start his own chain of discount stores in the neighboring town of Rogers and, as they say, the rest is history.

“I’ll bet those Franklin guys are shooting themselves in the head,” Richard says with a laugh, and Winnie rolls her eyes again. Irene never looks up, her head bent on her Blackberry.

What’s cool about this story is that the Waltons (I keep hearing John Boy saying good-night) have remained in Bentonville, as has the main operation of Walmart. Sam encouraged his business partners to open sites in Bentonville as well, so the sleepy little northwest Arkansas town became a booming entrepreneurial hub.

I never liked Walmart, mainly because the aisles are too crowded and you have to fight the hoards of humanity looking to save money and live better. But Walmart arrived on the Gulf Coast way before the feds did and ended up donating eighteen million dollars in relief supplies. After Henry mentions Sam driving a beat-up pickup truck because a fancier car would be impractical for hauling his hunting dogs, and the new green initiatives Walmart has begun, I have a new appreciation for the conglomerate. However, I still don’t want to shop there, prefer the ole mom and pops.

We tour the rest of the quaint town with its central square, old homes and biking trails, then get a glimpse into Compton Gardens which, Henry assures us, we will be able to tour on the last day. Sam’s daughter Alice Walton (“Goodnight Alice”) collects art and is planning a world-class art museum in the upcoming years. We’ll get a sneak peak of that as well, right before catching our planes home.

When we arrive at the restaurant the rest of the party is waiting inside, including Carrie and Alicia, two young and painfully thin PR women working for the Wallace Group, and a bespectacled couple from Wisconsin consisting of a newsletter journalist named Stephanie Pennington and her photographer husband, Joe.

“Yeah, right he’s a photographer,” Winnie whispers to me when the husband is introduced.

We make seven journalists, if you count the faux photographer, and three PR professionals. Everyone looks practiced and at ease and I wonder if they smell newbie emanating from my pores. I pat my clothes to make sure everything is in place and take a deep breath. I so want this to work out.

Jack Wendell, the owner of the restaurant greets us enthusiastically at the door, leading us to the back room and a massive table set aside for the travel writers. I don't know who is gladder to see whom, Jack meeting us or me meeting a free meal. Although I do wonder why we are eating seafood in northwest Arkansas. Irene has no hesitation bringing that up.

"Why a seafood restaurant? I always bypass seafood if I'm more than six hours from the sea."

The frank question takes the wind out of Jack's sails, but like a good promoter he steadies himself. "Good question. But because of our great new airport, we fly everything fresh in from the Gulf. I guarantee you it will be as fresh as anything within hours of a port."

"Will see," says Irene with a know-it-all smile.

We all grab seats and I feel like the new kid on the first day of school, awkward and self-conscious. I wonder if I'm out of my league. I keep an eye out for Winnie but she's busy hugging Carmine.

"How the hell are you?" she asks him.

He gives her that "Girl, you just don't know!" look that gay men do. "I need a stiff drink is how I am." Carmine pulls out a chair for Winnie. "Let's talk later."

Winnie glances at me and says to Carmine before sitting down, "Have you met Viola?"

Mr. Fancy Pants suddenly turns courteous and pulls out a chair for me as well, next to Winnie. "We met on the van, coming in from the airport," he says briefly, sitting on my left side and beginning a conversation with Henry.

"I take it you know him?" I whisper to Winnie.

"Yes, I do," she whispers back and we both laugh.

"Sorry, it's just that he was kinda rude on the ride in."

Winnie pulls her napkin into her lap. "That's just Carmine. He's really a lot

of fun.”

I look back at fun Carmine and wonder if now is a good time to ask about the wet opera singer but Jack instructs his waitresses to hand out menus and take our drink orders. On our press trip invitation it’s clear we’re responsible for our own alcohol but I watch the other journalists ask for wine lists and order cocktails.

“Alcohol isn’t included, right?” I whisper to Winnie, hoping I’m wrong because I can’t afford to pay for anything these days. I mean anything. And I would so love a beer.

“If they offer, it usually is, and he just did. Knock yourself out.”

I hesitantly order a Blue Moon, thinking I can always use my credit card if Winnie’s wrong. I hate doing that since TB and I agreed to use some of the insurance money to pay off debts and both vowed to keep it that way. TB thought it would help in the house’s renovations and refinance, but my thinking was it makes a divorce that much easier.

He can have the damn house.

“Where are you from?” Stephanie asks from across the table.

I’m about to blurt out my hometown when I remember the van trip from the airport. “I live in Lafayette, Louisiana,” I tell Stephanie. “Cajun Country.”

“I know Lafayette well,” she answers. “I’ve done press trips there and loved it.”

I haven’t lived there long enough to know much about the place, but most of what I’ve seen I like. People are genuinely friendly, will feed you at a moment’s notice — especially if they know you’re a Katrina transplant from New Orleans — and the food is out-of-this-world amazing. When I have free time I plan to act the travel writer in my new home.

“It’s a wonderful town,” I remark, leaving out the part about me only living there a few months.

“You know Gerald Breaux, of course?” Faux Joe asks.

I offer up a blank stare. “Sounds familiar.”

Stephanie eyes me curiously and replies somewhat coarsely, “He’s the director of the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission.”

“Oh, of course,” I lie. “Sure, just wasn’t thinking.”



Stephanie sips the wine being placed in front of her and I pray that's the end of that. She doesn't pursue the topic and I hope she doesn't see through me.

Winnie bites her lower lip glancing my way, as if she's trying to sum me up as well. Then a smile begins while her eyes glisten mischievously. "This is Viola Valentine and it's her first press trip."

The energy shifts and everyone looks my way, some laughing, some making comments. I look for a hole to crawl into. Carmine elbows me in the ribs. "Virgin," he says.

"Thanks Winnie." I send her my best evil eye.

"I think she was afraid to order alcohol," Winnie adds with a laugh.

Richard begins discussing how wine is necessary for proper digestion and that it should be *de rigueur* on press trips while Winnie raises her eyebrows in disgust.

"You started it," I inform her.

She laughs. "I'm almost sorry. Almost."

"Brat."

Being the fabulous PR professional that he is, Henry comes to my rescue — and everyone else's since it forces Richard to shut up. "Viola and I have done business together for a long time and now that she's finally on her own, she can join our trips. She's no stranger to travel writing though. She's won some impressive awards."

One award. But I look at Henry with puppy dog appreciation. If he were a date, we'd be making out by now.

Jack visits our table when the appetizers arrive, offering long descriptions of how fresh this seafood is, the delicate preparations made by his renowned chef (award-winning as well!) and how no one in this part of Arkansas has anything as delicious. Irene purses her lips and Richard huffs.

"I'm a food writer from New York," Irene tells me after Jack leaves. "I doubt this seafood is fresh."

I smile and nod, while thinking unpleasant thoughts about Yankees. In all fairness, I love New York and I've met some great residents of that wonderful city, and I hate when the shoe is on the other foot and people assume Southerners

are stupid and lazy. Still, know-it-all New Yorkers can rub my butt raw.

Instead, I focus on Winnie throughout the meal and her tales of raising three young children, chickens and goats and an herb garden on twenty Mississippi acres while working as a freelance writer and teaching part-time at the university's continuing education department.

"I also run elections, mystery shop and fill in on my friend's boutique when her employees don't show," Winnie says with a big snort.

"Careful, your wine may come out of your nose," I say, which makes her laugh and snort even harder.

We giggle like idiots, until Jack returns with triple chocolate brownies topped with homemade vanilla ice cream, caramel cheesecake, fruit tarts and oh my God crème brûlée laced with raspberries, accompanied by cups of espresso. I so love my new career.

"How on earth do you do it all?" I ask Winnie savoring that cracking sound when you break the top of a crème brûlée.

She shrugs. "Writing pays so well, you know."

Don't I ever.

"You do what you have to, to do what you love."

My dessert lodges in my throat and I feel half human. If only I had had that courage and perseverance years ago. But then I wouldn't have had Lillye.

"How about you?" she asks. "Did you lose your job after Katrina?"

She says it so quietly, in between bites of her cheesecake, no one catches on. "How did you know?" I ask in a whisper.

She gives me what her children must label the "mom look." "I gathered you're new to freelancing because of what Henry said but have been doing travel writing for a while, so I'm assuming a staff newspaper woman? And from what you said to Stephanie, you're new to Lafayette too, which means, since you said you're from Louisiana, that you were uprooted not too long ago. And more than likely lost your job in the process."

"Wow, you're good." I glance at my neighbors to make sure they haven't heard.

"Plus you graduated from that horrid school, LSU."

Now, I'm really puzzled.

She rolls her eyes. "You have a purple and gold tiger key chain."

I had forgotten about the purse incident. For a moment, I feel I should apologize for the tacky tiger, but I'm a huge LSU fan and piss on Ole Miss. I start to say as much — and change the direction of the conversation — when Winnie asks, "Why the big secret?"

Good question. Every person — and I mean every person — I know from New Orleans cannot wait for an eager ear to bend. They want to describe their trips through hell, relay how high the water came through their house, where they lived for the past few months, their exile horror stories. I shrug and shake my head. "I just don't want to relive it again."

Truth is, I've been down pity lane, lived on that street for years. I don't want to take that road no more.

Winnie pats my hand, but she's careful, as if she senses my thoughts on empathy. She taps my fingers gently, then retreats her hands to her lap. "Just don't keep too much inside, Sweet Pea. Grief is grief, no matter if it's a human being, your house or your hometown."

I'm done grieving, but I let her have this moment. Then I order an after-dinner drink since Richard pulled the waitress over and ordered a scotch.

"Good girl," she says a lot more enthusiastically. "Now you're getting the hang of things."

It's been a while since I've had alcohol, mostly because I can't afford it. My freelancing career so far has consisted of a travel column in the local weekly, some home and garden features in a regional magazine and book reviews for an academic journal, all of which have kept me in mac and cheese for three months. Out of shape in that regard, two beers and a glass of port has me feeling rather good, although those wheat and hops are sitting on a load of good eating and I feel like the Mississippi River in April after a Midwest flood.

Irene dissects the meal on the ride home, and of course finds the seafood lacking in freshness and creativity while thankfully Richard falls quiet in the front seat. Winnie appears to listen to Irene but my eyelids grow heavier every mile closer to the hotel and I lean my head back and rest. Henry brings me back.

When I jolt up in my seat, he laughs.

“Sorry, Viola, didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I was up late,” I lie, trying my best not to slur my words. Sheesh, how drunk am I?

“I said, do you like caves?”

My earlier dream of Uncle Jake hits me in a rush. I can feel the coolness of the stone in my hand and again wonder where that crystal ended up. It certainly didn’t float away.

“Uh, Viola?”

Focus, I command myself. “Sure, why do you ask?”

“We pass a cave on the way to Eureka Springs. One of the stops we were going to make on your track had to cancel so I thought we could substitute.”

The alcohol makes me pause too long in answering and Winnie assumes I don’t understand. “We all chose tracks when we signed up. Maybe you don’t remember that.”

Sure, I do. I chose the one with the spa treatment and shopping. When you’re invited to a formal press trip, they sometimes give you options. A round of tennis with instruction at the resort, for instance, or an hour-long massage? An afternoon of mountain biking or a few hours on your own to visit shops and cafes? Okay, really? You have to ask?

“You and Winnie are with Carrie tomorrow,” Henry says. “But instead of the arts center in the morning, which hasn’t finished its renovations yet, we thought we could do the Sycamore Cave by Beaver Lake.”

I honestly don’t know what to think of this. My twelve-year-old self would have jumped at the chance, but now I’m not so sure. Intense darkness near a water source doesn’t hold the same attraction as it once did. Can’t imagine why.

“Sure,” I answer. “Whatever works best.”

It’ll be fine, I tell myself, as Henry deposits us at the hotel, thinking of what Winnie had said earlier at dinner. I’ll do whatever I need to do to make this new career work.

This time I boldly gaze into the pool area, daring that crazy woman to show herself. She doesn’t, so I stumble off to bed, Winnie chuckling behind me,

muttering something about how LSU grads can't hold their liquor.

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## Chapter 4

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Say what you will about the South and its culture, but our food makes life more bearable. Nothing like cheese grits, over-easy eggs, large slabs of greasy bacon and biscuits and gravy to make a hangover disappear.

I'm eating way too much and I know it. I feel like a hunger victim at a feast. Carmine raises an eyebrow when I reach for another biscuit but it's been years since I've had white gravy.

"You might want to pace yourself, Virgin," Carmine says, raising that annoying eyebrow.

The city's tourism director arrives, a perky woman with a nice smile and an armful of swag. Everyone gets a press packet and an accompanying bag nicely adorned with a big ribbon on top. I can't wait to see what's inside.

She gives her speech about northwest Arkansas and what's in store for us during the next few days, talking mostly about her area of expertise, which is the Bentonville-Rogers area, but I'm too busy focusing on the drum player in my head. I motion the waitress for another cup of coffee, but it's suddenly time to go and we're rushed out the door. I get my coffee to go and thankfully don't spill it on my way to the back of the van.

We're headed to *tour* the Walmart Museum this time and I take the opportunity to peek inside my gift bag. It contains a Bentonville coffee mug and some assorted Arkansas state tourism do-dads such as a luggage tag sporting "Visit Arkansas State Parks," a keychain from the Clinton Library and a wine

opener announcing some festival. Cool. For a woman rebuilding her life after losing everything, I'm grateful.

The rest of the van is moaning about having to lug things back on the plane, particularly breakables like mugs (I get the feeling mugs are a common occurrence and these folks want nothing of them).

"I'll take whatever you all don't want," I say, thinking a set of matching coffee mugs could be used for company when they come to tea. Okay, I'm kidding! Well, sort of. Much to my surprise, everyone — and I mean everyone — eagerly hands me their bags. I gather up what will become my Bentonville coffee set and feel thrilled. I'm sorry my mother with her uptown values and designer clothes isn't here to witness my fall from grace.

The Walmart Museum offers the story of Sam Walton, his dream that resulted in enormous wealth and possibly the death of small-town America, although I never say as much. After a quick overview, we head to the Bentonville tourism office around ten for coffee and bakery treats — yes, more food, and yes, I eat some, plus stick a scone in my purse in case I get hungry later — then pile into the vans for a driving tour of Bentonville that's a mix between Arkansas historic and Made in China. We pause at the lovely Compton Gardens and I'm thankful for the fresh air and exercise, even if it's no more than a short walk. Then we're back on the road, heading to lunch, which makes me regret that extra biscuit, not to mention the sticky bun at the tourism office. This will be our final destination together before we reconvene in Eureka Springs for dinner and more food.

Once again, the owner of the quaint restaurant brings out platters of appetizers, extolling the food's quality, followed by a specialty soup, salads for those who need greens (I'm not one of them, although Miss Only-Seafood-Within-100-Miles insists upon it), entrees and a plethora of desserts. I think if someone pokes me I shall burst.

We split up in the parking lot, Carrie taking me, Winnie and the couple from Wisconsin to Eureka Springs via Sycamore Cave. Alicia hails Richard and Irene to her van for a visit to Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge with no doubt Richard nabbing the front seat; I overhear him mentioning car sickness. Henry and

Carmine will hit a round of golf somewhere.

This time, Faux Joe gallantly opens the front door for me, which makes me feel guilty for labeling him that. I glance back at the others, offering my front row perch. Everyone politely declines and Joe smiles as he closes my door. Photographer or not, he's a good man in my book.

Winnie takes the back row again and stretches out, leaving the middle aisle for the journalism duo. I turn and make small talk, learning that Stephanie and Joe have been publishing their travel newsletter for years, hailing back to the days when newsletters arrived in your mailbox. They now have a blog, podcasts and a local radio show, and I admire their tenacity.

Alicia proves harder to dissect, fresh out of Florida State with a public relations degree, very sweet and polite but either told not to say much or is feeling self-conscious about doing so. She answers when spoken to and explains little bits of info on the area, but that's about it.

I spend most of the hour talking to the Wisconsin duo about the possible demise of the newspaper as we know it while Winnie takes a nap in the back.

After twists and turns through the Ozarks we travel down a tree-shaded driveway to the cave's entrance. On the right is a two-story stone house with charming gables and an oversized front porch, no doubt where the owners live. I immediately romance the lifestyle of living in the woods, operating a cave for a living, waking up to greenery and birds, maybe owning a cat or two. I tend to do that, drive down country roads and imagine the lives of people in the ranch house, the woodsy cottage, the sprawling farmhouse. Would I be happy chucking everything and living in the sticks? Doubtful, but then, anything looks better than a potting shed in the rear of an estate house that's seen grander days. Not that I'm complaining. I wonder if my handsome landlord has looked at the busted pipe under my sink when I feel a set of gazes upon me; the hairs on my neck have come to attention.

I turn and find I'm right. Everyone is exiting the van. "What did I miss?"

"We're starting in the gift shop," Winnie says to me as she passes, rubbing her eyes. "Where did you go?"

If I had been born ten years later, they would have put Adderal in my



formula. No one called me ADHD in school. It was more like “space cadet” and “spaz.” I used to tell people I was working on my Nobel Peace Prize speech. Today, I tell people I’m working on my novel. That doesn’t fly either.

We follow the owners into a building that’s not so charming, something built in the seventies no doubt to accommodate tourists but screaming in contrast to the sweet farmhouse up the road. Still, the windows let in tree-balanced sunshine and a cool breeze and we all turn ADHD as we gaze upon the gaudy trinkets, T-shirts, gardening accessories and a vast collection of rocks and minerals while the owners, Bud and Charlene Moseley, tell the history of the cave. Despite my lack of some brain chemical, I can listen to the story while perusing the shelves. In fact, moving around or holding items in my hands helps me focus.

The cave was discovered in the mid-1800s by a couple exploring the lake. They picked up a hot fishing spot and followed it to a remote cove blanketed by sycamore trees. When they stopped to enjoy lunch, the wife stumbled upon the entrance to the cave.

“She had to pee,” I mumbled, enjoying the smooth surface of a polished angelite.

Charlene laughs and I suddenly realize I spoke that out loud. “You’re probably right,” Charlene says. “What woman wouldn’t?”

I place the angelite back in its box, thinking I should focus more by actually making eye contact.

“Around the turn of the century,” Bud continues, “a family by the name of Jones bought the land and opened it up for tours, mainly attracting visitors who came for the waters at Eureka Springs. They used to advertise that waters deep within the cave would cure diseases, but there’s only one spring that we have found in the cave and it’s inaccessible.”

“We’ve only owned the property for eight months,” Charlene interjects. “We haven’t thoroughly investigated the entire cave yet.”

Stephanie asks when they will open the entire cave so she can adequately report this to her readers and the couple explains their construction schedule, how they are adding a boardwalk, a nature hike and a corn maze in the fall as added attractions. When Stephanie starts asking about details, my mind wonders

back to the angelite. The light-blue stone has been cut into a heart and polished and when I pick it up again, sits warm in my palm. People believe angelite assists its owners with spiritual communication. When Lillye died, I bought several, placed them throughout my house in the hopes that I could hear her voice one more time. The effort was futile and I'm trying to convince myself to place this rock — it's only a rock, after all — back on the shelf when I feel someone approach from behind.

"You picked that stone up twice," Charlene says to me. "I think it wants to go home with you."

Goosebumps charge up my body as if they are racing with one another to reach my neck. Wasn't that the very thing Aunt Mimi told me when I visited her cave? I shiver as if to shake off the feeling but I find the angelite remains in my hand.

"I think I will buy this one," I say to Charlene, adding, "It's a lovely color" to keep her from thinking I'm buying it for any other reason.

To my surprise, Charlene places her hand beneath mine and folds her fingers and mine over the angelite. "My gift," is all she says and heads back to Bud who is opening the back door.

"Y'all ready?" Bud calls out.

I slip my angelite into my pocket and follow the line out the door. I'm the last one on the long woodsy path down to the lake and the cave and I'm missing most of what is being spoken at the front of the line. I don't mind because it allows me an opportunity to drop back and enjoy the sycamores and maples, witness a chipmunk scurrying across the way and listen to birds calling out from the treetops. The path is a switchback down a steep decline and the lake comes into view every few yards, teasing us with its placid blue waters, making us want more. By the time we reach the bottom of the trail, I hear snippets about Native Americans and how they used the cave, dating back centuries. Suddenly, I wish I had been closer. Yet, the peacefulness of the woods embraces me like a mother and I find my soul lifting. I will ask Winnie later what I missed.

We follow the lake for a small time before the cave comes into view. Indeed, Bud and Charlene have their work cut out to make this attraction more tourist

friendly. For now, those in wheelchairs have no access and they are working on that, they say. The path heading inside is rugged and bumpy and sometimes difficult for those of us on two feet with boots. I stumble, naturally, and Winnie laughs.

“LSU wimp,” she whispers back at me.

“Redneck colonels,” I whisper back, and we both giggle like college students.

We pause at the first area large enough for a group to assemble, where a few stalactites drip from the ceiling and pools of milky water form at the floor. A hole in the rock ceiling allows for light to cascade down and the illuminating effect is remarkable. We all take a moment to enjoy this delicate balance of light and water and I can feel our shared energy of awe.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Bud asks.

“Very nice,” Stephanie answers, while Joe pulls out a small tripod and shoots a bunch of photos. He kneels ever so slightly to catch the water dripping into a particularly lovely pool, its drops sending circles through the water as if in slow motion. I won’t doubt his abilities again.

“As we said, records have indicated that the Native Americans of this area used the cave, although for what we don’t know for sure.” Bud points to unusual markings on the wall behind us. “A local archaeologist claims those pre-date white settlers to this area. We’ve heard lots of stories from locals that Indians used this cave for the spring waters. One local historian believes those signs mean ‘a special place for water.’”

“Where is the spring?” Winnie asks.

Bud and Charlene look at each other and Charlene laughs nervously. “It’s down a long, dark corridor that’s very dangerous,” Bud says. “Once we get the cave up to where we want it to be, we will start exploring and developing that side.”

“But if that’s where this special spring is, wouldn’t that be a high priority,” Winnie insists. She looks at me and gives me a “Duh?” look, and I agree. That’s what I would want to see, just like those early twentieth century tourists coming over from Eureka Springs.

Charlene scratches her head, looks away and offers up that nervous laugh again, like the criminals I used to interview for the newspaper, the ones who would claim they were innocent while avoiding your eyes and shuffling their feet. There's more to this story, I think.

Winnie starts to retort but Bud turns and begins talking about the Civil War markings a few yards away, claiming that these scribblings left by retreating Confederates never fail to attract history buffs and re-enactors. Personally, graffiti doesn't interest me. I've seen it in other Southern caves and find it as distasteful as the gang markings lining the streets of New Orleans. I look up at the ceiling where light filters down and let the sun bath my face before descending into darkness. Nature is perfect just the way it is.

It only takes a few yards of walking from the hole in the ceiling before we can't see without the aid of Bud and Charlene's lantern. At this point, the couple hands us all flashlights and we continue on our way.

"They are definitely not ready to open for tourists," Winnie whispers. "You could kill yourself in here."

As if hearing us — although I know we were well out of earshot — Charlene begins shouting from the front that for now they do specialized guided tours for those who want a real cave experience. So far, they have been mostly catering to college students coming over from Fayetteville.

At the mention of the University of Arkansas, another esteemed member of the Southeastern football conference, Winnie and I both scrunch our noses in disdain.

"Razorbacks!" she whispers, and I fight off the giggles.

We stop when the tunnel becomes tight and it's now completely dark except for the faint glow of our flashlights. As we shine our beacons around us we see a delightful dwelling of stalagmites emerging from the cave floor. Off to the right, next to where the couple is pointing is a collection of soldier names scratched upon the wall.

Bud is obviously a Civil War fan for he begins relating battles that occurred in Arkansas and their significance to the Southern cause. I find the Civil War tiring, a simple case of not doing the right thing in regards to slavery, that

resulted in the loss of so many lives. I'm not a fan of either side, mind you. I find war ridiculous, like children fighting over toys. But the Civil War happened on my turf, so its legacy lingers throughout my homeland. I love Southern history, particularly Louisiana, but you can have the blue and grey nonsense.

Since I'm once again at the back of the line, I slink back and explore the unusual natural formations that surround me. There's a particularly gorgeous stalagmite off to the side, but I have to practically crawl to get a better view and snap a photo. I figured it's worth it, but I suddenly find myself slipping down a slick decline that seems to go on forever. I keep moving, hoping the momentum will help me remain on my feet, and quickly slip the camera into my jacket pocket for safe keeping. No matter how I attempt to right myself, several yards later I'm flat on my butt on the cold, wet floor. I slide my hands into my pockets to make sure my camera is okay — it is — and find the angelite cool and humming.

Before I can regain my composure, a wave of goosebumps skitters up my arms and my head feels light and dizzy. I slowly stand, trying to recoup my equilibrium and it's then that I hear a soft whimpering to my right. My first thought is that it's an animal trapped in the darkness, unable to find its way out. I swallow hard, hoping it's nothing prone to attacking people, and slowly make my way back from whence I came. The more I head back towards the others, however, the stronger the sound, and the goosebumps double. As I round the corner and lock my boot on a solid rock, I'm able to pull myself back up the path. Here, the sound is strongest. I'm almost sure now that it's right next to me. Only it's not an animal.

I raise my flashlight slowly, trying to keep the beam steady from all my shaking. I'm scared to death, have no idea what the light will uncover. In the darkness all I can make out for sure is the sound of a young girl softly crying.

When the light meets the origin of the sound, it is indeed a girl of about sixteen or seventeen, dressed in old-fashioned school clothes of a mid-calf white pleated skirt, white shirt and a little navy blue tie around her neck that reminds me of sailor outfits. She's sitting in a pool of water, legs outstretched before her with cuts and bruises appearing where her tights are torn and her skin exposed. I

try to make out her face but her right hand is placed over her right eye as she whimpers, rocking back and forth agitated.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice shaking. What on earth is this girl doing here? I don’t know what frightens me more, the fact that I may be witnessing another ghost or finally losing my mind. And yet, this girl appears so real, down to the dark clay marring her shoes.

She glances up at me and her eyes narrow in anger. She stops whimpering, instead holding up her right hand like a cop signaling a car to stop, as if she wants me to get a good look at her fingers and palm. Her hand is covered in blood, captured, no doubt, from the gaping wound in her forehead that I now witness. I sense this girl is just now figuring out she’s been hurt and wants to express her rage over the accident to someone. Did she fall here like I did? Was she part of a school group that may have been here before our arrival? But then why wouldn’t the Moseleys know about it?

Before I can inquire further, the girl’s face contorts into rage, she lurches toward me and screams with all her might. I’m so startled by her piercing and angry outburst that I stumble backwards in an effort to put distance between us. My first thought is she will do me harm and I reach out to find the path to get away. In my rushed attempt to do so, my head hits the stone wall behind me. Hard. I don’t realize immediately that I have done damage to myself, stand swaying like an idiot while the schoolgirl yells to the high heavens. The world tilts and fades and I notice the blood across the girl’s lap before total darkness consumes me.

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## Chapter 5

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I hear the voices before I see them, particularly Winnie insisting someone take me to a hospital. I suddenly remember the line of doctors at the Cajundome in Lafayette, checking vital signs, poking me as they looked for infections and god knew what, probing me with needles to prevent new ones. After two days on a roof you'd have thought that they would have let me rest, showed me to a comfy bed and a hot meal, but we stood in line for two hours filling out forms and getting poked.

I bolt upright and practically shout, "I'm fine."

Winnie rushes over and takes me in from head to foot like a mom. I now realize I'm lying on a couch in the cave office. How did I get here?

"How do you feel?" Winnie asks.

"Like running a marathon," I answer weakly.

A sliver of a smile emerges on its own but Winnie's in mom mode, touching my head for fever, checking out the back of my head where someone has placed a gauze.

"You hit the back of your head," Winnie tells me. "But you must have bit the inside of your cheek when you fell because there was blood on your face."

I explore the area around my mouth, hoping it's not that bad, but it feels soft and clean. Bless her heart, that Winnie. She cleaned me up.

"What happened to the girl?"

Everyone stops for a moment, gazing at me like they're afraid I might have

dislodged something inside my brain. It dawns on me that the schoolgirl might have been my imagination again — or worse. And now everyone is concerned I might have lost my mind.

“What girl?” Charlene asks from behind Winnie.

I lean over and spot Charlene, ashen face, hands clutched tightly in front of her, and gather that she’s worried I will sue them, put them out of business before they have time to adequately start their new adventure.

Or maybe she knows something.

Before I have time to inquire, a paramedic arrives at my side, carrying all sorts of torture. It’s more gauze, antiseptic and what looks like some Acetaminophen but there’s a big needle in the pile.

“I’m fine,” I reiterate, never taking my eyes off that needle.

He follows my gaze and to his credit reads my mind instantly. “When was the last time you had a tetanus shot?”

I can’t help but laugh at this. Ten a.m. Wednesday, September 1, 2005. “Within the last few months,” I answer.

“Are you sure?” He looks at me sternly. Must be a dad. Do they go to school for this or something? “Because most people can’t remember. And it’s important that you have one.”

I smile like a good student. “Trust me. It was within six months.”

He relaxes and starts bandaging me up and it’s here that I catch his name on his right breast pocket. Peter Parker. Really? I start to giggle which turns into a snort and then suddenly gag on the blood that must have been waiting inside my throat. It tastes nasty but Winnie and Charlene are looking at me with concern so I don’t want to spit it out and have them faint at my feet. I swallow the nastiness and grimace, which makes Spiderman suddenly concerned.

Wow, blue eyes, I think as he turns his attention away from my wound and into my face. Maybe I’m not dead to men as I thought. Reece, my gorgeous Cajun landlord, comes to mind and that childish grin keeps on keeping on.

“You okay?” he asks and I nod like a teenager.

“Is your name really Peter Parker?” I am a teenager.

He gives me a smile he must bestow upon half the population who routinely



ask that question, the one that says “Yes it’s my name and I know, I know” but what he’s really thinking is “Get over it, why don’t you.”

“It’s a family name,” he says politely, and I suddenly feel stupid. People in glass houses, you know? Viola Valentine is no walk in the park.

“My last name is Valentine,” I tell him, hoping this will bond us. “I got a lot of grief in school, especially because I never had a date.”

“I doubt that.”

He’s not flirting with me — believe me I know because I’ve had a lifetime of people not flirting with me — but it’s sweet of him to say. I smile politely, kicking myself for laughing at his name. He’s cute, but I now realize as I gaze into a head full of thick black hair and a face devoid of life’s harsh lessons that he’s about five years younger than me.

“She needs to go to the ER,” Winnie says from somewhere, bringing me back to the pounding in my head. Amazing how blue eyes and a cute ass (Okay, he turned at one point and I looked; I’m not dead, thank you Jesus!) can take your mind off the pain. But it’s there, dull and consistent, and I’m ready for drugs, not a hospital. A strong martini might do the trick.

“I’m not going to the hospital,” I tell Winnie.

“You blacked out,” she insists. “Poor Bud and Joe had to carry you up the hill unconscious. Viola, it could be something worse.”

I stand up to test my sea legs and find it’s a throbbing headache but nothing else. I teeter a bit, but I’m fine. Instinctively, I know there is nothing worse going on in my head. Well, physically that is.

“Look,” I proclaim to everyone in the small room that appears to be the office off the gift shop. “I’m fine.”

Winnie places hands firmly on her tiny waist and gives me a stare. For a petite woman, she packs a force. “You were talking about some girl down there.”

At this point, Spiderman gives me a questioning look and starts to ask, but Charlene jumps in the mix, gently pushing Winnie and Peter out of the room. “Let me talk to Viola for a minute, please you all?”

“I need to check her blood pressure,” Peter insists and Winnie starts mentioning hospital again, but Charlene gently nudges them toward the door,

convincing them in her sweet Southern accent that she will only be a moment.

“A little girl talk, that’s all,” she concludes as Winnie and Peter slide into the gift shop and Charlene closes the door.

I don’t even give her time to speak. “You’ve seen her, haven’t you?”

She pauses, which makes me worry I may be wrong and I’m indeed insane from post traumatic stress. But Charlene nods and I find myself exhaling.

“What in the world...?”

Charlene looks around even though we’re alone. She pulls up the stool Peter was using and scoots up close. I can sense she doesn’t know what to say or how to explain this, pulling her hands through her hair nervously and causing a bit of it to stand up straight on top. I want to smooth it down, but she suddenly finds her voice.

“I’ve heard screaming in there. In fact, pretty much every time I go past that entrance.”

“It’s where the spring is, isn’t it?”

Charlene nods.

“Have you ever been down there?”

I can tell she has and it was an experience she regrets. I sympathize. “Once, I took a strong lantern and ventured down about a quarter mile. I found the spring, which is quite lovely and pure. I took some water in a jug to have it tested and headed home. And that’s when I saw her.”

I sit up eagerly, which makes my head pound but I don’t care. These are the best words I’ve heard someone speak in days. If they were food, I would be devouring them like dessert.

“I can’t believe you saw her,” I manage without choking up. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“You’re not crazy, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I lean back in my chair and exhale again, wishing I had taken that Tylenol before Peter was rushed out the room.

“Was she a schoolgirl? Dressed in schoolgirl clothes?”

Charlene nods. “With a gash across her forehead, much like yours only in the front.”

“She acted like she didn’t know she was dead. Unless, of course, she’s a live girl and lives down there.”

Charlene smiles at this and I relax slightly. I’m amazed to find my muscles taunt and achy.

“I shone my light at her and she screamed,” Charlene explains. “I was like you, frightened and started backing up the trail to get away. But she disappeared as fast as she came.”

“You saw her vanish?” Oh please, oh please. I so want this crazy girl to be a typical apparition so there’s no question I haven’t lost my mind.

“Poof!” Charlene says with animation.

My shoulders drop with relief and my head even feels better. Charlene isn’t as relieved as I am. She’s obviously disturbed to find a dead schoolgirl in her cave.

“Okay, so we both saw a ghost but who is she?” Charlene asks.

I think back on Uncle Jake and Aunt Mimi and their cave in Alabama and all the soft, comforting hands reaching out to me in the dark. My logical journalist brain wants to dissect all this, providing hard facts to explain the phenomenon but that won’t do. There are no hard facts to prove the deceased walk the earth. Instead, I’m convinced the answers lie in the emotions, because as clearly as I saw the blond schoolgirl holding her head as blood trickled through her fingers, I knew she was dazed and unaware of her death.

Besides, I’m a fan of the ghost reality shows on TV and swear that ghosts have unfinished business. Or they are confused as to why they died, somehow missed the bus to the otherworld.

“I think she doesn’t know she’s dead,” I deduce. “She could have been here on a field trip with her school, got lost, hit her head and died in there and no one was able to find her.”

Charlene nods in agreement. “That would make sense. And no one thought to go down that path because she might have done what you did, leave the group without anyone noticing.”

I feel guilty, like a naughty child. “Sorry.”

Charlene tilts her head and smiles. “No, don’t be. I find Civil War shit boring

too.”

This makes us both laugh, which cuts the tension. But in a flash I remember something.

“I believe she was murdered.”

The blood leaves Charlene’s face and I wonder if she owns a psychic nature as well, for she understands me, maybe hoped for the best but silently knew the worst. “I think so, too.”

I sit up more, pounding now back full force and I grimace.

“Shall I get Peter?” Charlene asks.

“Not yet, because you might want to call the police and have them search the cave for bones and I want to give you one last thought.”

Charlene leans in closer, as if the walls have ears.

“The last thing I remember before I blacked out was blood in her lap.”

Charlene shudders as if goosebumps have taken over her body, an intense skittering over her skin. Suddenly, I feel them too and shiver as well.

The door opens and Peter sticks his head inside, which makes Charlene rise and ask for a blanket. “I think our patient is a bit cold,” she tells him.

Peter leaves to retrieve one from the EMT van but Winnie is Johnny on the spot, entering the room and gazing around to see what she might have missed. “What’s going on?”

Charlene doesn’t know what to say, to explain how our little tête-a-tête involved ghosts. I stand and pretend I’m feeling like a million dollars, heading for the door and hopefully a hot bath at the hotel in Eureka Springs.

“We were discussing how that path I stumbled upon was not for public use and how Charlene and Bud are putting up barriers this week to keep people out. I assured her I wasn’t going to write about my misbehavior.”

Winnie senses I am lying — that mother thing again — but she nods. “You really need to do something about that,” she tells Charlene.

“Don’t be hard on her,” I add. “It was all my fault. I never stayed in line in school and I never did what I was told.”

Winnie gives me a look that says I know something more is happening here. As I pass her on the way out the door, she whispers, “You’re going to tell me

everything in the van.”

I nod, which makes me wince and I see her eyes widen in my peripheral vision. “Stop, Mom. I’m fine. Really. It’s just a headache.”

“You should go to the hospital,” she says to me as she takes my elbow and helps me outside.

“No way, no how,” I whisper back. “I’m a Katrina survivor, remember? Bad memories.”

She lets it rest and I’m thankful for that. Besides, I’m sure it’s just a bad bump to the head and that martini is sounding better and better. If I’m lucky, my hotel room will have an oversized bath with some signature bath products and I can sip my alcohol and slip into heaven.

As I enter the gift shop I realize my worries about the rest of the group being bored and anxious to get out of there was unfounded. They have been happily exploring the woods and lake, I’m told, or buying stuff in the gift shop.

It’s then that I remember my angelite stone and slip my hand within my pocket. The cool stone remains and for a second I remember the girl’s face, bloody and frightful but also mad as hell. I pull my hand out of the pocket and the image vanishes, much like it did for Charlene.

“Why now?” I wonder. “What the hell?”

I feel a pinch at my elbow. Winnie’s giving me that look again. “Why what?”

Crap, I said it out loud. “Why on my first trip did I have to do something stupid and get hurt?” I say with the best innocent look I can summon. She doesn’t buy it and I pull away from her grasp, looking instead for Charlene, a friendly face who doesn’t think I’ve gone dancing with the fairies.

As I expected, Charlene is right behind me, embraces me tightly and whispers in my ear. “I’m so sorry.”

I enjoy the warm feel of her arms about me, wondering how long it’s been since I’ve been hugged. “Now how would you know the cave was haunted?” I whisper back.

She still looks scared, as if the journalists visiting her this morning promising to put her on the tourism radar have turned into *60 Minutes*.

“Don’t worry,” I assure her. “The police may straighten this out.”

Bud joins us, giving me a big hug and I wish I could stay in this sweet little paradise, the crazy dead schoolgirl notwithstanding. Alicia also looks worried, so I figure I should make my speech now.

“It was all my fault,” I tell the others, although Winnie frowns, arms folded tight across her chest. “I left the group and started playing Indiana Jones and went down this really dangerous trail. Believe me, if anyone remains on the trail they are perfectly safe. I’m just a sucker for adventure.”

The Moseleys begin a long litany about how they are working hard to bring the cave up to code and how that area is never open when tourists are here, but we were a small group and they didn’t think we would go exploring (Charlene gives me a guilty look for saying that but heck, it’s true). Finally, Stephanie holds up a hand and shakes her head.

“We’re not going to write about this,” she says which makes both Bud and Charlene exhale, a bit too loudly I might add. “I wasn’t planning on including your attraction until you had it fully functional, since my newsletter caters mostly to families.”

“This was a sneak peak,” Alicia interjects and I’m amazed to find her piping in.

“A beautiful place,” Joe adds. “It’s going to be just lovely when you have it done. Why don’t you let us know when it’s finished and we’ll come back for a visit.”

Bud looks like he’s won the lottery. “That would be fantastic. We can do that. And we’ll put you up anywhere you like.”

I give Charlene one last look and we silently speak volumes across the driveway. “Let me know what happens,” I say and she nods.

We all pile into the van and we’re not halfway down the road when Winnie starts her twenty questions. Only my head is now reminding me bigtime that I slammed it against a wall of rock and even my teeth hurt when I try to speak. I flush down the Tylenol with water Spidey gave me and close my eyes for a few moments of peace, which freaks Winnie out even more. Something about staying awake in case you have a concussion.

“Don’t you remember Peter telling you all this?”

I shake my head, and swear there *are* things rattling around inside. All I remember is the look on that girl's face when she found blood on her fingers. The more I run that movie inside my head, the more I'm convinced she has no idea she is dead.

Winnie keeps talking, mostly small talk about her son's football team and the trouble goats get into while we drive into Eureka Springs. Even Stephanie and Joe get into the act, rambling on about their last trip to Europe and what they had to eat on a barge ride through the Loire Valley. I'm about to scream that I'm in no danger of falling asleep unless they keep talking when we make the turn off the main highway, heading into town, and I'm anxious to see what this eclectic mountain town, founded on a series of medicinal springs, looks like.

A native of flatlands, I'm surprised at the twisting, winding roads that make up the town, the houses rising above us since placed on a mountainside, and how quickly we roll through the quaint downtown and are now at the Crescent Hotel. Perched high above Eureka Springs, the historic Victorian offers a stunning view of the Ozarks, the Catholic Church below and a giant Jesus statue in the distance.

"Jesus!" I shout, and the van's occupants immediately think I'm in pain, offering all kinds of support. "No, Jesus," I repeat, pointing off in the distance. We turn a corner and the hotel is now blocking the view so all they see is my finger pointing to the giant crescent moon gracing the hotel's portico.

"You need to rest," Winnie insists.

"I need a drink," I reply.

Alicia parks the van, unloads our bags and relays instruction as we head toward the historic hotel built in 1886. We have a couple of hours before drinks with the mayor and then dinner in the Crystal Ballroom. She suggests a dip in the pool if we're brave enough since there is a chill in the late spring air, a walk through the woodsy grounds, maybe a drink in the bar. I'm envisioning a hot bath, deep shampoo to get the blood out of my scalp and relaxing in a plush bathrobe. If I can figure out a way to get a martini in this picture, even better. This fantasy becomes so real I'm beginning to tingle all over.

Winnie, bless her heart, nabs my hotel key and we head upstairs in a tiny, slow elevator to the fourth floor. We roll our suitcases to Room 420, where she

leaves me, insisting to come inside and help me unpack, undress, do whatever, but I wave her away. There's a bathtub on the other side of this door, I know it, and quiet time in hot water is all I require. I will quickly take some photographs of the room to use in my story, then unload my suitcase since we'll be in Eureka Springs for three days. Once I'm settled, it's just me and that bathtub.

Winnie finally gives in, offers help one last time and makes her way to her room down the long hall that looks like something out of a Victorian novel.

Finally, I think, peace and quiet, relaxation time. What I've been dreaming of for weeks. My potting shed, despite allowing me to follow my bliss, lacks any semblance of a decent bathroom, including a tub. Instead, I'm forced to take showers in an ancient stall surrounded by old faux marble slabs and rusty fixtures where brown water emerges before coming clean.

As I use the old key to open the door — the kind they used before those little plastic things that turn lights from red to green — I hear movement inside my room. I figure it's the maid, but my usual calm demeanor escapes me and I'm ready to push this person out, no matter the condition of the room.

Instead, the person opens the door for me, and it's not the maid. My key still hanging lifeless in my hand, I gaze up to find my goofy ex-husband staring down, a stupid grin playing his face.

“Hey babe,” he says. “Surprise.”



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## Chapter 6

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My ex-husband stands in the doorway, clueless as usual. He thinks I'm happy to see him when I'm ready to strangle him until his tongue turns purple.

"What are you doing here?" I practically shout.

"I thought it would be a nice surprise." He pulls open the door wide. "Wait until you see the room. It's really cool."

TB grabs my polka dot suitcase and throws it on the bed, wrinkling the bedspread in the process. Now that I get a good look at it, the bed's totally disturbed as if someone has been stretched out on it all afternoon. Seeing that the TV is on some basketball game, I know who the culprit is.

I look around and he's obviously enjoyed a nice meal via room service. The tray containing an empty plate, utensils and those tiny little condiments I love to bring home is spread out across the bureau and two beer bottles are lying on the floor by the nightstand. His backpack has vomited clothes all over the floor. I peek into the old-fashioned bathroom with its giant tub and pedestal sink and see bath products open and scattered about.

It's everything I can do not to scream. "Damn it, TB. I have to shoot this room."

Again, lights on, no one's there. "Huh?"

"This isn't a vacation, you idiot. I'm here doing a story for the magazine. And these people who pay for all this do it for *me*, not you!"

TB tilts his head like a puppy, his oversized brown eyes glazed with

confusion. “It’s a hotel room, Vi. How does me being here cost them anything?”

I shake my head in amazement. “Who paid for the room service?”

He gazes at the mess he’s made, mouth open. “Isn’t that part of the free room?”

All I can utter at this point is some loud animalistic noise, which, coupled with the head injury, causes me to see white spots floating across the ceiling.

“I thought this would be a nice romantic chance for us to reconnect,” TB insists.

I turn, mouth agape, staring at him as if he’s lost his mind. I speak softly as much to contain my anger as to make this child understand. “We’re separated, remember? That means you and me, different places. No more marriage.”

TB looks away dejected, digging his hands deep within his torn and worn Levys. “So says you.”

“So says the court,” I remind him. “It’s official. I left you. We’re divorcing. End of story.”

I look around at the mess he’s made, realizing that a photo is now impossible. I’ll have to wait until he leaves and the maid cleans up the room, which means I must move all my stuff into the closet and not be able to spread out like TB has already done. I rub my eyes and groan, not because it’s that big of a deal that I haven’t shot a ready-made room and gotten it out of the way, but because I so wanted to slip into this delicious Victorian room, enjoy a bath and be alone for two hours. The last person I wanted to see was my ex-husband.

“You’re mad at me?”

Can this day get any worse? “Ya think?”

“I thought it would be a nice surprise,” he says defensively, as if *I’m* being the jerk.

“Yeah, great surprise.”

“What’s the big deal? You get all this for free.”

At this, I’m now incensed beyond any rational limits and I know that if the conversation continues I will murder this man. I get right up into his face to make sure he understands every word I’m about to say.

“This is a press trip,” I say through clenched teeth slowly and succinctly so

he doesn't miss a thing. "They pay for everything for me so that I will write about it. It's not a vacation. Why would they pay for you to eat their food when you're not writing about it? What did you think you would do all day and night while I'm out running around covering Eureka Springs? Because I'm here doing a story!"

At this point my voice has reached shouting level and I'm suddenly reminded of my headache, which has increased tenfold and rising. I touch the back of my head where the dried blood clot remains. "I need a bath," is all I can manage.

TB starts to speak but I throw up an angry finger in his face. He attempts it again, but I give him the evil eye. "Don't," I manage to whisper. Anything louder coming out of my mouth and my head will blow for sure.

I try to exhale, to resume a steady breath so I won't pass out on the floor, and it's then that TB notices my injury. "Vi, what happened?" he says, sounding genuinely concerned, which brings back the guilt that's been my companion for the past three years. I know this man loves me, and I'm sorry for it, but this marriage is not to be. Died a long time ago, buried the day Lillye was laid to rest. If he had any sense in that pea brain of his he would have figured it out and moved on. Or better yet, admit that he doesn't love me either.

I can't go there now. The room begins to spin and I desperately need to crawl into a dark hole and find my balance.

"Where is my suitcase?" I mutter and like a puppy dog TB retrieves it, holding it in front of us as I'm supposed to gratefully take it from his arms. And do what I wonder. When did I find this man attractive, I think before I haul the heavy suitcase into my arms, throwing it back on the bed.

"I got this," I mutter, pulling out my ditty bag and heading for the bathroom.

I'm not two steps from heaven when there's a knock on the door.

"If it's maid service, tell them to come back," I say.

"It's probably your tour guide."

This stops me cold. "Who?"

"Henry something."

I spin around, the fuze lit and the spark speeding along the cord, ready to

blow my brains apart. “Henry knows you’re here?”

TB gives me a blank stare, the kind children do when they realize they have done something wrong but haven’t a clue why. I walk to the door and open it and of course it’s Henry on the other side.

“How are you feeling?” he asks. “Alicia told me all about it.”

I haven’t a moment to answer when TB comes up from behind and opens the door wider. “You hurt yourself, Vi?”

I pause and close my eyes for an instant, trying to tame the angry beast inside my head, then slip into the hallway and close the door on TB. “Henry, I’m so sorry. He just showed up. I didn’t invite him and we’re separated and he really didn’t know that guests aren’t allowed on press trips....”

Henry holds up a hand. “No worries, Viola. We have a journalist stuck in Atlanta due to storms and I was just going to invite Bubba to the dinner tonight since the meals are already planned and paid for.”

These are the kinds of things that get journalists kicked off the list. You don’t break the rules. And you certainly don’t do anything to upset the tour without letting Henry know first. I know Henry’s being polite, but this could mean me never being asked again.

“It’s fine, Henry. I appreciate the thought, but TB is out of line here and I’m well aware of the rules....”

“Viola,” Henry says, touching my arm, “it’s the least we can do. Two days on a rooftop? I had no idea.”

Oh shit, oh shit. I will kill him for sure. “TB told you about that?”

“He was sitting in the lobby when we arrived and we got to talking. What an ordeal you all went through.”

“Yeah, well....” Oh please don’t make me talk about it.

“And you had that nasty bump today. How are you feeling?”

Henry moves to my side and takes a good look at my head. He’s starting to pale like Charlene and I wonder if he thinks I will demand health care, a settlement or something. As if. I just want to stay on the list.

That and a hot bath, oh please Jesus.

“It’s fine.” I offer a smile that doesn’t come without pain. “Nothing a martini

won't cure."

Relief washes over Henry, but he's still frowning a bit. "We'll get you one, then, but if you need a doctor or medicine...."

I wave my hand to halt this line of thought. "I'm fine, really. It wasn't that big of a deal."

"Well, let me know. The hotel manager said he has Tylenol and a few other things, that all you have to do is call to the desk and they will take care of you." Henry hands me a business card with the manager's name on it, but I'm still focused on staying on the list.

"Again, Henry, I'm really sorry about...."

"Bring your husband to dinner."

"He's not my husband."

"In fact, if he wants to stay...."

"He doesn't."

"Sounds like he could use a nice bed for a while. The stories he said about your house were pretty awful."

That old guilt returns and threatens to consume me. I had barely stepped two feet inside that house before announcing I wanted no more to do with it and now TB is living there, on the second floor above the water line, the mold and the stench.

I hang my head in shame. Damn that man. "Of course."

Henry backs up, ready to bolt, as if he senses some ugly history here and doesn't want to learn more. "It's up to you, naturally, but I wanted to make sure you know he's welcome."

I look up and force a smile. "Thanks. We appreciate that."

Henry nods. "See you at dinner, then."

I enter the room and find my ex sprawled out on the bed, his gaze cloudy and returned to some basketball game. He may have lost me to silence after Lillye died, or so he always claims, but the TV took his ass to never-never land the moment he was born.

I say nothing, gather up some clean clothes, retrieve my ditty bag and head to the bath. I fill up the tub, utilizing what's left of the bath products, which is

plenty, really. I shouldn't have been so critical, I think with a heavy heart as I slip into the steaming hot bath. As the water surrounds me, that old black hole follows suit like an old friend. I close my eyes and the New Orleans night looms in front of us, the day we drove back for the first time.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND what we are doing here," TB said and I fought the urge to punch him silly, even though he made perfect sense. What were we doing there?

"I told you, already. They said to get here early to wait in line."

"What line?"

I might have agreed with him on that point, but we couldn't see anything in front of us so, for all we knew, a line of cars existed right around the next bend. I had been sure people were desperate to get back home the moment they opened Orleans Parish and the interstate would have been clogged with traffic, but at that moment I got it. Home to what? It was like a blanket had descended upon my town, replacing New Orleans with something akin to wet, moldy cardboard. If you could see it.

I say darkness and that's not quite true. We followed the headlights of our car into Orleans Parish once we crossed over from Metairie, the Jefferson Parish suburb showing signs of life due to it being on the unbreached end of the broken levees. Once inside the city limits we slowly watched every foot of pavement in the shadow of our headlights, searching for debris, potholes or even things as large as abandoned boats (we spotted two right away). I finally opened the side window and shined my flashlight alongside the car hoping to spot a street sign, but even those were blown or washed away.

Because Robert E. Lee is such a massive thoroughfare, with a giant open median — what we call neutral grounds in New Orleans, — we drove to the lakefront without too much guesswork. Following the side streets to our house was another story. After an hour of creeping along, dark ghosts of buildings looming alongside us the smell of which turned our stomachs, we finally found our block. Exhausted from the search and craning our necks to the windshield,

we parked at what looked like the cleanest stretch of street with no piercing objects to pop a tire. TB insisted on turning off the car — anything to save gas; he was scared we would run out and never leave the city, hunted down by zombies and werewolves, no lie! But once the key turned, we were immediately engulfed into the black abyss.

It was the roof all over again, sans the incredible array of stars, and we kept bickering at each other, hoping our anger would keep the sick anxiety of that memory from consuming us.

“No one is coming here today,” TB said, a frightened edge creeping through his voice. “Who in their right mind would?”

“Us,” I reminded him.

“It’s too early.”

“This was your stupid idea.”

“I wanted to know what our house looks like.”

I considered reminding him that we saw what it looked like the day they rescued us from the roof, but thought it best not to mention, especially since I was the reason we didn’t evacuate. “It’s flooded, it probably stinks and everything is lost.”

The one thing I vowed to stuff tightly inside my brain started leaking through and my breath caught. My heart raced and I prayed that the donuts we ate in Baton Rouge would stay put because I didn’t want to barf on my front lawn smelling the stench of Katrina.

If only I had brought the photos with me.

“It might be okay. You are always so negative.”

“Shut up,” I managed to say between threats of rising bile. “Just please shut up.”

Something in the world shifted for TB turned silent and our environment developed outlines. I could make out what looked like a flooded car in front of us and our neighbor’s fence. Instinctively, both TB and I gazed toward where our house was located, squinting to see the two-story frame of a home still standing.

“I’m going in,” TB announced.

“Have fun.”

“You’re not coming?”

I gave him a look that said it all — at least to most people — but he only sat there, waiting, clueless. Not wanting to explain, I simply said, “I’ll meet you in.”

While TB took off for the house, I managed to calm the rush of nausea and anxiety. My baby’s pictures were in that house, placed high in the hall closet wrapped in plastic just in case. Only I never dreamed the levees would actually break and flood the city. Who did? It was all I had left in the world of Lillye and now I had lost that too.

I hated my life. I despised my husband and my pitiful excuse of a job. The house we were so concerned about was an anchor wrapped tightly around our necks, always taking what precious little income we managed to save, replacing vacations that might have rescued our marriage with new water heaters and plumbing mishaps. The kitchen alone pissed me off every time I came home, gazing at me with its cheap ugly cabinetry and broken linoleum, things we could never afford to replace. Even the car was a lemon. Absolutely nothing in my life mattered to me at that moment. Nothing.

Except those photos. And with them gone, I didn’t give a rat’s ass about anything.

And yet something inside urged me to go look. I left the car and gingerly made my way through the yard, trying not to breathe the mildew stench passing over me in a cloud like the smell of a paper factory you pass on the interstate. The ground cracked beneath my feet as if the grass has been sprinkled with water before a freeze, only the air hung dank and hot around me; it’s October in South Louisiana, after all. With the dawn approaching I could see where I was stepping, helpful after three weeks of flood waters covered everything and left behind all sorts of creepy items and critters. It seemed like forever until I made it to the door, which TB had propped open with one of our waterlogged chairs. With a closer look I could see it was part of my mother’s dinette set given as a wedding present, antiques that could easily be saved. I wanted to yell how stupid that action was, but I was too busy sidestepping a dead rat.

“It’s not so bad,” TB yelled from the kitchen area, as the image of the house came into closer focus.



Not so bad? The moldy watermark — or bathtub ring as our local newspaper columnist liked to call it — made a nice wall accent, about a foot or two below the ceiling. For a moment, before logic kicked in, I thought it was wallpaper, the kind Maw Maws prefer, with the tiny little rose pattern. The entertainment center we bought at Walmart consisting of that lovely particle board had literally melted with the TV lying cracked in the middle of the puddle. TB's Lazy-Boy was a soggy monstrosity spewing forth an ungodly smell and the pine floors, the only positive aspect of this trashy house TB's family had given us when we married, was buckled in several places.

"You need to see upstairs," TB said, pulling something black and nasty from the bottom of the kitchen sink. "I think we can save our clothes."

The image of wearing anything belonging to this house pushed me over the edge and I barfed on a pile of roof shingles, all the while wondering how the hell they made it into my living room. The heaving was harsh and relentless and I couldn't catch my breath in between, making me believe that I had escaped death in Katrina only to perish anyway in this moldy house I despised.

I felt TB's arms around my shoulders pushing me out the door, and even though the stench greeted me at the threshold, the air felt lighter and I got control of myself. He continued leading me to the car, where he opened the door and forced me to sit down. For a moment, before my mind interceded, I took comfort in my husband's embrace.

TB placed something in my hands but said nothing, just turned and walked back toward the house. When I gazed into my lap I discovered Lillye's angelic face staring back. Somehow the plastic I had wrapped them in, the proximity in the closet, it all helped to keep them safe. Somehow, Katrina, that bitch, never found my baby's photos.

I closed the door so no one would hear me — as if! — and I started a crying jag that lasted until TB returned and we crossed the Mississippi River Bridge outside of Baton Rouge. When I finally got a handle on my sanity, before we made it back to Lafayette, I decided there was only one recourse left to me. I'd leave New Orleans. I'd divorce my husband. And my crazy family could go to hell.

I FEEL a gentle touch on my elbow and open my eyes to find TB stroking my hair. I realize I've been sitting in now cold water, lost in the old familiar grief. There's a martini perched on the edge of the pedestal sink and once TB acknowledges I am conscious of him being there, he brings it to me.

"Henry had it brought up. I didn't order it, I swear."

I sit up and grab a nearby towel. "It's fine," I whisper, gratefully taking the drink and practically gulping it down.

"Do you want me to leave?" TB asks, and I'm not sure if he means my side at the tub or Eureka Springs. I still long for peace, quiet and solitude, but how can I send the man I was married to for years, of which I shared the most precious child in the world, back into that hell hole?

I shake my head and TB looks only slightly relieved. He still wants so much more than I'm able to give.

"I'll stay out of your way. I won't eat anything and I'll go home in the morning."

"Henry wants you to join us for dinner."

I should have said *I* wanted him to join us as well, but the truth remains, I don't. Guilt returns and tears are poised, ready to pour out like marathon runners.

"Okay," TB says softly. "I'll take a shower when you're finished."

I touch the top of my head that is still caked in blood. "I'll only be a minute. Need to wash my hair."

TB silently and sadly leaves the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I quickly shampoo my hair, feeling better despite the anchor attached to my heart, and step out of the tub. I grab the lush bathrobe on the back of the door and slip inside its comfort, but the ever-present pain won't let me relax.

It was like this when Lillye died, the endless crying, the dark hole of depression. I could never understand how human beings don't dehydrate from the amount of water we exude through grief.

I gasp for breath, then exhale, ready to steady my emotions and face the world when I see her in the mirror, faintly, the line of her figure like a shadow

marked by a Sharpie. She wears the schoolgirl outfit of the blond in the cave, but her hair combed back into a bun is a muddy red, the unfashionable color, not the one everyone emulates through Clairol. She stares at me sadly through pin-prick eyes above an unremarkable nose. Plain Jane is what comes to me in a flash. And although this apparition, if that's what I'm seeing, isn't offering emotion of any kind, I feel her pain. Loneliness, heartbreak and something much more acute.

The loss of a child.

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## Chapter 7

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You'd think after experiencing two hallucinations in one day a person would call 9-1-1 and head for somewhere with padded walls and blunt objects. I stand naked save for a towel before my tiny suitcase in this unusual alcove with no door that doubles for a closet, dripping on the lush Victorian carpet.

Frankly, I'm stunned. On one hand, I'm vindicated that Charlene saw the blonde in the cave. But how does one explain Plain Jane and the Opera Singer?

"What time is dinner?" TB asks, and for once I'm grateful for his incessant questions. My mind rushes back and I turn off the doubts, focus at what I need to do now. I'm not ready to be labeled bonkers yet.

"Drinks at six in the Baker Bar is what's on the itinerary. Then dinner in the ballroom."

"Wow, fancy smancy."

Suddenly, a thought flies through my head with lightning speed. I turn and settle my gaze on TB's backpack on the floor.

"I have something to wear," he says defensively. He averts my gaze, heading toward the bathroom to shower. "You never give me credit for anything," he mumbles on the way.

"I wonder why," I mumble to his back and pull on something comfortable but dressy.

When I rebuilt my wardrobe, I bought two pairs of black pants and two black shirts, then a series of jackets and long-sleeved tops to wear over. All pieces can

be rolled and squeezed into a suitcase and will not wrinkle when traveling, the perfect collection for someone like me. Plus, I don't have to think much, exchange the outer layer every evening and add new accessories.

I throw on my black shell topped by a flowery, gauzy top, accented by ornate earrings and a necklace that's filled with filigree — pieces discovered in the sales rack of the Blue Moon Bayou Antique Mall back home. I'm feeling Victorian tonight.

To my surprise, TB steps out of the bathroom dressed in new jeans and a smart button-down shirt, his thick head of hair nicely combed back. He appears like a model in a photo shoot, steam escaping to his back to frame his toned body sculptured from working years in construction and always tanned. I'm waiting for him to throw a sweater over his shoulder and credit a deodorant. Despite my best intentions, my heart pulsates — along with a few other bodily parts. Did I mention TB's not hard on the eyes? His six-pack and adorable tight butt are what got me where I am. Before I could ignore my straight-out-of-college primal hormonal instincts and gauge his IQ, I was pregnant and headed down the aisle.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod and we silently walk down the hall to the Baker Bar, a swanky spot on the fourth floor overlooking Eureka Springs that's more a throwback to the 1930s with a pressed tin ceiling and Art Deco-esque surroundings. There's a bar to the left and I quickly survey the offerings, so wishing for a repeat of that delicious martini, and a balcony straight ahead where several people are watching the sunset.

Everyone is there, save Winnie, huddled in a group off to one side with Henry and Alicia discussing PR things at the bar, cell phones in hand. It's good Henry's not demanding attention for the rest have a million questions about my incident in the cave. As I'm explaining what happened, sans the ghostly apparition that caused my downfall, TB slips back, looking sheepish and lost. He's still reeling from our argument — hell, from our separation — and I can't get those images of him living in our moldy, waterlogged house out of my head. I pause in my explanations, take his hand and lead him into the group. For

tonight, at least, I vow to be civil and understanding, take my feelings about our marriage out of the equation. List or no list.

“Y’all, this is TB. He’s going to be having dinner with us tonight.”

“Are you the one who got stuck in Atlanta?” Irene asks. “We thought you were coming tomorrow.”

Puzzled, TB looks at me as if he’s afraid to speak at all.

“No, he’s my husband.”

I hadn’t meant to say that, but introducing him as “soon-to-be-ex-husband” sounded tactless, not to mention cruel for one of us.

Stephanie lightens up. “I didn’t know your husband was coming.”

Again, TB looks at me for direction. He’s so much like a child, waiting for Mom to say it’s okay. It’s one of the things that always drove me crazy. When the world tilted and I needed a strong shoulder, he fell apart. But in all fairness, who wouldn’t have?

“TB has been working on our house in New Orleans and he really needed some time away. He’s staying in my room, but Henry invited him to join us tonight.”

Stephanie sends me a questioning look. “New Orleans? I thought you were from Cajun Country.”

“Cajun Country’s where we evacuated.” TB has found his voice.

The cat’s out of the bag now. Richard, who’s been lounging in an armchair with a cold Bud in his hand, rises on this revelation and saunters over. I’m expecting empathy like the rest of the stares I’m now receiving but Richard surprises me.

“You all are from New Orleans? What on earth makes anyone want to live there? It’s below sea level, for God’s sakes.”

I instantly feel a surge of hot energy emanating from TB, no doubt matching my own, but I grab his arm when I see him about to retort. I change the course of the conversation before one of us gets into trouble and an obnoxious journalist receives a black eye.

“Let me introduce everyone,” I say. “Stephanie and Joe Pennington from Wisconsin. Irene Fisher from New York. And this is Richard Cambry from

Arizona.”

I realize Carmine is missing, but as that thought crosses my mind, I hear his voice from behind me.

“Who’s this?”

I nearly laugh at the insinuation. As I turn, sure enough Carmine is giving TB the once-over. It’s always been like that; gay men love my boyish husband. As soon as they spot me, however, they shake their heads, no doubt thinking, “What a waste of a man on the female persuasion.” And one of the things I always loved about TB was how he took it all in stride.

“TB, this is Carmine. I forget where he’s from.”

Carmine raises an eyebrow. “TB?” With an afterthought, he adds, “I’m from Texas.”

Finally, TB relaxes. “It’s short for T-Bubba.”

I try not to groan. I’ve told this man a million times that no one will ever get this, but does he listen? Sure enough, everyone stares at him, waiting for an explanation.

“His dad was Bubba,” I say. “And he’s Bubba junior.”

“Actually, my real name is Thibault, named for my grandfather from LaRose.”

“That’s in Louisiana.” He also never remembers that no one knows where LaRose is, a tiny town at the bottom of Louisiana, at the ends of the earth, a place people in *New Orleans* have never heard of.

“And when you have a name like Thibault, Bubba is a good alternative,” he adds.

Debatable.

“My mom is Cajun and Cajuns like to name their kids after their dads and call them petite Joe or petite Bubba,” TB continues. “Which then becomes T-Joe and T-Bubba for short.”

Stephanie’s eyes are glazed but she tries to be polite. “So, you’re T-Bubba?”

TB beams. “That’s right.”

Richard shakes his head as if jolting grey matter will help this make sense. “So you call yourself TB on purpose? That’s crazy.”

I always thought the same thing and my parents used it as a weapon on why I married beneath me and what was I thinking? I'm feeling like I used to when my parents would make fun of my husband, as if I'm allowed to put this man down but no one else can.

"It's a form of endearment in Louisiana," I offer defensively, which makes TB look at me with a puzzled frown. "Leave it alone," I tell him telepathically.

Thankfully before he has a chance to speak, Henry and Alicia arrive with the manager of the hotel, the tourism director and the mayor of Eureka Springs. We do introductions all around and this time I introduce TB as Thibault and leave it at that.

We begin our tour in the bar, with each of the three offering different slices of history on the hotel and the town. The "Grand Old Lady of the Ozarks," as the Crescent Hotel was known, was carved from Ozark stone by Irish stonemasons after town founders realized building with wood was a fire hazard. The Crescent quickly became a favorite among the elite, attracting rich patrons. Victorians came to take the waters of the town, dance in the hotel's ballroom and enjoy the hotel's giant stable, which was rumored to house seventy-five horses. After the turn of the century, the Crescent College and Conservatory for Young Women operated here during the hotel's off-season, attracting women from throughout the region. In 1937, a quack named Dr. Norman Baker — the doctor part is debatable — purchased the then empty hotel-college and opened the Baker Hospital, which promised a cure for cancer until Baker was arrested for mail fraud.

"That's why you're in the Dr. Baker's Bistro & Sky Bar," Henry adds.

Winnie saunters up, trying to slip in quietly to the back.

"How's the head?" she whispers, and it's then I realize that the headache is gone.

"The martini helped."

She nods towards TB. "New journalist?"

I grimace. "No."

Before I explain, Winnie whispers, "The ex-man cometh?"

I love men, I really do, but I honestly believe women have evolved and



moved ahead. I look at the all-knowing Winnie and nod, thankful that I don't have to explain and thankful for the comforting look she returns.

Our guides lead us across the hall to a meeting space that used to be the office for the Crescent College. Along one wall is a picture gallery of the hotel's history. We peer into the glass and find Victorians in carriages and visitors lounging on the hotel's massive porch. Next are young schoolgirls enjoying the bowling alley or playing volleyball when the hotel converted to a girl's school in the winter. There are advertisements for the hotel, napkins from years past and a variety of memorabilia, including Baker's pamphlets claiming a cure for cancer.

We're about to head back to the Baker Bar for a drink — can I get an “Amen!” — when I spot something interesting in the case. A teacher of about thirty years of age with glasses stands proudly at his desk holding an award of some kind, surrounded by eight girls, all dressed in uniforms with their hair tied back in ribbons. A jolt of energy passes up my spine and I shiver. The blond isn't here, but the girl from my bathroom is, and I suddenly realize they were both wearing the same outfit.

I try to shake off the goosebumps, to find out what this means, when the mayor appears in the doorway, a woman wearing a stark business suit that's out of place for a casual evening, like she just arrived from a deposition. Her hair is frozen in place, every strand, reminding me of my grandmother who visited a beauty parlor every week for that teased effect. Even the mayor's bright red lipstick, despite that I spied her drinking on the balcony, remains perfectly intact. I hate impeccably dressed women like this, can't for the life of me figure out how they do it.

“Great photos, aren't they?” She holds her martini high in one hand. “I never get tired of looking at these wonderful old historic pictures.”

“Who is this?” I point to the group.

The mayor's a tall drink of water, graceful and thin even without her high heels, so she has no problem glancing over my shoulder and viewing everything in the case. “That's the English teacher on the day the school won a literary award. It was a big deal, a national title for composition. He went on to become a professor of English and later the mayor of Eureka Springs.”

The mayor says this with pride and I wonder if she knew the man.

“And this girl?” I point to my bathroom friend.

The mayor suddenly straightens, the blood draining from her face. “No idea, why?”

The goosebumps return. Something in her voice makes me think she’s lying. “She looks familiar.” I make a point to gaze into her eyes that have now narrowed and are staring at me suspiciously.

“Are you really with the group?” she demands, a distinct tone in her voice. “Did Merrill put you up to this?”

“Who’s Merrill?”

The mayor is suddenly in my face. She grabs my upper arm and squeezes, a bit too hard.

“Uh, that hurts.”

She leans in so her lipsticked mouth is inches from my ear. “You tell my bitch of a cousin that I’m done with her games. I don’t want to see you or anyone else associated with that ridiculous group anywhere near me or my travel writers. Do we understand each other?”

Maybe I hit my head harder than I realized, or that martini sent my concussion into action, but the room starts spinning and I feel light-headed. If I had some semblance of control, I might push this woman away and demand answers, but I’m too stunned and feeble to act. Thankfully, Henry sticks his head inside the room and looks startled at us both. “Vi?”

The mayor blanches, releases my arm and turns. “She’s one of your group?” she utters, trying to keep the panic from her voice.

“I thought we had introductions,” Henry says, still gazing puzzled at us both. “Mayor Sterling, this is Viola Valentine. She’s a journalist from South Louisiana.”

The tourism director sticks her head into the room. “Y’all ready? We’re heading out to the balcony before the sun fully sets.”

The mayor says nothing, refuses to look my way and quickly exits the room. Henry sends me a questioning look and I shrug. I have no idea what transpired, and I beg Henry to please get me another martini and he heads to the bar while I

try to restore my equilibrium.

What on earth just happened?

Before I join the others on the balcony, I can't help looking back one last time at Plain Jane. She's so happy in the photo, beaming as if it's her wedding day. Nothing like the feelings I picked up in the bathroom.

And just why was I seeing a sad schoolgirl in my bath anyway?

My headache returns in a rush and I rub my forehead. Too much mystery for one day and it's exhausting, not to mention an unexpected ex-husband and the idea that I may be seeing apparitions everywhere I go. Now I have a rabid mayor on my case and my upper arm throbs from the meeting.

My first press trip and I so wanted to escape the insanity of New Orleans and enjoy my new career, embrace the exciting new life that I valiantly created for myself. Those pesky tears lurk at the back of my eyes and I fight hard to keep them at bay.

"Are you okay?" the tourism director asks. "You're the one who hit your head, aren't you?"

"I'm fine," I lie. I'm anything but.

There's something about this woman that makes me say this, something that makes me feel safe, although I can't place it, the complete opposite of the imposing mayor and her sculptured nails; she's left marks on my upper arm. Or perhaps it's because I don't want to be crazy, want an explanation for the weird things happening to me lately. I blurt it out, pointing to the girl I saw in my bathroom because now I must know. "Who is this woman? Do you know?"

Surprisingly, the director doesn't question me as to why I would want to know a woman from a girl's school in the 1920s.

"How do you feel about ghosts?" is all she says.

I sigh, ready to admit the inevitable.

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## Chapter 8

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The table conversation at dinner is lively and fun, no doubt from all those specialty cocktails served in the Baker Bar while the earth tilted and the sun disappeared, mirroring the sensations in my head. Despite the sunset's beauty, I'm still focusing on the fact that the Crescent Hotel is one of the most haunted inns in America, according to Nanette Wells, the friendly tourism director. Not to mention the other bomb she dropped while we lingered in the history room.

"Eureka Springs is probably one of the most haunted cities in the country," she had said with a laugh. "We have ghosts everywhere."

Nanette didn't get a chance to explain for Henry arrived with my martini and ushered us to the balcony where thankfully the mayor was nowhere to be seen. When we made it to dinner, I made sure to sit at Nanette's table, grabbing a seat to her right. I needed Nanette to explain more about this haunted city — and inquire where the mayor rushed off to — but TB is dominating the conversation with his adventures in alligator season. The man has a horrid desire to murder gators in the wild.

Winnie sits to *my* right, also keeping me occupied with her one hundred questions about the cave. I answer with short answers; I don't want to talk about it.

"Okay," she says placing her napkin firmly in her lap. "If you don't want to tell me what happened in that cave, at least explain *him*."

She nods her head in the direction of my ex-husband who's busy stuffing

bread into his mouth as if he will never eat again. “He was always like that. Eats anything he wants and never gains a pound.”

Now, Winnie’s royally pissed. “Fine,” is all she manages.

I take a deep breath and touch her hand. I lean in close so no one else will hear. “He’s my ex. Or soon to be ex. He showed up this afternoon thinking he could hang around with me. I wanted to send him on his way — and hopefully he will tomorrow — but he started talking about us and Katrina and Henry felt sorry for him.”

I hope that will be the end to it but Nanette overhears and blurts out to TB, “You were in Katrina?”

TB pauses with a mouth full of bread. “Huh?”

Everyone at the table stops talking and turns toward my ex-husband, looking for an explanation. All except Carmine, who studies me from behind a wine glass. I set my own glass down, defeated, waiting for TB to start telling stories I have heard way too often.

“Of course we were,” TB says. “Didn’t Vi tell you?”

“Vi leaves out a lot.” Carmine raises that damn eyebrow again. How does he do that?

“We were there because of Vi,” TB adds, which makes me cringe. “We couldn’t evacuate because she worked for the newspaper. And yet she never wants to talk about it.”

I don’t know, guilt maybe?

TB then describes the long night of wind and rain, the lights flickering and dying around midnight, both of us falling asleep on the couch only to wake to the sound we still can’t place. Was it our imagination or did we actually hear the levees breaching? So many experts I have talked to said we shouldn’t have heard a thing where we lived in Mid City but then we were told by the same people those levees would hold.

“Vi and I both woke up at the same time and we never figured out what we heard,” TB continues. “But we saw the water slipping underneath the door and knew at least our street was flooding.”

“Why would you think that?” Stephanie asks, incredulously. “Does your

street flood through your door all the time?”

“If the pumps stop working, sure. But the most that has ever happened is the water goes to the top step of our porch.”

Folks at the table fail to comprehend so I quickly interject that New Orleans has an elaborate system of pumps to quickly move falling rainwater into canals, bayous and Lake Pontchartrain. The system is so immense, if all pumps are working it’s the equivalent of the Ohio River flow.

“If the pumps stop working on your street, and rain falls like it normally does in New Orleans, sometimes several inches in an afternoon, your street floods,” I tell them.

“It’s kinda cool,” TB offers. “We get out our canoes and boats and take the kids for a ride.”

We did that for Lillye one year and the memory makes us both pause and take a sip of wine, neither of us looking at each other.

“So what happened after the water started coming in?” Joe asks.

“We put towels by the front door but they instantly soaked,” TB continues, “so I opened the door with my flashlight to see what was happening.”

The memory gets to TB; I can see the old fear in his eyes. The darkness of the night with the wind pushing so hard I had to help prop the front door open. The tree that suddenly floated by and took out the corner of the porch. A neighbor screaming off in the distance, asking for help we couldn’t deliver. Why must we go down this road when people ask?

“The water was on our porch and we could see it rising,” I add. “Literally, see it rising as we stood there.”

TB recovers and takes over. “I grabbed Vi and we headed for the attic and the rest is history.”

I glance at my soon-to-be-ex and find he is now visiting my dark place, the home of denial or whatever you want to name it but a safe haven where I hope I don’t have to relive this horrific event over and over again. For once I wish he wasn’t on the other side of the table for I want to touch his hand and welcome him in.

“But what happened in the attic?” Stephanie asks, and I realize that everyone

continues staring, dying to know more.

“In New Orleans, you keep an ax in the attic just in case,” I explain softly. “We never ever expected the levees to break but we always knew there was a possibility.”

Nanette shifts uncomfortably in her chair. “What did you do with the ax?”

“They use it to break holes in the roof,” Carmine interjects. “Since New Orleans is mostly below sea level, if the levees break water will pour into the city and it’s good to have a failsafe.”

A heavy lull descends on the table and where once was laughing, drinking and discussions about beautiful Eureka Springs, suddenly we’re plunged back into flooded New Orleans. You didn’t have to be there to feel that pain. I learned that as soon as I arrived in Lafayette, greeted by residents with tear-streaked faces as we exited the bus, people who could barely look us in the eyes because they watched the horror on TV and somehow blamed themselves for the inability to do something.

My companions tonight sit quietly, transported in time, with that look of stunned disbelief on their faces.

And as suddenly as I’m whisked back to those nightmare days and nights I want to return to enjoying the elegant Crescent Hotel ballroom, where visitors danced to bands playing graceful waltzes. Anything to get out of those waters.

“So tell us about the ghosts,” I offer to Nanette, who appears absolutely shocked I would start talking about something so frivolous.

“How awful for you both,” she says and I realize there are tears in the corners of her eyes.

What’s awful, I think to myself, is having to experience Katrina’s wrath repeatedly. People told me after Lillye’s death that I needed to talk, to express my grief, to share the pain and it would help me heal. How making others cry will ease my load is beyond me. No matter what I said or who I spoke to, the darkness that took the place of my heart when Lillye died never healed. I’m a functioning human being today — with exception of seeing ghosts — and I no longer feel like I’m carrying a ball and chain around my soul, but the pain is acute as the day TB and I placed our baby into the family vault. And yes, I’m

still angry that God would inflict a sweet three-year-old child with leukemia and ruin her parents' lives.

Whatever stitches pulled my broken heart back together, they ripped open in Katrina. How could the Corps of Engineers let eighty percent of our city flood? How could our president move in slow motion to come to our aid and why is recovery happening at a snail's pace? I'm burying my child all over again.

Sue me if I don't want to talk about it.

"I heard this was a popular place for dances," I continue, trying to keep the catch out of my voice but it's there, I can feel it. "It's a lovely space."

The waiter arrives to announce tonight's dinner and while he explains the choices of soups and entrees, I feel everyone's eyes upon me, as if waiting for me to spring two heads. I glance over at TB and he offers a sad smile. Amazingly enough, I smile gently back. No matter our differences, why we married in the first place or how we are two different planets in opposite orbits, we shared something special and something horrific, events that will bind us for eternity.

"I want to know about the ghosts too," says Carmine, sending me a sly look that no one notices, and for once I love this guy.

Nanette recovers after a long sip of wine and starts with the Victorian era. "We have so many ghosts in this hotel, we have tours every night."

"Awesome," TB says, and I wonder if he will think our bathroom girl is that terrific when she hovers over him in the middle of the night.

"The Crescent was built at great expense and using Ozark stone since the town kept having these deliberating fires," Nanette begins. "The owner brought over stonemasons from Ireland to construct it. One of them was a young man named Michael."

I notice Carmine bristle at the news.

"The story has it Michael fell to his death and now haunts Room 218, although he's a friendly ghost, nothing too scary. Moves things around, pokes people."

"I think Richard's in Room 218," Winnie says, and we all laugh.

"Actually, Richard's across the hall from me," I say.



“Where are you?” Nanette asks.

“Room 420.”

“Oh, that’s another ghost and another story.”

Everyone giggles and murmurs at the table, excited and maybe scared at what Nanette will tell us next. My heart sinks.

“In this ballroom,” Nanette continues, “people have seen Victorian-dressed visitors dancing. We also had a TV crew doing a ghost segment here and they experienced weird things going on.”

Joe sits up straighter in his chair. “Wait, didn’t *Ghost Hunters* do an episode on this hotel, something about a morgue.”

I get one of those shivers that runs down the back of your spine. My grandmother used to call it a skunk running over your grave. Nanette laughs, which makes me shiver again. Winnie sends me a look she probably gives her children, right before she inflicts a sweater on them.

“*Ghost Hunters* did come here to do a taping,” she says. “They caught a full body apparition on their infrared camera. They later called it the ‘Holy Grail’ of evidence.”

Joe smiles broadly remembering the episode, excited, no doubt, to be in the spot where the famous taping occurred. Stephanie is not as convinced. “Full body apparition?”

To my surprise, Carmine springs to life. “There’s new technology used to capture ghosts on camera and in recordings and the TAPS guys, the ones who made the show, used an infrared camera that picks up energy we don’t see with our eyes.”

Joe nods. “They picked up what looked like a man in a uniform with a cap on his head.”

“Where was this?” Stephanie asks, squirming in her seat while her husband’s eyes widen.

Nanette then relates the dark history of the hotel, when Dr. Norman Baker purchased the deteriorating building to use as a cancer hospital. Only Baker wasn’t curing cancer.

The Muscatine, Iowa, native made a fortune in the 1920s broadcasting ads

for his mail order products, claiming his natural remedies would cure what ailed people as opposed to what he considered the corrupt American Medical Association. Rural residents hearing his program ate it up. The AMA, however, was none too pleased and began fighting back.

In 1929, Baker started making claims that aluminum caused cancer. With the help from Dr. Charles Ozias who operated a cancer sanitarium, Baker developed a “cure” made from glycerin, carbolic acid and alcohol mixed with tea brewed from watermelon seed, brown corn silk and clover leaves. He used this non-surgical treatment in his Baker Institute, going so far as to open a skull of an eighty-six-year-old cancer patient in front of a live audience, pouring the concoction over his brain to remove a tumor. The crowd went wild with excitement and Baker grew even more rich.

The cancer patient later died, however.

The AMA continued the fight and the Federal Radio Commission revoked his license in 1931. When a warrant was issued against him for practicing medicine without a license, Baker fled to Mexico.

But that didn’t stop the flim-flam man. He built an even larger radio station and broadcasted his propaganda into America, plus created another cancer hospital. Then he returned to Iowa, faced trial, served a one-day sentence and later ran for the Iowa state senate.

At this information, we all react.

“He ran for office?” Joe asks, amazed.

“Are you sure he wasn’t from Louisiana?” I ask and my table colleagues laugh.

“He was a bold man,” Nanette continues. “He spent years convincing thousands the government was a hoax and if you have a loved one suffering from cancer, you’ll try anything.”

“How did he get here?” Stephanie asks.

Nanette recounts how Baker purchased the hotel that was lingering unused in hard times, renaming it the Baker Hospital and offering the same cure. For two years, he made another fortune until the feds caught him for mail fraud.

“Apparently, he was having patients sign letters stating they were feeling

wonderful and that the cure was working,” Nanette explains. “And he would mail them to their loved ones even if they were actually dying.”

Stephanie grimaces. “I’m afraid to ask what the morgue reference was.”

We all stop eating. “It was in the basement, the place where they took patients who passed away,” Nanette answers.

Suddenly, the table is abuzz with lots of questions but Nanette holds up a hand. “You all are going to be treated to the ghost tour tomorrow night, so you’ll get to visit all these places then.”

Dessert arrives and a lull settles. We shift to small talk and suddenly it’s time to call it a night. The hour is relatively young but my head is still spinning so I’m more than ready to crawl into some heavenly sheets, even if I must share them with TB. We move into the lush lobby where Nanette gives us a nightcap story of the ghost cat. Apparently, the beloved hotel cat passed away and refuses to leave as well. We all laugh as if it’s some great joke, all except Carmine, who keeps staring off to a corner of the lobby. We all share good-nights, then the group splits up. Richard takes the stairs (of course he announces this so we’ll all be impressed with his vigor and stamina), Stephanie and Joe move to the back porch to enjoy the rocking chairs and night air and Winnie follows TB and me to the fourth floor. Carmine and Irene are staying at the Basin Hotel in town, so they take off with Henry. Alicia and Carrie hang back in a huddle, discussing plans for tomorrow, heads intent on their blackberries.

“That was interesting,” Winnie says to us in the elevator.

“What was?”

“The ghosts.”

A shiver skitters across the hairs of my skin.

“Are you cold?” she asks, giving me the once-over.

“No, Mom.”

Winnie turns to TB who is focused on digging something out of his teeth with a toothpick. “Watch her!”

TB turns my way and is, as usual, clueless. “Huh?”

Winnie exits the elevator and turns right, not explaining.

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing,” I say as we head to the left. “I just fell in a dark, dank cave this afternoon and hit my head, had to have an EMT come and she’s worried about me having a concussion.”

“You fell?” he asks, and it’s in those two words that explain why I want to divorce this man.

When we reach our room, Richard is already there, occupying the haunted room across the hall — or is it mine Nanette was referring to?

“If you’d have taken the stairs, you’d be here by now,” Richard says.

“We are here by now,” I answer.

TB fiddles with the old-fashioned key and then huffs in frustration. I take it from him and easily open the door. He says nothing, enters the room and begins pulling off his shoes and socks. He’s unusually quiet, and I’m not sure what’s going on in that head.

“I’ll leave in the morning,” he says solemnly.

Now I get it. I sit on the edge of the bed and ponder how to make this work. “You can’t go with me,” I say quietly.

He drops his shoes and sighs. “Fine, I’ll leave in the morning.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Stay as long as you like, just don’t expect to follow me around or get free food or anything.”

His composure changes instantly, like a dog reacting from being admonished for raiding the kitty litter to be offering a plush toy. “I won’t get in your way.”

“There’s a pool but it’s outside. I think there’s a fitness center.”

“I’m happy to sit in here and watch a decent TV.”

The old guilt pours over me like concrete on Jimmy Hoffa. I can only nod in agreement, then pull off my own shoes so I have something to do, anything besides look at my ex who’s living in our nasty house in moldy old New Orleans.

“I’m beat.” TB yawns, which makes me grateful he changed the subject and that he won’t start poking me in the side for sex. That was how he initiated things, stabbing me with his index finger and saying, “Hey, hey.” Not like he would get any anyway, but I don’t want to have that argument tonight.

I get up to start removing my makeup and get ready for bed when there’s a

knock on the door. TB brightens. “You think that’s the chocolate they put on the pillow?”

I look over and see the maid has already visited, the bed has been turned down and there are two mints gracing each pillow.

“Uh, don’t think so.”

It’s more likely Alicia or Carrie about to impart instructions for the next day.

Standing in my bare feet, I pull the door open wide. Maddox Bertrand, St. Bernard Parish Police Detective and the regular star of my sexual fantasies, fills the doorway with every inch of his gorgeous flesh.

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## Chapter 9

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As usual, I'm flummoxed. Madman Maddox steals all common sense from me every time I meet him.

"I'm looking for Miss Valentine."

For a moment, I think he doesn't remember me. But how can that be? We worked together for eight years, he on the St. Bernard Parish Police force and me hounding his trail for the New Orleans Post. We are by no means friends — police have little love for the media — but we shared two murders, a child abduction case, numerous breaking and enterings and the notorious Mardi Gras Bead Burgler.

The latter involved a homeless man named Big Head McGee (have no idea why, his head looked perfectly normal to me, besides the lack of hygiene and possible lice) who followed residents after Carnival parades, stealing their beads so he could resell them to krewes, the people responsible for the parades. It was the ultimate recycling in my opinion — non-profits do it regularly — but the poor soul got three years for his conservation efforts.

I wrote the story, tongue in cheek, couldn't help myself. The headline ran, "Bead burgler catches time in jail" and I staged Big Head carrying a sign that said, "Will eat for beads." You're not supposed to do things like that — news is to be reported on, not created — and when my editor found out I gave Big Head the idea for the sign, he threw a fit, almost fired me on the spot. One day when I was interviewing Maddox about a robbery at Walmart we got to talking about

the case, my story and the faux news sign and we erupted into a fit of laughter. Nervous laughter on my part, I might add, because I was working so hard at being cool. Did I mention he's handsome: broad shoulders, sculptured features, and that gun belt that sits on his hips so sexy it knocks the breath out of me. Seriously, this man makes my knees weak.

"I'm Vi," I say to him with a smile. Again, a little over the top because my heart is beating rapidly. What is he doing here?

"You the one who fell in the cave?"

It's then I notice the uniform. "You work for the Eureka Springs police now?"

He ignores my comment, pulls out his notebook from a back pocket. "I need a statement from you."

Now I realize he's messing with me. A statement? Really? "Uh huh. You want a statement." I fold my arms over my chest, feeling cocky. This could be good.

He's not smiling, and for a second I think he doesn't recognize me. But that's impossible.

"I need to know what you were doing in that part of the cave."

I unfold my arms. He doesn't remember me and my heart tumbles. "I'm Viola. Viola Valentine."

He looks down at his notes. "Yeah. The one who fell in the cave."

I try to pull my heart out of my socks. It's been a long day and my head hurts, did this hunk have to make it worse by reminding me how invisible I am to most men? I sigh. "What do you want to know?"

Maddox rubs his eyes, no doubt ready to wrap up this incident and go home. "Why you were where you were today."

I explain how I was part of the press trip for travel writers, ventured down into that part of the cave where I wasn't supposed to be in, slipped on the wet rock and hit my head. I conveniently leave out Blondie.

"That's it?"

He gives me a look that makes me think he knows about the ghost, but I'm sticking to my story. "That's it."

Maddox flips close the notebook and returns it to the pocket gracing his oh so cute bottom. In a flash I envision my hands slipping that notebook into place.

Did I also mention it's been a long time since I've had sex?

My logical brain, the one not attached to lower body parts, slaps me hard, waking me from my lurid thoughts. "Why is the police concerned about me hitting my head in a cave?"

"We found a body down there, bones of a young girl we think disappeared in the late 1920s."

This news hits me hard. "Was she murdered?"

Maddox eyes me curiously, which makes me want to laugh. What am I, a suspect? "Why do you say that?"

"Why else would a young girl be dead in a cave?" I answer, leaving out the part about me seeing her looking alive, hurt and bleeding.

"She had a blow to the head," he adds, and those pesky goosebumps return in full force.

I have no rebuttal to this, even though I wish I could offer something witty and interesting, anything to make this husky man with haunting brown eyes attracted to me.

"Thanks for your time."

As he turns to leave, I blurt out, "You don't remember me, do you?"

I was hoping he would send me one of those looks people give when they don't remember, but are trying to act like they knew you all the time. He stands in the hallway, a blank slate.

"Viola," I offer. "I used to cover the police beat for The Daily Post."

Lights remain on but no one is answering the door.

"Viola Valentine. Big Head McGee. The New Orleans Post."

Maddox grins like he makes the connection and, like a good puppy dog, I follow along like I believe him. "Hey, how are you?"

"Good." I would add, "Now that you are here" but who am I kidding? I'm invisible to this man. "What brings you to Eureka Springs?"

He shrugs. "I evacuated here. Didn't have a job back home and they offered me one so I stayed."



“Cool.” I’m a woman of so many words when I’m nervous.

We stand there staring at each other until he manages, “So, you doing okay?”

I nod and am about to explain that I’m now in Lafayette — in case he wants to get in touch with me — when a tall, slender woman with legs taking up at least half her body turns the corner.

“Hey,” she says with an adorable tilt of her head. She’s wearing tight jeans, leather boots and a cute top that accentuates her bosom. Her makeup highlights her oversized blue eyes and sensuous lips — think Angelina Jolie — and her hair curls gracefully about her shoulders. I immediately hate her. “Viola?”

I don’t know this woman so I’m stumped, but unlike Madman I know how to pretend. “Yes, that’s me.”

She pulls her rolling suitcase to a halt and extends her hand, fingers exquisitely manicured. “I’m Kelly Talbot, the one who got stuck in Atlanta.”

I offer my collection of fingers my mother dubs “steak fries.” “We thought you weren’t going to make it in tonight.”

“Managed a stand-by and rented a car,” she says with a sugary sweet Southern accent. Georgia, perhaps?

Maddox clears his throat and I realize I have forgotten my manners. “Kelly, this is Maddox Bertrand of the Eureka Springs Police Department. I had a bit of a mishap today and he’s here to haul me off to jail.”

Neither one retorts to the joke, both appearing incredibly happy at what they are staring at. She extends her hand and gives her name again, but this time tilts her head coquettishly, which sends long, silky hair cascading over her shoulder. She and TB could be romance novel covers. I’m thinking maybe I should introduce them and mention it.

Maddox eats it up, of course. Men become silly putty at times like these. “Are you a travel writer on this trip, too? Will we be seeing more of you?”

“I’m an editor,” Kelly clarifies. “With Southern Gardens magazine.”

Now, I really hate this woman. Southern Gardens was my dream job and I applied for three positions with them before giving up, couldn’t get a foot in the door. TB used to say I was crazy for applying since I lived in the world’s most interesting city while the magazine was in Athens, Georgia. But Southern

Gardens vs. covering the police beat in St. Bernard Parish? Hell, I could have always *visited* New Orleans, not to mention that Athens is a pretty cool place, a town where REM and the B-52s got their start.

“I love that magazine,” Maddox says with a stupid grin and I look at him puzzled. I can’t imagine him reading anything but Guns & Ammo.

“Well, I’m going to get some shut eye,” Miss Georgia announces with that sweet tea accent, placing her key in the lock.

“So nice to meet you,” Maddox says with more enthusiasm than he ever showed me tonight, and Miss Georgia disappears. Maddox finally turns back to me and our conversation but the handsome smile he bestowed upon my neighbor is long gone. He pulls out a card from his shirt pocket and his authoritative Po-Po voice returns as he hands it my way. “If you think of anything or have anything else to add, you’ve got my number.”

My heart leaps, although my logical brain is telling me not to read anything into this gesture. Still, I wonder like the naïve fool that I am, is he hitting on me? I gratefully take his card and find myself smiling silly. “Great. And if you have any more information on the case, I’d love to hear it. Not as a journalist,” I quickly add. “I mean I am still a journalist but I’m a travel writer now. No more awful police beat.”

Why did I say that?

“Not that police business is awful,” I quickly add. “Just that I’ve got a really great job now as a travel writer. Get to visit cool places like this.” I move my hand in the air to indicate that I’m now way up in the world, staying at posh hotels like the Crescent.

Maddox smiles politely, his forehead slightly wrinkled in a frown and I wonder if I shot myself in the foot. “Talk to you later,” is all he says and saunters off. But I take this as encouraging, hoping that he giving me his card means we will hook up sometimes in the future.

When I wonder back in the room TB has crashed on the bed, TV remote in his hand, thumb on a channel while he snores loudly. I turn off the TV, pull the blankets up to his chin and roll him over like I have for the past eight years, minus the last few months.

I change into my nightgown, one of the few things I have not purchased at Goodwill, and for the first time in a very long while feeling sexy, even though my logical brain is trying to rewind the scenes with Maddox and point out his disinterest. I refuse to admit that the man was way more interested in Kelly, convince myself he was just being polite with the garden editor, then I wash my face, apply the hotel's mint and rosemary body lotion and brush my teeth. My headache has disappeared, I realize, and glance down at the Eureka Springs Police Department business card and smile.

I'm headed to bed with visions of hunky detectives dancing in my head when I spot her. She's waiting for me in the corner of the room, dressed in schoolgirl attire like in the photo. No longer hazy, I can make out the Crescent College and Conservatory for Young Women logo on her breast pocket, the mauve ribbon carelessly tied in her hair, even the color of her eyes — bayou mud brown. I detect nothing of the sadness from before, no longing or heartache. Tonight, she's anxious, as if her patience has been exhausted and it's time for something to happen.

"What?" I ask, not thinking that I'm speaking to a ghost. "What do you want me to know?"

Before I can comprehend what is happening, the girl rushes toward me, her spirit pulsing through my body in a sensation I can only describe as being touched by a million lightning bugs. As the electricity pours through my being, I feel my eyes rolling back in my head and I lose myself.

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## Chapter 10

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I'm standing in the meeting room that I visited earlier, the one that held the photo of the girl and other hotel memorabilia next to the Baker Bar, but it's a different time. I sense I still belong to myself, still existing within my own body, but I also feel part of the ether and those around me. As the room comes into focus, I make out several schoolgirls and a teacher, all of whom are excited about some good news.

"I couldn't be more proud of you all," says the teacher whose name is James Cabellero. I don't know how but his name appears clear in my head as the figure before me, a slender man in his late twenties with premature salt and pepper hair and deep brown eyes, more homely than handsome but there's something attractive about him, that old college professor appeal I suppose? Could also be his enthusiasm, as if he had just left college and entered the teaching profession.

"A national literary award," James says. "Think of what this means to not only the school but to your parents. Not to mention for some of you who want to become writers."

James looks over my shoulder with a loving smile and I imagine he's sending me that warm, affectionate gesture. Instinctively, I smile back, glowing in the recognition of my work that my family routinely fails to offer.

"We owe it all to you."

His gaze passes right through me and I know he can't be admiring me at this point. I turn to find the schoolgirl of my room — her name is Lauralei Thorne,

Lori for short — sending the teacher a doe-eyed smile. As I glance back and forth between two people we might call geeks in the modern world, I wonder what's going on between them.

James breaks the connection and turns to the other girls, about seven pimply-faced coeds in identical uniforms, ranging in age between what I imagined to be seventeen and twenty. They've gathered around his desk, all smiles, one playing with his pencil sharpener, another bouncing up and down with glee.

"It was a concerted effort created by the unbelievable talents of my outstanding class," James continues.

He sends Lori another smile but only briefly this time, as if he senses someone might catch on. I look back at my roommate and find her awkwardly smoothing out her skirt, the same outfit the blond wore in the cave, I suddenly notice.

As this scene continues to unfold before me, I'm not only viewing this gathering but picking up emotions from everyone as well. The rest of the girls come through as a ball of energy, unfocused with erratic thoughts consuming most girls that age. Will my dad be proud? Is my hair combed right? Will anyone notice my skirt is not the required three inches below the knee? But James and Lori emit messages through the fog, and it's clear these two have more than a teacher-student relationship, although I'm doubtful anything physical has happened yet.

In the same flash of a second the vision appeared, I'm back on the floor of my room, gazing up at the ceiling, my head splitting for the second time that day.

"Did you say something?" TB asks from the bed, above my line of sight.

I sit up and gaze around the Victorian room with its deep reds, heavy furniture and an oversized plush chair, none of which belonged to my dead roommate — at least I sure hope she's dead. I sense, now, this room was used by students during the college era, although the configuration has been changed over the years.

I also know Lori died here.

Out in the hall a voice carries and my heart skips thinking it might be

Madman returning for more questions and here I'm lying on the floor in my cheap nightgown from Kmart after a bout of time travel. "Explain that one, Valentine," I tell myself. And yet, for the first time since the Opera Singer back at the New Orleans airport, I'm not that surprised or worried about my ethereal experiences. Maybe I've finally embraced insanity.

I gingerly stand so as not to jiggle the headache and make it worse. As usual, TB doesn't ask why I'm on the floor, simply rolls over and rearranges his pillow.

Heading to the door and the source of the noise, I press one ear to the wood and listen to a man explaining something and, when I gaze out the peephole, see a group standing behind him, listening intently.

"It's the ghost tour," TB mumbles. "They have several every night."

"How do you know?"

"That bitch of a mayor told me."

There are times when TB absorbs the world, digests its true meanings and appears almost smart. Few times, mind you, but I'm so happy tonight is one of those moments. I reach over and kiss his forehead.

"What?" he asks without opening his eyes.

"The mayor grabbed my arm in the library earlier and accused me of something to do with her cousin." I pull up my nightgown sleeve and find a nasty bruise in the shape of fingers.

TB opens his eyes and looks my way, spots the odd-shaped bruise and sits up. "Jesus, Vi."

"I know!" Now that I realize she has left a mark, I'm royally pissed. "What on earth was she thinking?"

The group outside titters — you know, when something spooks them or a piece of information startles their senses and they react. One woman burps up a nervous giggle. TB and I stop talking and try to hear what the man in charge is saying. We can't make out much, but we hear him recall a cancer patient named Theodora who stayed in the room across the hall during the Baker hospital days and apparently she can't find her keys and appears at the door to hotel visitors.

After a second or two, TB relaxes back on his pillow. "He's telling the *Ghost Hunters* story. The crew from that TV show stayed in that room across the hall

and the ghost moved everything around. When they came back to their room one night, they couldn't get in the door because the ghost had moved their stuff and blocked the entrance from the inside."

"How do you know this?"

TB shrugs and looks guilty. "There was a tour this afternoon."

He expects me not to catch on. Worse, he thinks I'll be mad that he either crashed the tour or accepted a free one without my approval. I lean over and kiss him again, right on top of that thick head of gorgeous blond hair.

"What?" TB asks again, totally confused.

I sit on the bed next to him, grab the remote, turn off the TV and throw the remote on the side table. "Tell me all about it."

"Henry says you all will go on the tour tomorrow night," TB begins, still fighting off sleep. "But there are several ghosts in this hotel."

I take a deep breath, hoping one of them is a plain girl with reddish hair and brown eyes. "I heard about Michael in 218. And the guy with the cap in the morgue. Who else is here?"

"I can't remember them all." TB rubs his eyes. "The lady across the hall, a nurse with a gurney I think on one of the floors. Some couple in a suite took a photo of a woman in white in their TV screen."

My heart drops. "Is that it?"

"That's not enough?"

How do I bug him without mentioning Plain Jane? "I mean, were there any others?"

TB pushes himself up from the pillows. "Oh yeah, there was the college girl who threw herself off the balcony."

A hum begins in the room, too quiet to be detected by the human ear but it resonates with my pulse, skittering throughout my body. This buzzing energy is Lori, I think, and might explain the story of the room's ghost. "What did she look like?"

TB turns to me with a puzzled grin. "How the hell would I know?"

And with that remark, the buzzing immediately stops, TB turns and readjusts his pillows, dropping down with a sigh and quickly falling back to sleep.

I'm disappointed, naturally, but what did I expect from a man who couldn't remember how to recite vows at our wedding. I'll get my own tour tomorrow night and I'll actually listen to the details.

Suddenly, I'm exhausted and I crawl into my side of the bed, drifting off to sleep as I vaguely hear the ghost tour making their way down the hall and out of earshot. One piece drifts through the ether and into my consciousness, however, pausing within the fog enveloping me toward sleep: that of a girl who lived on this floor who fell to her death.

WE START the day at a cute coffeehouse in the center of downtown Eureka Springs, if you could call it a downtown. The city hugs the mountain so streets crawl high and low and twist in all directions, one reason why someone dubbed it "the town of up and down." I hug my coffee cup and literally inhale the caffeinated aroma, hoping it might jolt my brain into action.

Sleep eluded me like the ghosts I have been seeing, so I'm thoroughly exhausted. Through my dreams I witnessed faint images, saw tiny clues that I couldn't quite grasp, and heard historic people telling me things I failed to decipher. I tossed and turned all night, waking up at the slightest sound, continually gazing the room for Lori who never returned.

Now, clutching my coffee like a lifesaver, I remain in that fog, unable to focus on what our historian is saying.

"Are you okay?" one of the emaciated Wallace girls asks me and for the life of me I cannot remember her name.

"I'm fine," I say, even though I want to nod off in my chair. "Have you had breakfast yet? You're so thin."

I'm being rude and I know it. I had a friend in college who resembled a beanpole, which is exactly what people nicknamed her. None of us thought much about it, until I found her crying in her dorm room and realized that pointing out faults, no matter how much we wished they were our own problems, is as hurtful as calling someone fat.

The Wallace girl isn't insulted, but maybe she's being nice because she's in



PR. “Are you sure your head is all right? We just had breakfast.”

I look down and sure enough, there sits my half empty plate. Reminds me of the old Steve Martin stand-up routine where he would pause on stage then say, “Sorry, I went to the Bahamas.”

“I’m not fully functional until I had my coffee,” I lie to skinny whinny, then kick myself for calling her a name, even if it is inside my head. “And I’m sorry for saying you’re thin. It’s the mother in me.”

Admitting that makes me physically wince. Oh, please don’t ask me about Lillye.

“We’ll be doing the walking tour soon,” she tells me and I breathe a sigh of relief. “That will help get you going.”

Indeed. Like I said, I can focus better when I’m holding something, moving around. Sitting here listening to this fine gentleman drone on about the establishment of Eureka Springs is failing to lodge anything within my brain.

Our Wallace Girl seems to receive that same message for she gently interrupts boring — but highly informative, I’m sure — local historian and suggests we continue the history lesson as we make our way around town. Richard mentions a bathroom break and another cup of coffee — the ghost tours outside his door interrupted his sleep — and Stephanie and Joe ask if they can run across the street to the Basin Park, where the original spring exists, to take photos in the perfect morning light that will disappear soon. It’s decided that we break for fifteen minutes and meet in front of the spring to begin the walking tour.

The morning group is me, the Wisconsin duo and Richard for the others are enjoying spa services at the hotel; we have split up the salon time and mine comes tomorrow. Wallace boss lady gives us the go-ahead and we instantly move in all directions, like kids being released for recess. Since I neither have to visit the ladies room or am interested in chasing light, I head outside for fresh air and a chance to clear my head.

Next door is a chocolate shop, another bistro and then one of those typical gift shops you find in cute towns such as Eureka Springs, those offering the same tchotchkes made in China but also upscale souvenirs, local art and what I call

“cruisewear” clothes for women, the free-flowing kind. None of this interests me — although I wonder if I will need those clothes if I keep eating like I do — so I walk to the end of the block and notice an alley with a stone stairway down to the next street. Again, the city is an up and down experience.

Alongside the alley, beneath a rainbow flag, there’s a store with crystals in the window. Naturally, Rainbow Waters catches my eye but it’s the enlarged Tarot card on the front door that does the trick, the “Hanged Man” staring at me as if life is some big joke.

Every time I have a Tarot reading, this card appears. It depicts a man in blue with red tights hanging upside down by one foot from a tree, like he got caught on a branch and decided to enjoy the experience. His hands rest casually behind his back and one leg is crossed behind the other. Around his head, a yellow light glows.

I’ve been told the Hanged Man represents indecision or feeling stuck, an ample definition of my life since I graduated LSU in 1997. But the Hanged Man’s resignation, the ease of his hands folded behind his back and the heavenly light about his head suggests I need to surrender to circumstances and let go of emotional issues.

“You need to release what you are holding on to,” the last card reader told me, which made me laugh considering. How does one move past the death of a child? “When you let go of the worries, concerns, emotional baggage you hold tight to, a new reality will appear.”

I stare at my nemesis, an image I have come to detest with the message he brings, since the resolution the card demands has always remained out of reach. This time, I’m not intimidated. “This is my new reality, sucker,” I tell the flipped man, who never flinches from his head-exploding position.

Just then the door opens and a woman peeks out. “I don’t open until ten but you’re welcome to come in. I’m stocking inventory.”

I have fifteen minutes to kill so why not. “Okay,” I tell the woman, who opens the door wide and flicks on an additional light that illuminates the many shelves of New Age miscellany. The store is filled with crystals and other stones, jewelry, books and witchy things like blankets sporting pentacles, altar kits and

black capes. Of course, there are Tarot card decks and how to read them, plus other divination articles such as runes and numerology.

“Cool store,” I mutter as I make my way through the maze, breathing in the sweet smells of sage, incense and something else, scented candles perhaps?

“Anything in particular you’re looking for?” the owner asks. “Something to help you focus, maybe?”

I turn and stare at this woman dressed in a long, flowing skirt and peasant top, hair a mass of frizz turning toward white, wondering how she picked up on my morning predicament. “What makes you say that?”

She leaves her mound of boxes, slipping a stack of what appears to be political flyers beneath the counter, and emerges to where I’m standing, her hand outstretched. “I’m Cassiopeia and this is Rainbow Waters.”

I shake her hand, which is warm and comforting, but my manners leave me once again. “Seriously, that’s your name?”

“Well, we cater to lots of people here in Eureka. There’s a big Christian population who come for the Passion of the Christ performance in the summer, but a lot of gays visit here as well, plus they own a lot of the local shops. And, of course, there’s the Wicans who are attracted to the mountain because of its healing properties and other spiritual attributes. A rainbow seemed appropriate. And I don’t have to tell you what the waters refer to.”

I meant *her* name, but I don’t interrupt. “Cool,” is all I manage.

“Looking for something in particular?” She picks up a cloudy somewhat purple stone and one a brilliant lavender. “Lepidolite is a great stone for healing emotions,” she says holding the darker stone, “but if you want something for clarity and focus, I would suggest purple fluorite.”

I’m attracted to the vibrant purple stone, but I can’t get past what the star lady said. “How did you know about my focus issues?”

Her smile warms me like her handshake, genuine and kind, and I’m convinced she has looked inside my soul and deciphered every fault and attribute. “Just a hunch.”

Suddenly, I’m tuned like a baby grand. “What’s the deal with ghosts in this town?”

Cassiopeia casually leans back against the counter as if we're discussing the weather and not dead people walking the streets of Eureka Springs. "It's the geology. Some people believe more hauntings occur near strong magnetic fields and lots of time that's around places where the ground shifts, the kind that produces electromagnetic energy but not hard shifting that produces earthquakes. Know what I mean?"

Huh? "Not hardly."

"Cracks in the earth, near mountains like this one, can produce electric and magnetic fields when there is geological strain. You find this a lot with granite mountains, where quartz exists."

"So the ground is evolving and the pressure causes unusual fields and that attracts ghosts?" I hope I'm not sounding as clueless as I am.

"It's a theory," Cassiopeia says. "The crystals help move the energy. Our bodies pulse energy, pouring out of us and producing our auras. Ghosts are believed to be energy imprints left on the earthly plane, or sometimes more intelligent energies who are able to communicate with us. You're too young to remember this, but early radio sets used crystals because they vibrate at various frequencies."

I know this theory all too well.

"Water is another conduit," she adds.

This stops me cold, reminding me of my repetitive dreams. "Water? Why?"

"Water has many metaphysical properties. We're comprised of mostly water as well as the earth. It's the basis of all life. It transforms itself and reacts to vibrations. You can take a glass of water and transform its energies simply by speaking to it or labeling its container."

"Masaru Emoto."

Cassiopeia brightens. "Yes. Exactly."

Emoto was a Japanese doctor of alternative medicines who inflicted either positive or negative energy towards different containers of water. He then photographed the water crystals and found striking differences between the two. The water receiving positive energy — such as words of "thank you" or "love" in different languages — had complex, beautiful crystals when frozen and

photographed. The water with the negative language had malformed crystals. I had read his book, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, and felt the pain lying within those distorted water crystals appearing like an abused child, plus learned more in the documentary on physics and the spiritual world, *What the Bleep Do We Know*.

Emoto is convinced that our individual consciousness and that of the world's consciousness collectively is deeply connected to water.

"Fascinating guy and ground-breaking work," I say.

Cassiopeia nods enthusiastically. "Water is my favorite subject. It can be so healing. It's what brought people to this town to begin with, the healing springs we take for granted and pollute."

"Water also destroys." I speak before I think, something I tend to do. I didn't mean to interrupt our positive conversation but Katrina is always lingering in the back of my mind these days.

Cassiopeia gazes at me as if I gave her the final piece of a puzzle. I sense she knows me completely now, although I can't explain why.

"You know, maybe you should try blue apatite." She heads to a corner of the store where a collection of blue rocks rest. "It stimulates psychic visions and clairvoyance, helps communicate with the other worlds."

Before I can answer that the last thing I want to do right now is to communicate with the dead anymore than necessary, the door swings open and the mayor stands gaping on the threshold. Once again, she's attired in a stark business suit, her hair perfectly coifed and her face fully made up — too much so — with that trademark red lipstick.

"I knew it," she practically shouts at me. "I knew you were in league with my cousin."

This is getting ridiculous and I'm in no mood this morning to be yelled at by a woman who left nail marks on my upper arm. "Who the hell is your cousin?" I retort.

Cassiopeia steps between us. "I am."

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## Chapter 11

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For a moment, no one speaks. We're too busy shooting daggers at each other with our eyes. Except for New Age Goddess who quickly centers herself between the mayor and me and offers up a peaceful stance, her arms outstretched gracefully.

"I don't know what's going on here but I'm sure we can talk this out." Looking toward her "cousin," Cassiopeia adds, "How do you two know each other?"

"Don't give me that shit," the mayor retorts. "I know you are planting this woman in my group of travel writers so that something can happen." She uses two fingers to emphasize quote marks on the word something. "I saw her last night asking questions about that girl."

"What girl?" Cassiopeia asks.

"You know damn well who. The one you're so convinced is related."

"What?" I turn to Ms. New Age and say without thinking, "You're related to Lauralei?"

The blood drains from Cassiopeia's face and for a moment I know her secrets. At least I think I do. She narrows her eyes and studies me. "How do you know...?"

"So now you're going to tell me that you two have nothing up your sleeves?"

The mayor continues her tirade about how I'm here to bring down progress and ruin her campaign, whatever that means, while

Cassiopeia continues her questions, mainly how I came to know the name of the homely girl haunting my room. Blame it on the lack of sleep, not enough coffee or too many ghosts following me around, but I melt down. Bigtime. Hands in the air, I push toward the door, and practically yell, “I don’t know what’s going on with you two but I want out of here.”

The mayor blocks my way at the door and reaches to grab my arm for the second time but I jerk back. “Oh no you don’t,” I bark. “Touch me again, woman, and I’m calling the cops. I happen to be friends with Madman Maddox.”

I didn’t mean to use my nickname for the hunk, but I don’t work well under pressure.

Unfortunately, the mayor does.

“He works for *me*,” she says between gritted teeth. “Don’t you even think you’re getting away with this.”

Suddenly I spot an angel lurking behind the mayor’s back, a thin PR girl holding two coffees in her hands watching this interaction with eyes as wide as saucers. God, for the life of me, why can’t I remember her name?

“Great, you’re here,” I yell to the Wallace girl. “I’m on my way out.”

The mayor turns and spots my savior and, after a moment’s pause, moves back so that I may exit the store. Just before I’m home free she whispers in my ear as I pass. “I’m watching you.”

I try desperately for a witty comeback, something that would make Clint Eastwood proud, but all I manage is, “You too!”

Skinny and I climb the stairs to Spring Street in silence, but once we turn the corner and cross over to the Basin Spring Park, she looks my way sheepishly and asks, “What the hell was that all about?”

I stop at the entrance to the park, standing beneath an arch that reads “Balm of Life” because I can see Richard, my Wisconsin buddies and the historian waiting for us ahead. “What’s your name? I’m sorry but I can’t remember.”

“Alicia.”

“And please dear God is that coffee for me?”

Alicia laughs, breaking the awful tension we carried with us from the shop. “Yes, one for you and one for Richard who’s been complaining ever since we

left the Crescent Hotel.” She winces. “Oh, did I say that?”

I grab a coffee, remove the plastic cover and inhale its scent, hoping that delicious aroma will bring me back to center. “Your secret’s safe with me, Alicia, and although mine really isn’t a secret — I have no idea what that was all about, the mayor has something in her bonnet about me — but I won’t tell if you won’t tell.”

“But why does the mayor have a beef with you?”

Something to do with the ghost in my room, I want to say, but that would sound crazy.

“I don’t know. I think she has me mixed up with someone else or she thinks I’m working with her cousin, for some reason.”

And her cousin’s related to the ghost in my room.

“Her cousin?”

“The New Age-looking woman in that shop. Her name’s Cassiopeia, by the way.”

Alicia laughs, and the tension drains. “She’s Merrill Seligman. She’s pretty well known in town, a big water conservation activist. When we were planning this trip, the mayor specifically said we needed to keep you all away from both her and that discussion. One of the reasons I happened to come looking for you, by the way.”

“What discussion?”

Richard waves his hand from his seat at the base of the spring. “Are we going to do this or what?”

Alicia sighs. “A minute ago he was begging to go back to the hotel. Something about ghost tours keeping him up all night.”

We start walking toward the group and Alicia whispers, “The mayor’s fighting with a conservation group about water issues, or some development residents are upset about. But you can’t write about it!”

I send her a wink. “I’m a travel writer, always stay away from political issues. Promise.”

Alicia passes a coffee to Richard who fails to offer gratitude, mumbles something about no cream, and the historian takes that cue to start our walking



tour. We're at the center of town in a beautiful park that surrounds the Basin Spring, the site where first Dr. Alvah Jackson used the waters to heal his son of an eye ailment in 1856 and then built a business selling "Dr. Jackson's Eye Water." Next came Judge L.B. Saunders of nearby Berryville who brought his family to the Basin Spring to try to cure his erysipelas (I write this malady down but have no idea what it is and if I spelled it right). The judge built a small house near the spring that flowed into a natural stone basin at the time, hence its name. Mr. Historian claims the ancient Indian spring was graced with markings that vandals abused in the late 1800s.

"What's the historian's name?" I ask Stephanie, because I may want to quote the guy in my article.

"Harold P. Johnson," she whispers back, and I'm so thankful for travel writers without ADHD.

Mr. Johnson explains how the judge was cured of his illness that I can't spell and began telling everyone of the healing springs in northwest Arkansas. Soon visitors were traveling to this magical place in the Boston Mountains, which I learn is what these hills of electromagnetic energy are called. On July 4, 1879, more than four hundred people came to the spring in the hopes of renewal and it was then that the judge's son, Burton Saunders, declared "Eureka!"

"The expression means 'I have found it,'" Johnson explains. "And it's been the name of the town ever since."

"I'd say 'Eureka!' if I could find some cream," Richard mutters and we all ignore him.

Streets were soon planned and Eureka Springs grew as more people arrived. By the end of 1879 lots were established and wooden homes quickly built. Dozens of other springs were discovered, but the town grew up around Basin Spring and a few nearby, which Mr. Johnson promises to show us.

"By 1880 we had three thousand residents," Johnson said. "By 1882, five thousand. Within a few more years there would be a rail line here and Eureka Springs one of the largest cities in Arkansas."

I look around the "Indian Healing Spring" that's now harnessed from the mountainside into a manmade basin and fountain, surrounded by a cast iron

fence. There's a monument to World War I soldiers standing guard in the park's center, plus numerous benches where tourists rest, including one created from a massive sycamore tree that once graced the springs. One of the benches has carved in its side, "Play it again, Sam," and I'm about to ask Mr. Johnson what that means when I look up and see the group heading up Spring Street.

I run to catch up and hear him mentioning the Osage Indians, a tribe who lived in the area and labeled this slice of heaven the land of blue skies and laughing waters. A place of miracles. Where are these native people now?

"By the early twentieth century, there were numerous claims of people being healed here," Johnson continues as we pass the stone walls of the Basin Park Hotel and tourists watch us from their breakfast on the second-floor balcony. Johnson pulls a paper out of his pocket and reads, "In 1926 a Dr. M.H. Owen wrote, 'I firmly believe that nature, God, has given these springs to heal nearly every disease known to man, and these springs are yet in their infancy as far as their reputation and value are concerned.'"

In my state of fatigue and recovery from being yelled at, I'm not in the best frame of mind. Part of me thinks stealing Native American miracle springs is not something to be proud of, while the other wonders if these waters will heal my broken heart.

"How do people use these springs today?" I ask.

Johnson is now walking backwards up Spring Street as he leads us on. "Unfortunately, the springs have become polluted over the years. The city's growth took its toll on them. But there's been work to bring them back and one of them, which we will go to, is clear enough to drink."

This news strikes me to the core, as if I learned that Santa doesn't exist. So now people come to Eureka Springs for what, to walk around these gorgeous springs, then go shopping, have a beer? A malaise, my constant companion these past three years, settles in my heart, this time a reminder that priorities have shifted in this country, focused on acquiring things made in China instead of what's best for the earth and our souls. Or maybe it's me, a broken woman who has lost a daughter and everything she owns to a monster storm some are chalking up to global warming, a threat that no one seems to be taking seriously.

I can't comprehend the machinations of the world anymore.

Johnson takes us past the post office built in 1918, then to Sweet Spring, a gorgeous park built alongside the waters that's emerging from inside a small hollow. As we descend the steps to the water's edge, the air turns remarkably cooler.

"Sweet spring was named for its pleasant, sweet taste," Johnson explains.

"Which we can't enjoy anymore," Richard inserts.

Joe waits patiently for us to return so he can shoot the springs without interruption or people. Stephanie moves out of the way and takes in the lovely gardens surrounding the park, flowers beginning their early spring buds.

"Shame about the springs not being accessible," she says. "I sure could use some help with my arthritis."

I look back at the corner bluff, flowers cascading down toward the spring that still bubbles forth no matter what people have done to its environment; nature continues. Bees and butterflies flit from flower to flower and while we wait for Joe, I pause on a bench that reads, "Our Past is Your Present, Eureka Springs Preservation Society."

"That's an understatement," I say to no one, thinking of the *passed* people who appear to be hounding me these days. Still, I get it. Even now, sitting here listening to the buzzing of bees and the trickling of water, the tension drifts away and peace prevails. There's an aura of healing that remains despite progress, and we spot many people standing by the springs, breathing in its beauty and energy.

Johnson points out historic buildings, such as the circa-1901 Palace Hotel and Bath House across the street, as well as where hotels and spas used to be. We move up Spring Street and pause at three cottages established within the mountainside next to Harding Spring, a spot where one of the most famous healings took place.

"Jennie Cowan came to Eureka to cure her blindness but didn't get any relief from the Basin Spring," Johnson says. "But at this spring, she regained her sight."

Off to the side are stone stairs leading up and I follow, ending up to the left of the spring and the group, hugged on one side by a cliff where a tree is

growing in the middle of the rock. Viewing a majestic tree prospering despite its limitations gives me hope, and I'm suddenly feeling better, regardless of the fitful night's sleep and the disturbing morning. I'm liking this town, especially the springs.

"What are you doing?"

I look down and find Richard scowling at me.

"You Louisiana people never follow the rules, do you?"

"What does that mean?"

"Uh, like you're supposed to get out of town when a major storm is brewing so the rest of us don't have to rescue you afterwards."

A fire rushes up my body and I'm about to give him a major piece of my mind but Richard's already back in line with the group as they head to the next spring. I hurry down the stone steps and catch up, still fuming over his insensitive remarks.

Next up is the town's Carnegie Library — those wonderful old buildings constructed by the Carnegie Foundation in the early twentieth century that I love — and the delightful Crescent Spring beneath a canopy. I use the opportunity to close my eyes, listen to the water spewing forth and calm down. Thankfully, Richard has moved to the other side of the group.

Before the library was built, a gazebo existed on this spot, Johnson explains, and marked the beginning of a staircase that led up to the Crescent Hotel. Around the corner is the First Presbyterian Church, built in 1886 from the hotel's leftover stone.

"And now we will take a drive to the springs on the outskirts of town," Johnson informs us, and like magic, Alicia appears with the van.

Stephanie, Joe and I are amazed at this well-tuned tour but Richard grumbles, "More springs?"

"Well, we are in Eureka *Springs*," Joe says.

Richard shakes his head as Alicia approaches. "I don't want to see any more springs. You've seen one water coming out of the earth, you've seen them all."

Poor Mr. Johnson stands there unsure of what to say — no doubt he's used to people paying him money to take a tour of these unique waters and undoubtedly

stay until the end — and the rest of us wince at Richard's rudeness. Alicia, dear heart, comes to the rescue.

"You can return to the hotel, if you want Richard. Maybe you can catch a quick nap before lunch."

Richard instantly perks up. "Great."

"But we're on a schedule," Alicia continues. "So if you want to do that, you'll have to walk back."

This takes the wind out of Richard's sails but he's still itching for that hotel room. "Yeah, whatever. Is the hotel close?"

"There's a stairway on the upper side of Crescent Spring," Johnson says. "Goes right to the hotel. Just walk up the stone steps to Crescent Drive, turn left and you'll be right in back of your hotel."

"Thanks."

As Richard heads to the stairway, hidden behind the gardens of the Crescent Spring park, Alicia whisks us to the van. She's moving too fast, I suspect, which means there's some ulterior motive, but I'm just glad to be rid of the irritating man. When we get settled into the van and head off, Stephanie says, "You're right Mr. Johnson, those springs are healing. I feel so much better."

We all know what she means, and I smile as we pass the stone stairway leading up to the Crescent Hotel, a steep incline winding through woods with Richard struggling through every step.

Johnson offers to either show us historical and architectural sites or water and the three of us enthusiastically choose springs. We make a big loop around the north side of town, passing adorable gingerbread Victorians, several bed and breakfasts and a backyard dinosaur statue Johnson tells us used to belong to nearby Dinosaur World. We pause at the Grotto, a spring that's hidden deep inside the mountain with a small stone staircase providing access into its cave. The temperature drops significantly and I pull my sweater close over my chest. Someone has placed candles on a makeshift altar, creating a glow that's stunning.

"The Grotto is considered by many to be very spiritual," Johnson says and I'm so there.

Back in the van we stop at Magnetic Springs, the only spring in town that's drinkable but none of us choose to try it out. Since there's a large, deep basin where the water collects, Stephanie does take the opportunity to dunk her arthritic feet into its depth. After a few minutes, the cold water proves too much for my co-traveler so we drive to Cold Spring and Soldier Spring, both located away from town and tourists.

"Federal soldiers reportedly killed two bushwhackers in front of this cave," Johnson explains in front of Soldier Spring.

"Want more?" he asks after the van pulls away and the three of us glance at each other for confirmation; we all do. Johnson tells us there are dozens of springs and "seeps" in the area, with nineteen pocket springs and parks in town, all maintained by the Eureka Springs Parks and Recreation Commission. Alicia politely adds, however, that we're due to meet up with Henry and the next tour.

"One more loop around a neighborhood," Johnson says. "And the last three are fun ones."

Turns out Carrie Nation, the hatchet-wielding, saloon-smashing prohibitionist made her way to Eureka Springs at the turn of the twentieth century and we pass what used to be her house. Being from New Orleans and a lover of cocktails, I make a joke about the radical member of the temperance movement but Johnson quickly corrects me, claiming she was acting out in protest of women who were victims to family members who couldn't hold their liquor. Nation married an alcoholic physician who died of alcohol poisoning, which drove her to do what she did, he informs us. Her protests ranged from the meek singing hymns in bars to smashing bottles with her hatchet, which landed her in jail more than two dozen times. Many bars hung a sign that read, "All Nations welcome but Carrie."

In her later years Carrie Nation ran a boarding house and girl's school in Eureka Springs, aptly titled Hatchet Hall, and she never hesitated knocking cigars out of youngsters' mouths and protesting alcohol sales.

"There's a story that Carrie had a vision of a spring across from her boarding house," Johnson tells us as we drive down Flint Street. "She hired workers to blast through the rock and sure enough, there was a spring."

We also pass Onyx Spring, which was used by locals for washing laundry, which makes us all gasp in horror. We pause at Little Eureka Spring, its water once labeled as the purest at the 1904 World's Fair and a favorite with people with arthritis, which makes Stephanie perk up.

The road ends at Lake Eureka, a spring that was damned to produce a swimming hole, although it's anything but a lake. The small body of water — more like a pond — rests in the turn of the road deadly still and a bit rancid around the edges, although dragonflies are flitting everywhere. This corner of the world is on private property — I spot a house up to the left of the lake and a gravel road hugging the right. No doubt the owners have left the swimming hole to run wild with nature. Which isn't a bad thing, I suppose.

We disembark the van to check out both spring and lake while Johnson tells us about the last spring on our list, the Cave Spring up Douglas Street that's reportedly haunted. That strange tingling sensation I had back in my hotel room returns in a rush, buzzing me like an electrical shock. I swallow hard, trying to regain my balance — and sanity — and return to that peace I had known at the previous stops. Johnson keeps talking about ghosts and I find it's both difficult to breathe and walk, so I pause while the others head to the lake's edge and look out on what used to be a popular gathering spot in summertime.

"Why is the Cave Spring haunted?" I manage to ask before Mr. Johnson moves too far away.

"No one knows but there are plenty of stories. Of course, they say the same thing about this turn in the road, that it's not safe to be down here late at night."

Joe laughs. "Sounds like the perfect teenage date scare. Take a girl down a dark road late at night, a place with spooky placid waters and tell her ghost stories so she'll jump in your arms."

"Yeah, they're pretty placid all right," Stephanie adds. "I wouldn't want to hang around here after dark."

"That cave isn't much better," Johnson adds. "Dark and cool inside, with several rooms cut out of the bluff. It's awesome to see, will take you there if you want, but it's pretty spooky at night."

My head hurts when he speaks these words and something tells me that what

he's saying is important.

Joe snaps a few pictures but no one's impressed so everyone moves to get back in the van. "Aren't you going to check it out," Stephanie asks me.

I realize I haven't moved from my spot, still vibrating as if I stepped in a puddle during a lightning storm. My head is screaming for me to get out of there, but something else I can't explain is pulling me forward. I nod to Stephanie and gingerly take a few steps toward the lake, my hands clutched tightly around my camera.

"Just take a photo and get the hell out of here," I tell myself. "It's an ordinary body of water."

I stop at the pond's edge, knowing for sure, now, that something's very wrong here. The journalist in me is desperate to know what, but my beating heart demands I flee. Off to the right a stone wall rises up the mountain and in its center a hole about four feet by four feet. I'd say it's a cave but it looks too clean cut to not be manmade and its dark interior tells me it travels fairly deep into the mountainside.

I raise my camera to my eyes and adjust the telephoto lens dial, and take a quick photo of the odd little box cave, although I can't explain why. Then I turn toward the lake and point to a distant spot across the water that offers the best composition while taking in the scope of the scene before me.

As the far shore comes into focus, I see them. Three girls. One standing off to the side, blood pouring down from her head, staining her clothes and screaming to the heavens, and the other two holding hands, crying and begging for their lives. I swallow, doubting that this scene is real, but I take the photo anyway, then several more. As I watch these women standing horrified in pain, I realize that I have completely lost my mind. But I do what any confused person would in these circumstances, point to my ghosts and scream bloody murder.



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## Chapter 12

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I'm waiting for Madman Maddox to show, watching Jesus with his arms outstretched turn colors as the sun descends to my right. I nurse my now familiar martini while trying to get my story straight, something that explains what happened today without me admitting that I have survived Katrina's watery destruction only to fall off the proverbial deep end of the ocean. My journalist brain screams, "Enough with the clichés!"

After my blood-curling scream at the lake's edge, Alicia had come running, along with Joe who grabbed my arm and gave me a once-over to see if I was hurt. All I could manage was to point across the water and say something about helping three murdered women. At least that's what I heard Joe telling the cops when they arrived.

To make matters worse, Merrill or Cassiopeia or whatever the hell her name is showed up with a contingent of protestors, carrying signs about a new development that's threatening the water supply of Eureka Springs. Stephanie told me just before Alicia whisked our group away to lunch — and leaving me to contend with the cops — that Merrill had planned to meet us at Sweet Spring, but the bus carrying the protestors had broken down on Highway 62, delaying their arrival.

Adding icing to the cake, the mayor arrived, and guess who's standing there, next to the crime scene and a hoard of protestors, shaking for all she's worth? Then, as if on cue, the news van pulled up and began taping us all.

After an hour of watching Merrill and her cousin go at it, then the mayor taking turns with me while the cops had a million questions, Henry arrived to rescue me back to the Crescent, where he left me while continuing his tour, and Alicia took my group to the Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge, something my editor specifically wanted me to include in the article.

“I think it’s best that you stay here for the afternoon,” Henry had said as he planted me on the steps of the Victorian hotel and I’m picturing him scratching me off the list for good.

The door to the balcony bar opens and my heart races. I still haven’t figured out what to tell the Eureka Springs Police Department as a formal statement, but it’s TB and for once, I’m thrilled to see him.

“What on earth happened?” He plops down next to me. “You didn’t show up for lunch and then I hear you uncovered some body?”

“I don’t know,” I lie. “We were doing a walking tour of the springs and I saw something. Turns out it was a bone. A girl’s forearm sticking out of the mud.”

“Yeah, Alicia said they found what they think are remains.”

I nod, still unsure of what I’m supposed to admit.

“She also said you screamed and yelled something about girls covered in blood.”

I close my eyes trying to blot out that painful memory. Why oh why did I have to open my mouth? When I look up again, the waiter is passing by and I signal for another round.

“Vi, you’ve had enough.”

“You just got here, how do you know?”

“Because I can tell when you’re headed to never-never land.”

I gaze at my husband of eight years and am both horrified and thankful he knows me at least that much. “I saw three girls at the far edge of that pond,” I whisper. “And they weren’t really there, know what I mean? Don’t you think that deserves another martini?”

TB sighs and raises two fingers toward the waiter. “I don’t know why you’re surprised. You’ve seen ghosts before.”

I lean back in my chair and study him. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve always been a little psychic. Remember that time we took Lillye to the Myrtles Plantation and you kept saying how it was all a scam, them being the most haunted place in America?”

“It is a scam,” I say with a snort. “They said an antique mirror had a ghost image in it. Antique mirrors age that way naturally. And some shadow in a corner of a photo was the slave who killed the plantation wife and children with oleander tea? I looked into this, couldn’t find anything about a murderous slave.”

TB turns and looks me in the eye. “You see? You rationalize everything. But you’re the one who saw the door close on its own and that weird light out back in the yard.”

I wave him away. “Could have been anything.”

“Yeah, but it probably wasn’t.”

The waiter arrives with two martinis and sets them down in front of us. I want to gulp mine down like the previous drink I ordered but I’m too shy to do it while TB’s watching.

“You could always interpret my dreams.” TB sips his drink.

I savor that tangy combination of gin and vermouth, eating the olives immediately. “Not very hard to do. You dream the same thing over and over again.”

TB looks away thoughtfully. “I can never catch that fish.”

The fish probably symbolizes me, but I’m not going there.

TB shakes his head as if forcing it to get back on track. “There was that time in Lafayette too. Remember, on our honeymoon?”

We had little money when we married, TB working for the Orleans Parish School Board as a carpenter and me pregnant, fresh out of college. I wore a store-bought dress for the ceremony at City Hall and our parents hosted the reception at TB’s Catholic church (you know my mother loved that). Our friends chipped in and gave us two nights at a Lafayette bed and breakfast called T-Freres, which means Little Brother in Cajun, so we drove the two hours into Cajun Country for sex, crawfish and zydeco dancing.

And a ghost named Amelie.

“I don’t know TB. Maybe I was influenced by what the proprietor told us;

she gave us the whole story the moment we arrived. I know I said I saw the French lady with the bun on her head but who knows what I really saw.”

TB places his drink on the table. “Some days, Vi, you sound just like your mother.”

This is the last thing I want to hear coming from a man who shows up on my first press trip unannounced, not to mention with whom I legally filed a separation that he’s ignoring. Besides, of all people he knows how much that comment smarts. I start to give him my view on things when Madman Maddox strolls through the door, emerging on to the balcony of the Crescent Hotel, hands on his gun belt, chiseled chin in the air like a TV series character.

I smile like a schoolgirl and for a moment I think he doesn’t recognize me again. TB notices my reaction, huffs and rises. “I’ll be in the room when you’re done with Jack Shephard.”

I look up at my husband, always amazed at his occasional right-on perceptions. Regardless, I play dumb. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’m not blind, Vi. I know you’ve had a thing for him.”

I start to protest but TB heads for the door, saying as he passes Maddox, “She’s over there.”

Maddox claims the seat TB occupied while pulling out his notebook. “Viola, right?”

“Yeah.” Damn, he doesn’t remember. “From the New Orleans Post.”

Maddox nods and says nonchalant, “Right, the Bead Burglar.”

“Eight years.”

“What?”

We worked together for years, you insensitive moron. I don’t say that, of course. Now that he’s right in front of me, I’m too shy to be honest but I’m also noticing how he’s not that handsome, after all. “I need another drink. Where is that waiter?”

He leans in close, his elbows on his knees. “Are you going to explain to me how you knew there was a dead body in Lake Eureka?”

“It’s hardly a lake,” I clarify.

“Less than twenty-four hours after you found a body in Sycamore Cave?”

I shrug and offer a sheepish smile. “Coincidence?”

“Seriously?”

The waiter passes and I grab his shirt, which almost causes him to drop his tray of margaritas. “Oh sorry, just wanted another drink.” To Maddox, I say, “Anything for you?”

He shakes his head at the waiter, and sends me a stern look.

“Oh,” I manage with a slight slur, feeling the gin taking hold of my brain. “Of course, you’re on duty.”

He starts writing something in his little black book and I wonder if he’s noting my alcohol usage. “I need a statement. You need to tell me exactly what’s going on.”

I empty the contents of my drink — who cares what he thinks? — and place it on the table a bit too hard. The noise of glass upon glass elicits looks from my neighbors. “I haven’t a clue what’s going on, *ossifer*.” I smile coquettishly at the mispronunciation. “I was minding my own business, first in a cave and then on a historic walking tour of Eureka Springs and the next thing I know, it’s a crime scene. What is the world coming to?”

“A pretty significant crime scene.”

This makes my journalistic haunches rise. I stop smiling. “Oh yeah, how come?”

“There was more than one body at that lake.”

Goosebumps skitter across my body and I shiver. Hard. “How many?”

“Because you were also babbling about that hole in the wall, we looked inside and found another victim.” Maddox crosses his arms. “Why don’t you just tell me what’s going on?”

As if I know. “Like I said, I have no idea. I’m here to write about why people need to visit the Ozarks.”

“The mayor has a few ideas and it’s nothing to do with tourism.”

Now I’m leaning forward. “The mayor can kiss my ass.”

I’m so close to Maddox I smell the delicious after-shave he always wears, something manly and provocative that stirs my primal emotions. I inhale deeply but I know he’s not remaining close because he wants to smell *my* perfume.

“This is some crazy shit you’re stirring up,” he tells me. “If you’re trying to push your tree-hugging agenda with murders that are a century old, I’m going to be royally pissed and I will haul *your* ass to jail. So, I need to know what’s going on, I need it to make sense and I need you to stay out of the mayor’s business, you understand Miss Valentine?”

Maybe it’s the gin, maybe it’s the freakin’ ghosts following me around or maybe I’m tired of being pushed, but I lean in closer and stare him down. “As soon as it makes sense to me, Mr. Maddox, you’ll be the first to know. But I assure you, it has nothing to do with that bitch of a mayor.”

We’re locked in a stare contest until the waiter shows up. “You need something?” he asks, which makes Maddox stand and slip his notebook back into his pocket.

“I’ll be back tomorrow, and I want a cohesive statement out of you.”

With that, my once sexual fantasy walks out of the bar, like a line in a bad joke.

What did I just do? “No thank you,” I tell the waiter because TB was right, I have had enough. Besides, if the sun’s going down, that means it’s close to dinnertime and I need to meet the group in the dining room at seven, followed by an eight-thirty ghost tour. Goody, goody.

I stand and try to appear sober and head toward the room. I need to change and come up with — as Maddox so expertly put it — something that makes sense. If only I knew what that was.

When I return to the room, TB is dressed in a pale blue button-down shirt topping his jeans, something I’ve never seen before.

“Where did you get that shirt?”

“At the gift shop downstairs,” is all he offers, avoiding my eyes.

I pause, knowing he doesn’t have money for Polo shirts, so I stare at his back until he finally turns and spills the beans. “Okay, the manager said I could pick out whatever I wanted and I needed a nice shirt for dinner, so I did.”

I rub my forehead, wondering how such a pleasant trip to the Ozarks has turned into this nightmare. “I thought I told you this wasn’t a vacation and that these people are paying for me....”

“I know, Vi. He offered.”

“You didn’t have to accept.”

“Yeah, I didn’t have to accept playing golf with Henry and Carmine this afternoon either, but there you have it.”

My blood pressure kicks up a notch. “What?”

He pulls up close to me and I can smell *his* aftershave which, I must admit, rivals Madman’s. It has been way too long since I had sex.

“I’m not like you and your mom,” TB says with a touch of vinegar. “When people are kind to me, I accept it and say thanks.”

“I am not like my mother!” I’m almost shouting now. “Seriously? How can you possibly compare me to her?”

He throws up his arms in surrender. “You’re in denial, Vi. You shut up tight like a mason jar. No one can help you. No one can get inside.”

I’ve heard this argument from him so many times, especially after Lillye died, but I’m not like my mother, who’s a control freak and whines about everything, anything to draw attention to herself. If anything, I’m the antithesis of the woman who brought me into this world.

I stumble over to the closet and throw on my black ensemble topped by a new outer layer, grab my purse and keys. “Let’s go,” is all I say and TB follows me out the door.

We walk to the elevator in silence, an empty void that I created so many times before. Maybe TB’s right, maybe I shut people out too much. But the truth is, I don’t want to be like my mother or most of the people I know, pouring forth my troubles like water.

“I’m leaving in the morning,” TB finally says. “I won’t be a bother to you any longer.”

This is not what I wanted to happen, surprising myself that I really don’t want my crazy ex-husband to leave. I start to say as much but the elevator arrives. We’re about to walk inside when Carmine hurries over, apparently imbibing at the bar before dinner for he still has what looks like an old fashion in his hand.

“Hey Virgin,” he says as he gets onboard.

You know how water can slowly drop into an unstable container and the drips silently fill up the space until one moment the whole thing comes toppling over? All it takes is that one small drop. Tonight, Carmine is the drip.

I take a huge breath and get in his face. “Ass wipe, I haven’t slept well in several days, all of a sudden I’m seeing ghosts everywhere including a bunch that have been murdered and my head is about to split open for the second time this trip, so if you call me Virgin one more time I’m going to smack you upside your pretty little self-absorbed head.”

The elevator doors open to the lobby but no one moves. TB gazes at me as if I’ve lost my mind. I turn to him and say, “Have I opened up enough for you now?”

I move to exit the elevator but Carmine grabs my elbow and leads me into the lobby by his side. “We have to talk.”

We turn the corner into a seating area by the ancient fireplace, a quiet spot that’s cozy and private, far away from the lobby entrance. Carmine plants me into an oversized chair and TB follows like an obedient puppy, sitting on the couch to my left. Carmine faces us both, placing his drink on the coffee table before us and acting as if he’s called a meeting to order.

“Let me guess. These ghost sightings of yours started right after Katrina?”

I’m totally confused following this line of conversation or why Carmine is discussing ghosts but I nod.

“And you probably had some sort of psychic ability when you were young but you repressed it, right?”

“Exactly,” TB inserts and I send him the evil eye.

Carmine smirks proudly, leaning back in his chair. “You’re a skank.”

“I’m a what?”

Carmine leans forward again, waving his hands defensively. “It’s not what you think.”

I stand ready to go, have had enough of his teasing. “I really don’t have time for this. I’ve had a day from hell after an afternoon and night from hell so you know where you can go.”

Carmine takes my hand softly and looks up at me. Gone is the flippant



attitude, replaced by something akin to empathy. “Please sit down.”

I don’t know why but I do as I’m told and TB starts mouthing off about my past psychic experiences and how I saw three dead girls today. Carmine listens but his eyes never leave mine and I feel like an eighth grader caught throwing my American history book out the window only to have a counselor explain that my ADHD made me do it. Wait, that really happened. But come on, five chapters of our nation’s history and not one woman represented?

Realizing my mind has wandered while TB was talking — big surprise — I interrupt and ask Carmine, “What has this got to do with you?”

Carmine leans in close. “It’s called SCANC and it means specific communication with apparitions, non-entities and the comatose.” When I give him a “you’ve got to be kidding” stare, he adds, “I didn’t come up with that stupid acronym.”

“SCANC?” I ask again.

“The theory is that when someone has psychic or channeling tendencies that they repress, these gifts lie dormant within that person. Sometimes people will go their whole lives and never have another psychic event.”

“Man, that’s a bummer,” TB says. “I would so love to see ghosts.”

“On the other hand,” Carmine continues, “a traumatic event can release this blockage and suddenly a person sees ghosts everywhere. Or they have visions, can communicate with people in comas, or something like that. It all depends on the trauma.”

This all makes sense, but I’m not totally convinced. “And you know this how?”

Carmine picks up his drink and drains the glass. Obviously, this is not something he wishes to revisit. “As you probably have guessed, I bat for the other team. When I was in high school, I was bullied fairly regularly by the more manly specimens of my gender. My dear father said I needed to stand up to these assholes so one day I did.”

Carmine takes another drink even though there’s nothing left in the glass. “What happened?” TB asks.

“They beat me within an inch of my life. I was in the hospital for five

weeks.”

“That’s awful,” I say, feeling how those two words sound so inadequate.

Carmine shakes it off and resumes his haughty appearance. “It’s fine, but now I see ghosts. And I’m a member of the SCANC tribe.”

“So you’re saying Vi should join this group?”

Bless his heart, despite his stupid remarks Carmine doesn’t patronize TB. Like I said, only I’m allowed to do that. “No, although she certainly can if she wants,” Carmine says sweetly. “What I’m saying is that not only has this psychic door opened to Vi for some reason — I’m thinking Katrina did it — but Vi will also be having experiences related to that hurricane.”

I shake my head trying to process all this through a martini haze. “What?”

Carmine leans in closer and glances around to make sure no one is listening. “I only see ghosts who are gay.”

“That’s weird,” TB says like an astonished child.

“Not always,” Carmine retorts with a grin. “I got to meet Oscar Wilde in Paris. That was pretty cool.”

At this point I know he’s pulling my leg. I smile, shake my head at the absurdity of it all and rise once more. “You’re an asshole.”

Carmine doesn’t grab my hand this time, leans back in his chair with a gaze as dark as the night of Katrina. “I think ‘ass wipe’ was the word.”

I’m feeling that buzz again, like a pesky fly that won’t leave you alone, and my head throbs. Right now the only person making a lick of sense is a Texan with great hair who sees the gay dead. Whether it’s that fact or that my head will blow if I remain standing, but I sit back down. I’m still skeptical and I’m certain Carmine reads that in my gaze.

“Maybe you need to explain that,” TB offers.

“What happened in Katrina?” Carmine asks. “Exactly?”

I’m not going there but TB explains it all, from the levees breaking to the two days on the roof surrounded by floodwaters, snakes and who knows what. He skips the information he offered the night before but details our nights on the roof and our evacuation to Lafayette once we were picked up by some benevolent Cajuns in a skiff.

“I’m going to assume this has something to do with water,” Carmine concludes. “You’re probably seeing ghosts who have died by water.”

The buzzing stops and my head clears and suddenly I remember the opera singer at the New Orleans airport. “That woman singing *You Are My Sunshine* back in New Orleans. You saw her too.”

Carmine nods. “I heard her.”

“She was soaking wet.”

Carmine nods again and offers a weak smile. “Then that’s probably it.”

My brain pours over the possibilities; this all makes sense. “The woman in the cave, the three girls by Lake Eureka, they all drowned.”

“What girl in the cave?” TB asks and I ignore him. I’m finally vindicated and I’m not going insane so life suddenly seems brighter.

Except for one thing. “How do I explain this to the police?”

Just then Alicia walks over and informs us that we’re now meeting for dinner in the hotel ballroom.

“We’ll be right there,” Carmine answers.

We all stand but Carmine draws closer and we huddle like football players, waiting for the quarterback to tell us what to do.

“Your best bet is to find out all the information you can on these women. Information is power. That way at least you have something to offer the police. It might not be enough — they’re not keen on psychics — but it’s better than nothing.”

“How do I do that?” I ask.

“Maybe Opie here can dig around for you while we’re out on the tour?”

It’s a great idea but “Opie” frowns and digs his hands deep inside his jeans pockets. “I’m leaving for New Orleans in the morning.”

That old malaise returns, threatening to swallow me whole. I wonder if the self-inflicting darkness I have lived with all these years could have been averted if only I had shared my pain with my husband, who looks so lost and hurt right now. Besides, if I can communicate with ghosts, could I finally be able to see our little girl again? The thought of speaking with Lillye floods my heart with so much hope, I have trouble speaking.

“You don’t have to leave,” I softly say to TB. “I don’t want you to.”

Such simple words, but they make a world of difference. TB looks up hopeful and I smile.

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## Chapter 13

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It all begins with the cherry tobacco outside Room 212, which no one smells but me and Carmine; he's grimacing to my right.

"This was Dr. John Freemont Ellis's office, the hotel's Southern physician during the Victorian era who was a heavy pipe smoker," our ghost tour guide tells us as we make our way through the Crescent Hotel. "People have reported smelling tobacco here although we're a non-smoking hotel."

"I don't smell anything," Richard announces proudly as if that settles the case.

Carmine glances my way and rolls his eyes.

TB, meanwhile, is watching Carmine and me for a clue. "Did you smell it?" he whispers but neither of us replies.

We move on to the most famous room of the hotel, that of 218 where Michael the Irish stonemason reportedly hangs out because it was here that he fell to his death years before. "He's a rascal and a bit of tease," the tour guide says. "He sits on the bed, flirts with women. One visitor said she heard an Irish voice."

"I'm okay with a cute Irish man waking me up," Holly says in that way too adorable Southern accent, and all the men laugh.

"*Moi aussi*," Carmine whispers to my right.

Other ghosts, we learn throughout our hour-long tour, include a young girl who also fell to her death, this time on the staircase near our room, and Theodora

across the hall who despises discord and will tidy up a mess.

“That’s the one I told you about,” TB tells me.

“Tidy up my ass.” Richard crosses his arms defiantly. “I’m in that room and I’m the only one in that room.”

Winnie leans close to me and whispers, “I’ll bet she tidies him up tonight,” and we giggle.

We head down one flight to the third floor on the north side where people have seen or heard a nurse pushing a gurney late at night and as we descend further to the “morgue” our guide tells us about the college coed who threw herself off a balcony. Her “mist” is occasionally seen around ten-thirty at night, he claims. “You can go to the police station and they will tell you that people have reported a girl jumping off the balcony here.”

That now familiar buzzing returns. “Who was she?” I ask.

“No one knows, but they believe she was attending college here back in the 1920s. Some have called her Annabelle.”

That electrical feeling intensifies and I vaguely make out the sound of an emphatic “No!” As soon as the guide starts discussing the morgue, the buzzing stops.

Just before we head to this infamous morgue, the guide hands us a variety of photos snapped by past visitors. Some contain “orbs,” small round balls of white that float within the photos, images that have been credited to both paranormal activity and dust mites and mosquitoes. In other photos, wispy mists and streaks of white appear and these can’t be explained away. The last photos to get passed around contain actual ghost sightings, at least that’s what the guide claims. I have to look really hard to make out what he claims to be a man in a top hat, but the outline of a woman in a room mirror is pretty clear.

“It’s a reflection,” Richard says over my shoulder. “Or Photoshop.”

The basement of this behemoth hotel contains the spa, which is closed up for now. Its bright and airy retail shop is the only redeeming aspect of this underground crypt, the rest dark and rustic like most basements although I wouldn’t know, I live below sea level where basements are unheard of. We walk down a long, narrow hallway with a low ceiling and ductwork exposed, arriving

at a room Baker used to dispose of cancer patients who — amazingly enough — weren't cured by his magical tonic. The creep factor soars through the roof in this tight, dark space, and we also learn that Baker might have experimented on folks here as well.

The tour guide expounds on the Baker cancer hospital and all its horrors — they believe Baker burned his patient's bodies in the incinerator rather than have proof that his cancer cure was a fake. There's mention of accomplices, some who followed Baker to jail when he was finally convicted of mail fraud (the only thing the feds could nail him on, apparently). And we get to check out the locker where TV's *Ghost Hunters* captured a full-body apparition on their infrared camera.

We're all feeling light-hearted about the whole thing, listening to the stories, looking around and taking pictures. But after a few minutes everyone stops talking and a lull settles over the group. The tour guide keeps offering ghost stories, however, now sharing what other people on the tours have experienced, including some weird light anomalies in the morgue, but it appears no one's listening.

Finally, the tour guide gets the hint. "Y'all ready to go back upstairs?"

Several of us agree and there's almost a mad dash out the door. Something spooked us, and we all felt it.

No one says a word until we reach the stairs. I feel a light touch on my elbow and I jump.

"It's just me," Winnie says from behind, laughing. I wait until she catches up and we climb to the lobby together.

"Are you avoiding me?" she asks.

"Not at all." I have been, not wanting to explain all that has happened since our cave escapade the day before.

"I tried sitting with you at dinner but you moved too fast and ended up at Carmine's table."

"Oh, really? Sorry." I hope I sound sincere.

"Henry said you weren't feeling good this afternoon so I was worried about you."

I sneak a glance over at Joe who winks. God bless that man for not spreading the news. Good thing Richard hadn't been at the lake with us when I spotted those girls.

"I'm fine." Another lie. "My head's much better but I didn't sleep well last night so Henry thought it best I get some rest."

"Good for Henry." We reach the top of the stairs from the basement to the lobby and Winnie has perked up since the morgue visit. "Want to go have a drink at the Baker Bar and catch up, now that we heard all about his dead patients? Or we can nab a drink in the lobby and sit on the back porch and wait for Annabelle to fly by."

I know she's just being funny and normally I'd be laughing at the joke, but it hits a nerve considering Annabelle's now my roommate.

"It's been a long day." I pause at the elevator. "I think I'm going to head up to bed."

Winnie seems disappointed and I so wish I was in better spirits to join her, no pun intended. But I really am beat and I'm hoping I will rest eight hours sans ghosts tonight.

"But you rested all afternoon," Winnie insists. "Come on, one drink."

I've had my limit of alcohol after too much drama, never got that nap and my brain is shutting down. Winnie senses my refusal before I speak it. "See you in the morning, then." She heads off to where Stephanie and Joe are ordering a nightcap.

I push the elevator button, expecting TB to be following but he and Carmine have a tête-a-tête going. In fact, everyone in the group is heading toward the lobby bar, not ready to call it a night, except for Richard who naturally announces he's going to bed and bounds up the stairs.

Part of me hates that I'm not joining this party, a gathering of colleagues I have waited my entire career to be a part of, but becoming a SCANC has sucked the wind from my sails. With a heavy heart I get in the tiny elevator.

Just before the doors close, a hand appears and I quickly push the door open button and move aside for the newly arrived person. "Thanks," she says, and suddenly I'm standing next to Merrill. When Merrill notices it's me she



exclaims, “Just the person I’m looking for.”

The doors close so I’m trapped. “I don’t think so, Cousin. You’re bad news.”

She gazes at me in that New Age, Mother Earthy way and appears sincere but I’m still pissed from the incident at the lake. “I can explain. Please let me buy you a drink or something.”

“Is the mayor coming too?”

“I can explain that as well.”

We reach the fourth floor, the doors open and I sigh. I can’t help it, I want to know what’s up with this woman and how the hell she’s related to Lori, aka Annabelle the flying mist.

“One drink.”

Because it’s a weekday the Baker Bar is sparsely occupied and we nab a quiet table right away. Merrill orders a bourbon and like a good girl I request a Diet Coke.

“Okay Cassiopeia or whatever your name is, what the hell happened at that lake today?”

Merrill smiles, turning her napkin emblazoned with Dr. Baker’s creepy face on it around and around. “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

I lean back in my chair and study her. There’s something about her face that’s so familiar, the tilt of her chin when she smiles, the glint in her eyes, but for the life of me I can’t place it. Sitting here in a gauzy top and jeans with about a half dozen bracelets that range from hemp to meditation beads, she’s nothing like her cousin, that’s for sure.

“How are you related to Lori?”

“Who?”

“Lauralei Thorne?”

“Oh Annabelle?”

That buzzing starts but I shake it off. “I don’t think that’s her name.”

Merrill leans in close and studies me. “How do you know all this?”

Because I’m a SCANC I want to say, which makes me laugh and Merrill stares harder. Instead, I sober. “Annabelle or Lori is haunting my room.”

This juicy piece of information — and that of the other girls and their deaths

— is not something I'm eager to share with anyone for I'm certain of their disbelieving reaction. Merrill, on the other hand, appears thrilled at such news. She leans forward and grabs my hand, which jolts my senses.

"How do you know this?"

I'm not a touchy-feely girl, although I don't condone it either, so I slip my hands free and place them in my lap. "I saw her a couple of times in my room and I think she haunts my dreams."

"But how do you know it's her?"

"There's a photo in the room across the hall, the one with the English teacher and the class winning a literary award. She's in it." Not exactly true; her name came to me in that weird vision the first night. Tying her with the photo works, however, remembering what Carmine told me about providing facts instead of Woo-Woo reports. But now that I think about that photo and the mayor's reaction when I asked about Lori, I know there's something very odd about my ghost and these Arkansas cousins.

Unlike the mayor, though, Merrill appears happy with the connection. "That's probably her. She went to school here. But still, how do you her name?"

I *don't* know, so I decide to come clean and hope Ms. New Age is as open to these things as I suspect she is. I shrug. "It came to me."

Anyone else would dispute such a statement. As a journalist who bases everything on fact, I know I would. But Merrill nods, so happy to have this tidbit of information. "You're gifted."

"More like crazy. So, how is she related to you?"

The smile fades and she takes a deep breath, letting it out in a rush. "She's not. It's about my grandfather."

The drinks arrive, Merrill hands the waiter a ten and I let her. We take the opportunity to relax a little, sipping our drinks and sinking deeper into our plush seats. Finally, Merrill drops the bomb.

"I think my grandfather killed her."

This makes me sit up straight. "What?"

Merrill puts down her bourbon on the rocks and leans forward, forearms on the table with her hands overlapping each other. "He died several years ago and

my mother inherited all of his papers and stuff, a endless assortment of things she's been slowly going through. Letitia only wanted the important stuff. He was mayor of Eureka Springs too, so she pulled out all those papers and donated them to the library here."

"Letitia?"

"My cousin, the bitchy mayor." She smiles as if to make light of this but I know she's not kidding, wondering what Christmas is like at her house.

"And your grandfather was mayor, too?"

"Long time ago, but yes. James Leatherwood."

Doesn't ring a bell but why would it?

"Anyway, recently my mother found this old letter hidden inside a book that make us wonder if he was involved in Annabelle's suicide or murder, we're not sure which."

Now I lean forward. "Why do you and the ghost tour guide call her Annabelle?"

"I'm not sure where the tour guy got his information — they've always called her Annabelle — but it's what's in the letter."

I'm puzzled because I'm almost positive her name is Lauralei and not Annabelle. If anything, she goes by her nickname, Lori. "What else is in that letter?"

Merrill exhales deeply. "I should have brought it with me."

"Paraphrase."

She leans in again, this time her voice very low. "He talks about some girls disappearing at the school and how he's responsible, but he doesn't want that happening to her so it's imperative that she leave for a while until things blow over. He also goes on and on about how sorry he was for the other night, something about a girl named Blair, who's also gone missing. It's all very creepy."

I'll say. I shake off a shiver that's run up my spine. "Merrill, do you think this has anything to do with those bones found at the lake today?"

She stares deep into my eyes. "I don't know. You tell me."

I huff. Like I know. "How about you explaining why you and a bunch of

protestors were there this afternoon. Plus, why the mayor thinks I'm in league with you all."

Merrill runs a nervous hand through her expansive gray locks. "I don't know if you know this but Leticia's about to announce her candidacy for governor."

"Okay."

"Might not be big news for you but for those of us championing saving the environment, it's huge."

"I take it she's not a tree hugger."

Merrill smiles grimly. "Not even close. She's brought in numerous constructions projects and subdivisions outside of town. It's taxing on the water system we have worked so hard to clean up."

"But we're just travel writers," I insist. "Why the big protest for us?"

She shrugs. "I'm desperate. In a couple of days she's going to sign a major deal with a corporation that's a big contributor to her campaign. I can't let that happen. Besides, your friends from Wisconsin interviewed me for twenty minutes so something good came of it."

I start to say that three dead bodies also came of it, which is probably airing on the news as we speak, when my fellow travel writers pass by, all laughing and recalling some funny story. Winnie spots me from the door and I smile and wave until I realize that I turned her down for a drink and here I am sitting in a bar with another friend, if you could call Merrill that. She doesn't smile back, which makes my heart sink. Somehow, somewhere I must explain what's going on and clear the air.

Maybe Carmine's right. Knowledge is power and hopefully whatever TB pulls up on these dead girls I keep seeing will help my case and make it easier to explain to everyone.

When I look back at my table companion, she's standing. "I really need to go, have three dogs at home who will have their hind legs in a knot if I don't let them out soon."

I grab her hand like a lifeline. Now *I'm* touchy feely. "Is there any way I can see that letter?"

"What's your day like tomorrow?"

I scan my brain trying to recall our itinerary. It's our last day in Eureka Springs. "Art galleries in the morning, I believe, lunch on the balcony at the Basin Park Hotel and then spa sessions back here in the afternoon." Just thinking of the day makes my heart swell. Oh please, oh please universe, no dead people tomorrow — unless Lillye shows up and then I'm all ears.

"I'll meet you back here in the afternoon," Merrill says and I give her my spa time so she can plan.

I walk back to my room and find my husband once again sprawled on the bed watching the Patriots play somebody (forget what team that big horned sheep stands for) remote in hand and fast asleep. Like I have been doing for the past eight years, I turn off the set, cover him up fully clothed and slip inside those heavenly sheets on my side of the bed. Within minutes, I fall fast asleep.

I say sleep but in truth I have no idea where I am. Lori is standing at the foot of my bed, dressed in her usual schoolgirl attire of a long white pleated skirt and matching sailor-esque top with her muddy red hair tied back with a ribbon. She nods her head in the direction of the door. I don't want to leave my luxurious bed but I grab my robe and follow her, wondering if the halls of the Crescent Hotel are real and someone alive will spot me soon, or if I'm lingering in an alternate reality.

We're back in James Cabellero's office so it's not my century. This time, the English teacher is leading a class in the Shakespeare comedies while Lori sits in the front row. There's an easy, peaceful feeling — as the song goes — in this scene, and again I sense something between teacher and pupil, an attraction bordering on impropriety. She loves English and excels at it, I'm thinking, which makes any English teacher's heart go pitter-patter. But Lori's also a bit too enamored with Teach, which undoubtedly stirs other parts of his fresh-out-of-college anatomy. Still, it's hard for me to imagine Plain Jane doing anything too naughty with the professor.

The door suddenly opens and who should walk in but my blond girl from the cave. I'm astonished to see her standing before me not only alive and well but stunningly beautiful with her blond hair coifed up with ivory combs and her sweater a size too tight buttoned over her uniform, which emphasizes an over-

matured bosom.

She's also cocky as hell.

"This is your new student, Blair Marcus," a woman about the same age as James informs him. As the other teacher gives James instruction, Blair takes in the room and its occupants, not liking what she sees.

"So she's all yours," the teacher says and leaves the room.

James rises and knocks over his chair as Blair seductively walks to his desk. Blair sends him a knowing smile and James clears his throat nervously.

"Welcome to Crescent College," he says hoarsely, holding out his hand, which makes the girls whisper to one another. I imagine them thinking Mr. Caballero never shakes a girl's hand and why is he acting so nervous?

Blair takes the opportunity to not only squeeze his hand, but leans in closer than what's appropriate for a girl her age. "Nice to meet you, handsome."

This impudence throws James off guard so instead of reprimanding Blair he quietly points to an empty chair in the front row next to Lori. The girls titter once more.

Lori, on the other hand, doesn't miss a thing. She watches the interaction closely, appalled, her heart sinking. I know, because I can feel her emotions and compare them to my own, sense how she's realizing that there is no way she can compete with Blair's sophistication and beauty. Been there, done that.

I want to lean over and tell her "teen years are a bitch but it gets better down the road" but I suddenly remember there is no future for Lori. The time frame changes, anyway, and we're now in an expansive room filled with windows, dressed in workout clothes, or whatever they called uniforms for PE back then. Blair sits off to the side, surrounded by a cackle of girls eating up her every word. Lori ignores them, reading *Twelfth Night* by herself in a corner. Her choice of reading material makes me laugh, but no sound emerges from my throat.

"Are you going to town with us later?" one of the girls asks Queen Bee. "We want to buy something new for the dance on Saturday night."

"What's the point," Blair answers. "The clothes in this podunk town are so boring, nothing that's fashionable right now. I'm going to wait until I get back to Dallas to buy my new wardrobe."

The group's enthusiasm drops a notch. "We can go to the ice cream parlor instead," another girl pipes up.

Blair studies her nails. "I suppose. But then you have to make small talk with Mr. McLaughen. Seriously, this town bores me to tears."

"You didn't seem bored last night," another one says. "Mamie said you were out past midnight with that cute townie. And you weren't on school grounds."

A secretive smile forms on Blair's face. "He's okay. He wasn't too boring, did what he was supposed to do, if you know what I mean."

The girls look at each other innocently. I doubt they do.

"I came home satisfied," Blair concludes. "Although I think I lost my panties in the woods behind St. Elizabeth's."

Several of the girls open their mouths in shock when they finally get her meaning, and Lori stops reading to look over in astonishment.

"What are you looking out homey," Blair shouts at Lori. "Just because you never had a man touch you doesn't mean the rest of us don't. Some of us have looks."

"Blair, that's mean," a girl whispers.

"She has to learn somehow," Blair retorts. "Might as well prepare for spinsterhood now." To Lori, she adds, "Keep reading bookworm. You're going to need that education when the men never appear on your doorstep."

Once again, my chest hurts from the pain Lori's feeling. To her credit, she bows her head into her book and ignores Blair. But I can see the tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Are you going out with Townie again?" the girl with the pink ribbons asks Blair.

"No, I'm done with him. I'm fishing for bigger trout now."

The girls offer a million questions but Blair doesn't let on. When James walks into the conservatory, however, she lights up, adjusting her hair and sneaking on some hot red lipstick.

"Girls," is all he says as he makes his way to the bookshelf on the far wall.

"Professor," Blair says slowly and seductively as he passes by.

The last thing I witness before the vision blurs is the sly smile on James' and

Blair's faces while Lori looks on in shock.



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## Chapter 14

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I'm standing in the doorway of an exquisite art gallery filled with local artwork, much of it hand-blown glass and delicate ceramics. In the state I'm in, another night of little sleep and haunting dreams, I don't trust my clumsy self to enter the store. Alicia hands me a coffee as she passes me at the door and I know there will be a hallowed place in heaven for this petite public relations goddess.

"Bless you," I manage and she looks back with a cute smile.

"What's the matter with you, now?" Winnie asks. "Not enough rest?"

I look at my new friend with longing, wanting so much to tell her everything. "Winnie, it's not what you think."

She waves her hand in the air and saunters off. "I'm not thinking anything."

Bless the shop owner's heart as well, for he's brought in an array of baked goods and tiny quiches, which Irene studies intensely and asks, "Do you have anything gluten free?" and Winnie roll her eyes.

After we all grab a bite and the owner explains how the beauty and history of Eureka Springs makes for the perfect art colony, dating back to FDR's time when Cora Pinkley-Call started the Ozark Writers' and Artists' Guild, we head to the back of the store where a staircase leads down to a variety of fine art. I grab Winnie before she descends.

"I really was exhausted last night and on my way to bed."

"God, Vi, I'm not your mother."

When she turns, I grab her sleeve again. "That woman was the mayor's

cousin.”

She’s bending but she’s not all there. “Whatever.”

“You don’t know this but there was an incident on my morning tour.” This stops Winnie from leaving and she looks back curiously, like any good journalist. “That woman was part of it and the mayor’s furious at me and Merrill came to explain what happened.”

Winnie pulls up close. “What did happen?”

“You’re not going to believe me.”

She gives me the mom stare.

“O-kay.” Here goes. “I saw a vision of three dead girls covered in blood by the side of this lake. And I screamed. The police came and found a bone of a person sticking out of the bank, most likely someone long dead. That woman and a bunch of protestors showed up because they’re trying to save the town’s springs which have become polluted over time and then the TV station arrived.”

Winnie puckers up her face and I’m not sure she’s with me. “It looks like those bones are from an old murder case,” I continue. “Kinda like what happened in the cave.”

I’m grimacing, waiting for the backlash, that Winnie imagines I’m either mentally deranged or pulling her leg but instead she opens her mouth like a freshwater trout. “No frickin’ way!”

“Unfortunately way.” I pull her aside knowing we only have a few minutes before they will call for us. “Please don’t tell anyone although it’s probably in the newspaper this morning.”

Winnie pinches my arm. “You have to tell me more.”

I give her the Scouts honor sign and we head downstairs to view a bunch of Ozark scenes encapsulated in oils and watercolors. I look over and Winnie’s practically bursting with questions.

Two hours and several galleries later with a quick trip to Keel’s Creek Winery for a lovely tasting of local wines that are thankfully not muscadine, a painfully sweet grape that grows in the Deep South, we head over to the Basin Park Hotel’s balcony restaurant and join the others. We learn that Carmine and Richard spent the morning visiting nearby Beaver Lake on a fishing excursion

and Holly enjoyed a private tour of local gardens.

Winnie grabs my arm and leads me to a table that only sits two, pushing Richard aside.

“Hey,” Richard objects. “I’m sitting there.”

“Not anymore.”

You don’t mess with Winnie, I learn. Richard the once stout-hearted moves as far away from us as he can, which pleases us immensely. We sit down at our table overlooking Spring and Center streets and Winnie instantly starts firing off questions. I put up both hands. “Slow down. All in good time.”

The waiter arrives. “Can I get you something to drink? Ice tea, soft drinks, our Basin chocolatini or the 1905 top shelf margarita?”

Of course, I don’t let an opportunity like this pass me by, especially since I’m going to enjoy a spa treatment later on. Winnie gets a gin fizz and I vote for chocolate.

Before either of us can get a word out, our host welcomes us to the Basin Park Hotel, a landmark in the center of town. The hotel rests on the site of the Perry House, which rented rooms and operated a bath house across the street back in the 1800s. The Perry House burned in a fire and the Basin Park Hotel replaced it in 1905, built by William Duncan out of local limestone by those always creative Irish stonemasons. And here I thought the Irish were only famous for black beer, wool sweaters and a good fight?

The new hotel built on this spot boasted of one hundred rooms complete with telephones, an elevator, electric lights and a ballroom known as “The Roof Garden.” The ballroom’s still there, the owner explains, and of course includes a few hotel guests who refuse to stop dancing. When he starts discussing the other ghosts lingering about, I turn off.

“You don’t like ghost stories?” Winnie asks, which makes me choke on my drink. “Did last night’s trip to the morgue freak you out little girl?”

“You have no idea,” I reply.

Once we get our lunch orders out of the way, and the owner finishes his history lesson that most of us have stopped listening to, Winnie grabs my hands. “Spill!”

I'm about to explain everything from the cave to the lake when Maddox emerges on to the balcony, broad hat on his head, surveying the scene like a sheriff in an old western. "Shit," I mutter, pulling my hands from Winnie's grip. "This may have to wait."

"Oh hell no," she says. "He can take a turn."

Maddox sees me and heads my way, pulling a chair from a neighboring table and plopping it down next to us. He straddles it backwards and checks out Winnie while pulling off his hat and straightening out his hair. "Mind if Miss Valentine and I have a talk?"

Like I said, you don't mess with Winnie. She crosses her arms and states proudly, "Yes John Wayne, as a matter of fact I do." I'm so glad I have confided in my new friend for I'm grateful to have a comrade at my back.

"Fine." Maddox pulls out his notebook from his back pocket. "Maybe *you* can help me make sense of this."

Winnie shoots me a look that makes me laugh. It's half what have I gotten myself into and half you better not be shitting me. I try to offer something that will appease them both. "What do you want to know?"

"First, how did you know about the girl in Sycamore Cave? And don't tell me you stumbled and found a pile of bones. You asked about some girl to the ENT right after you regained consciousness."

"What did the bones tell you?"

"I'm asking the questions here."

I hold up my hands in defense. "I'm just trying to help."

He grimaces and I wonder for the umpteenth time why this man couldn't be nicer to me after all the crime scenes we experienced together. "Forensics were called in from the University of Arkansas," he finally tells me. "Said there was a dead body in the cave, probably died early twentieth century."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Okay, fine. I headed down the path that I wasn't supposed to because I'm ADHD and I have a hard time following orders." I look over at Richard and give him the evil eye. He's wolfing down fried cheese and pauses mid-bite saying, "What?"

"I heard a noise that I thought might be a wild animal," I continue. "I shined

my flashlight over to where the noise was coming from and I thought I saw a girl in school clothes crying. It scared me, I slipped backwards and hit my head, lights went out. End of story.”

He puts his pencil down. “You’re going to tell me that you saw a ghost and that’s why you knew it was a girl’s body down there.”

“No, actually I saw a living girl who time traveled from the 1920s.” I shouldn’t be sarcastic but I can’t help myself.

Maddox narrows his eyes. “Then what happened?”

“I killed her,” I admit. “Somehow I did this sixty years before I was born. Then, because I’m not a bright criminal, I came back to the scene of the crime, walked down to the bowels of the cave and screamed, ‘There’s a dead girl here.’”

Now Maddox is sending me the evil eye. “Just tell me what the hell happened.”

“She already told you Jack,” Winnie pipes in and I look over to Winnie sending me a knowing smile. I’ll never badmouth Ole Miss again.

“She’s told me nothing.” His voice rises, causing Stephanie and Joe to look over, not to mention Henry from his side of the room.

“You okay, Vi?” Joe asks.

Maddox exhales and raises his hands. “It’s all good.” To me, he adds, “Look, I’m not here to arrest you, I just want to know what’s going on.”

I smile confidently because now I’m feeling empowered by friendship. “Do you want me to describe her? Tell you what she was wearing? You can discount it all, I’m sure, because there must be photos of the girls who attended Crescent College and you can easily assume I saw them and made this all up. But I hadn’t seen them before I went in that cave and I saw her. Dressed in a Crescent College uniform. Better yet, do you want me to tell you how she died? Blunt force trauma to her lovely blonde head, although I’m almost sure she was sexually assaulted as well.”

Maddox stops writing. “How do you know all *that*?”

I lean in close and answer as sincerely as possible. “I don’t know how, but I do. I was always a little psychic but ever since Katrina....”

My former New Orleans native swallows and nods and I'm thankful I don't have to explain. "And the lake people?"

"Did you find three sets of bones?"

Maddox shakes his head. "Are we unclear about who asks the questions?"

I rub my eyes in frustration. "What did you find?"

He looks at me sternly, no doubt wondering how much he should divulge. "We found two sets of bones, one at the lake side and one inside that hole in the wall like you suggested to the officer who responded."

"Jesus," Winnie says.

"There's another one," I practically whisper, sliding the beads of perspiration off my glass, anything to avoid that man's eyes. I still can't believe I'm saying all this. "I would look at the Cave Spring before you start dragging the lake. But there's definitely three. And if I'm not mistaken, they were all killed the same way, blow to the head, most likely abused in some way."

Maddox sits like a statue before me, staring intently. I finally meet his eyes. "I didn't kill them."

He rises without a word, returns the notebook to his pocket and places the hat on his head. "Don't leave town."

It's such a cliché that I laugh. Then I realize the tour ends tomorrow. "I think we drive to Bentonville tomorrow to catch our planes home."

"We're having dinner at DeVito's," Winnie inserts.

I send her a why did you have to say that look and she shrugs.

"I'll be back," Maddox says like a scene from another movie and heads out the door.

We both watch him leave when suddenly I think of something. I run through the restaurant until I reach Maddox at the elevator. "The girl at the Crescent Hotel. The one everyone says jumped or was pushed off the balcony and people see her mist around ten-thirty at night."

Maddox rolls his eyes. "Is this another one of your ghost visions?"

"The guy giving the ghost tour last night said that people see this happening all the time and it's so real they call it in to the police."

The elevator arrives and three people get off. Maddox holds the door open.

“Yeah?”

“Is it true?”

“How the hell would I know? I don’t believe in that shit.”

“Can you look into it?”

He gazes at me intently and I’m waiting for more questions when the elevator door starts beeping.

“There might be a connection.”

Maddox shakes his head and I’m convinced he’s blowing me off. But when he climbs in the elevator cab, he says, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Just before the doors shut, I think of one last thing. “I think the blond girl in the cave is named Blair Marcus and she was from Dallas.”

The surprised look on Maddox’s face and his attempt to stop the door from closing when he hears this news makes me laugh. The elevator doors clang shut and I’m suddenly staring at myself, which sobers me up. Who are you? I ask my reflection.

I turn to head back to the restaurant when I nearly run into Henry. “Oh hey, Henry.” I’m feeling nervous around him after what transpired the last couple of days.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah, Madman — I mean Maddox — and I were just going over what happened yesterday at the lake.”

“What did happen?”

Now would be a great time for TB to arrive with an armful of research, something that makes sense. We could all say, “Wow, that’s crazy,” and continue our tour and forget this insanity ever took place. On future press trips, Henry and I would recall this crazy week where a bunch of ghosts showed up and have a good laugh.

But that’s not happening and I’m suddenly frightened. I’ve lost everything and given up a steady income to start my new career and here stands the man who could take it all away. There are other PR agencies that host press trips, sure, but Henry’s established and highly reputable and a bad word from Henry to his tourism colleagues and my travel writing days are over.

I shrug hopelessly. “Wrong place at the right time or vice versa, depending on how you look at it. The police found bones from an old case but I can’t explain how or why I happened to discover it. Honestly, it was pure accident.”

Henry digests this but his countenance doesn’t change. If only he would smile and ease my worries, convince me he doesn’t think I’m in league with Merrill and her tree huggers looking to derail the mayor and lose Henry a client in the process. Instead, he hands me that morning’s newspaper and there I am, plastered across the front page with a headline that reads, “Decades-old crime scene unearthed by tourist.” Of course, beneath that is a story about a new electric plant protest with Merrill and her gang carrying signs that read, “Keep Eureka weird and clean.”

“Wow,” is all I can manage.

Thankfully, Henry changes the subject. “There’s a bad storm coming in. They think they’re going to close the airport in Bentonville tomorrow night so we need to be prepared for plan B. You and your husband have a spa treatment this afternoon but we’re going to switch that out so we’ll have indoor things for you to do tomorrow. This afternoon we’ll do the outdoor attractions. Dinner’s still on at DeVito’s tonight. As for flight changes, I’ll keep you posted.”

He hands me another piece of paper and I look down to find an updated itinerary.

“And Vi,” he says softly, “if you need to go to the police station for anything, just let me know.”

I nod, grateful for his help but my heart never stops beating frantically. “Thanks.”

He turns to leave but I call out. “You don’t have to give us both a spa treatment. TB knows the rules.”

“Don’t be silly,” Henry says, but again, he’s not smiling.

I follow him in silence back to my table where my hamburger labeled the best in Eureka Springs awaits. I’m worried about Henry’s attitude, the Crescent Hotel forced to feel guilty and include TB in practically everything and whether the police think I’ve gone bat-shit crazy.

“Everything okay?” Winnie asks.



“I don’t know,” I answer softly.

“You have to admit, it’s a crazy ass story.”

I look up at my friend who I was hoping would make me feel better but she shrugs as if she’s as clueless as I am. “Now if you had a photo like the ones we saw last night. Something with orbs in them or a lady in the mirror....”

The hamburger is halfway to my lips when the light bulb goes off. Of course! “Winnie, you’re a genius.”

She smiles proudly. “I know. But why this time?”

I pull my camera out of its bag and start flipping through the photos I took yesterday. There’s a long stream of spring photos, starting with the Basin Spring and its lovely park and all the other springs we visited throughout the morning. Finally, I spot the photo I took of the box cave in the side of the mountain, the one located by Eureka Lake. It’s a little fuzzy and I stare hard trying to make out if I snagged a ghost but nothing’s there, really. The ghost of the three girls were by the lake, for some reason, so maybe.... Suddenly, I’m looking at the photos I took of the lake. There are three I managed to capture before screaming bloody murder.

And each one contains a mist hovering over the water.

I look up at Winnie and smile. “Hot damn.”

A relief powerful and uplifting floods my soul. I’m vindicated. I turn my camera toward Winnie and show her the evidence I caught on film — or digital — and she squeals with delight. Joe slides his chair over and demands to know our secrets. We pass the camera over and he starts playing with the zoom, magnifying one of the photos. When he gets it just right, he hands it back to me with a shocked look.

“Wow,” is all I can think of to say. Again.

At this point, Carmine is now over my shoulder, gazing down at the faces of three young coed, each about twenty years old.

He and I shiver at the same time, but I feel a “Way to go” tap on my shoulder. “SCANC,” he says, and returns to his table.

I look again. The photos show only faces above a mist and I see them for who they really were, young women with bright futures, not the bloody mess I

witnessed at the lake.

“You have to show that to the ‘Terminator’,” Winnie says.

“Who?”

“That cop. This will prove you’re not crazy.”

“Thanks.” I turn off the camera and put it back into my bag. “I never thought I actually was.”

She gives me that mom look again. “You know what I mean.”

After lunch we all pile into two vans and head for the outskirts of town. I’m feeling better now because one, I have actual evidence to show Maddox, even if he doesn’t believe in ghosts, and two, I’m starting to trust my newfound ability. And if I can communicate with ghosts now, I should be able to talk to my daughter. For the first time in a very long time, I have hope and feel the stirrings of something akin to happiness.

After a quick trip outside of town, we stop at Thorncrown Chapel, a magnificent structure rising heavenwards in the Ozark woods with four hundred and twenty-five windows and more than six thousand square feet of glass, an impressive, uplifting site that mirrors my mood. As we make our way into this chapel that also contains one hundred tons of native stones and colored flagstone, we all sigh with pleasure. The architecture alone is extraordinary but to be able to worship inside a space that’s surrounded by nature makes it that more special.

An elderly woman who we wish would speak louder tells us the story of how the chapel was built. Ninth-grade teacher Jim Reed purchased the property for his retirement home but found people constantly pausing on his homestead to view the natural beauty of the area. He envisioned a chapel for people to use and enlisted the help of E. Fay Jones, an architecture professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Halfway through its construction, however, Reed ran out of funds.

“He was downhearted,” the woman tells us, and we all lean forward to hear. “But he came into his half-finished chapel and prayed for guidance. And somehow the money came.”

“Is that all it takes?” Winnie whispers to me. “I could use a new roof.”

“Go for it,” I whisper back. “And get me a new bathroom for my potting shed.”

Once Jim Reed built it, the people came. The woman claims that more than six million visitors from around the world have come through these doors.

She’s getting a little preachy at this point and it’s still hard to hear so my mind wanders out the window, enjoying the sunshine filtering through the trees to warm my face, wishing church had been this awesome when I was growing up. If I had attended church services here, I would have spent the whole time gazing out into those peaceful woods. Not exactly what church is for, but nature brings me peace like no other.

The group begins laughing softly and I look up to find a man dressed in biblical garb walking down the aisle. He’s a shepherd, he tells us, a follower of Jesus. He’s performing with the Great Passion Play at the Christ of the Ozarks, but he tries to stay in character. The production coincides with the massive statue of Jesus on the hill overlooking our hotel.

The shepherd actor introduces himself as David and explains how a cast of more than one hundred performs in Eureka Springs every summer and that we all need to return to catch this outdoor drama. There’s also the Holy Land next door to the performance space, offering exhibits that have been reproduced historically and archaeologically accurate, David insists.

Our colleagues start shooting tourism questions such as when does the show begin and end, is it tour bus accessible, would non-Christians enjoy it, etc. Suddenly Winnie pipes up. “Was this something you studied in school, becoming a biblical-era shepherd.”

Davis laughs. “Actually, ma’am, I studied to be a Roman soldier when I was sixteen and I worked my way up.”

The crowd laughs appropriately and David beams being in the spotlight.

“Did it help you win girls?” Winnie asks and our fellow travel writers giggle.

“Yes ma’am,” David replies proudly, missing the sarcasm. “My wife’s in the production too. She plays Satan.”

Winnie throws up her hands. “I’m not touching that one.”

We leave Thorncrown Chapel in a good mood, our van chugging up the

mountain over to Lake Leatherwood City Park, a peaceful retreat created by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early 1940s. The cold spring stream was dammed to form the eighty-five-acre lake covered in lovely lotus blossoms, popular with fishermen. Both the dam and the park are on the National Register of Historic Places and the acreage is one of the largest city parks in the country. There are cabins at the lake's edge, nestled near a manmade beach where a gaggle of Canadian geese have taken over. Because spring has almost arrived, the trees are beginning to burst forth in greens and other colors, dogwoods dotting the landscape in whites and pinks.

On the way back through town Nanette Wells, our local tourism contact, suggests a stop at Pivot Rock, another park located outside of town that includes an unusual rock formation — basically a rock resembling the inverted pyramid we journalists learn in basic newswriting — and a natural bridge. We hike to both from the parking lot and are considering continuing to a view of Lake Leatherwood until Irene and Richard begin complaining, Irene that she has a bum knee with doctor's orders to lay off physical activity and Richard that rain is in the forecast, no doubt to cover up the fact that he's not up for the challenge. After hasty photos, we return from whence we came and head back to town.

It's beginning to drizzle so we decide the Crescent is the best course of action. Henry announces that we have two hours until dinner and does anyone want to do the ghost tour at the Basin Park Hotel tonight at nine o'clock. Half the van raises their hands but I'm not one of them. I've had enough of ghosts for a while.

"You'll be missing the cowboy," Carmine leans over and whispers to me. "He and his horse kept me up all night." I give him a questioning look but he only raises that one eyebrow in explanation. "You don't want to know," he finally answers.

Henry pulls the van up to the front door and we all disembark, grateful for a few hours of down time. I'm thinking now's the perfect chance to grab a nap, hopefully make up for the past few nights of fitful sleep, when I spot Merrill lounging by the lobby fireplace. When she sees me she waves. I slip over to the couch where she's sitting but I'm hoping Henry doesn't notice.

“I really shouldn’t be seen with you,” I whisper when she looks up from reading a copy of the latest Sierra Club magazine.

To my surprise, Merrill looks heartbroken. “Oh. I was hoping we could talk about Lori.”

“Four Twenty-two,” I whisper and continue my stroll through the lobby to the elevator, hoping no one noticed. Winnie has that quizzical look on her face and the elevator’s packed, so I take the stairs. It’s a good haul up three flights in the Crescent but I love the hotel’s old staircases with their heavy wooden rails painted black, the Victorian red walls and the colorful carpeting. You can also look straight up to the fourth floor, not to mention peek around the corners of each floor you visit. Not sure what I’m looking for, maybe a nurse pushing a gurney?

At the top of the stairs I make my way down the hall, past the Baker Bar and around the corner to my room. TB hasn’t arrived yet, so it’s just me and for the first time since I arrived in Eureka Springs I get to enjoy the solitude.

Of course, it doesn’t last long for Merrill is soon at my door.

“I brought the letter,” she tells me as she slips inside.

Something in the air shifts when Merrill enters the room. I don’t experience the buzzing of the past few days but my arm hairs are standing at attention. I gaze around in the hopes of seeing Lori appear but she’s nowhere to be seen.

“Look, I’m sorry about showing up at the hotel,” Merrill says. “I don’t want to make things awkward for you.”

“It’s not that. I don’t want Henry, the guy who put this tour together, to think I’m one of your protestors posing as a travel writer because I suspect that the mayor already planted that seed in his head.”

Merrill gingerly sits on my bed. “I wouldn’t worry about that. Nanette is not a big fan of Leticia and I told Nanette everything that happened.”

I exhale and fall into the easy chair opposite the bed, trying not to appear too eager. “Can I see the letter?”

Merrill pulls an envelope out of her purse and hands it to me. “You can keep that. It’s a copy.”

I open it and read the delicate writing of a different age. There’s no date, but

the postmark reads January 22, 1924, Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

MY DEAREST ANNABELLE,

*What must you think of me after my actions of the past few weeks? Nothing I can say or do will ever erase the hurt I have caused you or the disgrace I have brought upon us both, even if our secret shall follow us to the grave.*

*You have done right in leaving this place. There is nothing but evil about, including deep within my heart for darkness has invaded my soul.*

*The search for your colleague continues. No matter what has happened or who will be charged in what I fear will be a crime, I consider myself responsible. I let the evil desire rule my judgment with her, as I did you, and will carry that sin with me until my dying day. I pray you will forgive me.*

*There are things that may be said of me in the near future, dear one, but do not listen to these rumors unless you hear the truth from my lips. Do not return, for it is not safe to be here and will remain so until I'm confident things have been made right.*

*Please keep up your English studies. You are a gifted writer and I know that fortune will shine upon you and your work.*

*Your friend forever,*

*James Leatherwood*

THAT CHARGED FEELING in the room ratchets up a notch. Big time. I look up from reading, my head buzzing with the electricity. "Your grandfather was the English teacher?"

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## Chapter 15

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“What English teacher?” Merrill asks.

I grab her hand and lead her down the hall to the room where the historic photos are kept. I scan the wall until I find the right one. “There,” I announce, pointing to the photo of the English class winning the literary award. “Is that him?”

She leans in close to the photo, studying it hard, then pales. “What is my grandfather doing in that picture?”

Now I’m really confused, because the mayor knows about this photo, acted proud when she mentioned the literary award. Surely, being cousins, Merrill would know this as well?

“He was the English teacher here?” Merrill’s looking at me for more information, but what I got from this photo came in a vision.

“Obviously.”

Merrill shakes her head. “I never knew this.”

“Did you know that his name was James Cabellero?”

This rings a bell for her eyes grow large. “I’ve seen that name before but I can’t remember where. But my grandfather’s name was James Leatherwood.”

That name rings a bell with *me*. “Like the park outside of town?”

She nods. “But the park wasn’t named for my grandfather.”

“You think this is really the same man.”

Merrill takes another long look at the photo. “I’m positive. Besides, it says so

under the photo.”

Now I look closely and sure enough, beneath the photo reads: “James Leatherwood’s English class after receiving the top regional award in creative writing.” There’s a list of the girls in the photos and Lauralei Thorne is one of them.

I sit down on a nearby couch, feeling vindicated for the second time that day, but it’s not enough and really, I’m as confused as ever. “I’m positive he and Lori — or Annabelle — knew each other. Knew each other well.”

I explain my visions and how Lori has appeared to me in the room, how she and James had seemed close friends. I leave out the part about her showing me what might have been a baby, no use freaking out Merrill more than necessary and really, I have no idea what that means. But I do ask, “Was there something romantic between them, you think?”

Merrill pulls her hand through her hair and the locks fall softly about her face. Even with all that natural gray, her sublime countenance presents a younger appearance. “I don’t know. And I don’t think my mom knows either.”

Here comes the tough question. “Do you think he had anything to do with those girls’ bodies that were found?”

Merrill looks up and meets my gaze but we say nothing. The answer feels all too real.

Just then TB passes in the hallway, sees us sitting there and bounds into the room with a huge grin. “You won’t believe the day I’ve had.”

He’s excited, bursting with some news, so I move over to give him room on the couch. Before he sits down I make introductions and Merrill offers that warm handshake to him (I can tell for TB instantly brightens).

“Merrill’s grandfather used to teach here,” I tell TB.

“Wow. That’s awesome. Maybe you can help us with a few questions, then.”

Merrill sits taller, her eyes glistening. “I hope so.”

TB’s smile grows until he shows some teeth; he’s super excited and it’s the first time I’ve seen him this happy since LSU won the College World Series. He pats the pile of papers in his lap. “I found lots of great information.”

“Where have you been?” I ask him.



“Right down the street is this awesome building. It’s a library of sorts although it’s got a longer name, like after some rich guy or something.”

“The Carnegie Library,” Merrill says sweetly. Again, I’m thankful she doesn’t treat TB in a patronizing manner like so many others. And yes, that includes me.

“That’s it,” TB says enthusiastically. “Very cool place. Built right upside the mountain and the inside’s got this cool fireplace and you can go up these stairs to where more books are kept.”

“So what did you find?” Unfortunately, I’m not as patient.

“The librarian there was very helpful. I told her what I was looking for and she and I went through all these old records, articles from old newspapers from the 1920s and the college yearbooks.”

This gets my attention. “College yearbooks?”

“Yeah!” He pulls a bunch of papers from his stack and hands them to us, half to Merrill and the other half to me. “So this college that was here was pretty well known. At one point the college president was putting ads in newspapers that bragged about the school having students from thirty-nine states. They even had an amazing basketball team that played other schools all over the south, even though it was just girls.”

For that comment, I pinch TB on the arm.

He flinches, staring at me. “What?”

We look at the pages in front of us, copies of old yearbooks with photos of girls in basketball uniforms, a bowling league and various pages of senior portraits.

“It wasn’t cheap either,” TB continues. “We found an article about the school taking in a couple of scholarship girls, at least that’s what they called them; they were orphans from Little Rock. For the most part, the college was full of smart, accomplished girls who came from money.”

Flipping through the pages I didn’t see anything I recognized. Until I got to the basketball page and there she was, our blond goddess in a school uniform, if you could call racing around a basketball court in a skirt a uniform. I point to the spoiled blond with a penchant for “townies.” “That’s her.”

We all lean over and look down on Blair Marcus, but I'm the only one who knows who she is.

"Her who?" TB asks.

"She was the girl I saw in the cave two days ago. The one whose bones they found."

"You saw this girl in a cave?"

I start to grind my teeth, that after two days TB remains clueless as to the cave debacle but Merrill stares at me wondering what the hell I'm talking about too.

"I saw this girl deep inside Sycamore Cave by Beaver Lake," I tell them both. "She was wearing the school uniform and had blood on her head, appeared like she didn't know she was dead."

"Oh, so it was a ghost," TB points out.

"No, sweetheart, she was time traveling from the 1920s."

Merrill grimaces and I mentally kick myself. I don't mean to be sarcastic to my boyish husband, but his simplemindedness gets the best of me sometimes and I'm still smarting from Maddox's accusations. "Sorry, yes, it was a ghost. And the cops showed up and found old bones there."

Merrill reads the inscription, moving her finger across the page to match the name with the position in the lineup. "Blair Marcus."

Those damn goosebumps return when I hear her name spoken aloud but TB sits up straight, a big smile again on his face. "I know this girl! She won the basketball scholarship. She was some big deal in Dallas."

"Marcus," Merrill muses. "Wonder if she's related to that family." When TB and I gaze at her questionably, she adds, "Neiman-Marcus."

"That's a department store, right?" TB asks.

Merrill smiles graciously. "A very rich department store."

"But that wouldn't make sense," I say, considering the consequences. "If the heir to a fortune like that went missing, the whole world would have known."

TB proudly pulls out some other pages from his treasure pile. "Maybe not the whole world, but this part of it did."

He hands us several articles, mostly from Texas newspapers but a few from

Little Rock. Blair's formal photograph graces most of them, sitting on top articles about a missing girl from Crescent College.

"Wow," Merrill says, picking up one of the articles. "I never knew about this."

TB leans back cocky on the couch, stretching his arms behind us both. "The librarian said the same thing. One day she was cleaning up a back room and she found these old articles. They were tucked inside an old chest, hidden beneath dusty volumes of government crap. She said if she hadn't been the overly curious sort, she never would have found them."

"But this must have been big news," Merrill says.

"Not for the college," I add. "This is the kind of thing that can ruin an educational institution. Maybe there was a concerted effort by the townspeople and the school to keep this quiet. The college was a way to keep this old building going in the off-season. On our tour, they said the hotel was having a hard time staying open. Maybe the town didn't want to see their cash cow going away."

"Cow?" TB asks.

I pat his knee. "It's an expression, dear."

"But why would a cow have cash...?"

"I wonder if the cops know about this?" Merrill thankfully interrupts.

"I may see Maddox tonight," I tell them. "I can show him these and see what he knows."

Merrill laughs. "The local cops aren't too keen on psychics and our visions. They have labeled me crazy on more than one occasion."

I recall our little tête-a-tête at the Basin Park Hotel elevator. "Yeah, Maddox said he doesn't believe in ghosts."

Then I remember the photos. "Wait here," I tell them as I hurry back to the room and grab my camera. When I return, I flip through the photos until the ones at the lake appear. TB and Merrill are impressed with the mist images although Merrill points out that these could easily be chalked up to a natural mist occurring over the water. I hit the zoom button like Joe did at the restaurant and focus on the individual mists and lo and behold, the faces emerge.

"Holy shit," Merrill exclaims.

TB says nothing, just stares. Finally, he takes the camera from my hands and studies the photos intensely for what seems like hours. Again, I'm not the patient type. "TB, you can play with this later."

"I've seen these girls."

"What?" Merrill and I say simultaneously.

TB hands the camera back to me. "The library closes in an hour. Got to go."

"But what did you see?" I ask his back as he rushes from the room.

He's already to the door, but he pauses and looks back. "I think those were the scholarship girls."

And with those words, my ex-husband who's suddenly become an expert in research — or at least is thrilled with the assignment — disappears out of sight.

"He's a keeper," Merrill says and my heart sinks. I want to agree so badly, heard this statement so many times before, but my heart never follows suit.

"He's an awesome guy." Despite I don't want to be married to TB anymore, I mean every word.

Merrill and I look over the pile of papers TB has left behind, discovering more information about our English teacher and Lori. According to the yearbook, James hailed from Illinois but it doesn't say where and was educated at a small liberal arts college "in the Midwest," again not specifying, all vague information Merrill has heard over the years.

"We never knew the particulars," she offers.

Apparently, Lori is quite the gifted writer, a girl after my own heart, and an actress, a member of the Shakespeare Club. At the bottom of the club's page, however, is a note about *Twelfth Night* being postponed due to a family tragedy of one of the players.

"I wonder if that was about Blair," I muse out loud, although I can't imagine boy-crazy, flippant Blair being interested in Shakespeare. Perhaps if James was directing....

Dinnertime arrives and Merrill takes the pages home to show her mom, see if anything about the college jogs her memory. We agree to reconnect in the morning and Merrill gives me her cell phone number.

I head back to the room to change, Lori's happy face in those pictures

emblazoned in my mind. As I slip on evening clothes, I sense movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn ever so slowly and there she is, my homely sad coed.

“What is it, Lori? What do you want from me?”

She doesn’t speak, stares at me forlorn. Again, I’m sensing the loss of a child but I wonder if it’s not a similar emotion in her, an intense loss that’s triggering the same pain deep within me.

“Is it James?” I ask, hoping that might provoke a reaction. Nothing. “Is it Blair? Did she hurt you in any way? Did James?”

There’s so much pain in those eyes haunting me that even if she were to respond, how would I differentiate between who caused her grief. She’s the victim here, though, of that I am sure.

“Did you jump off that balcony? Or did someone push you?”

Again, nothing, but this time she gazes back toward the bathroom.

“I’m going to help you, Lori.” Even though I’m not sure how, I long to solve this mystery and witness this sweet girl pass on to something akin of heaven. I think of my own angel on the other side, who would be wonderful company. I couldn’t imagine Lillye trapped in some alternate reality like this old Victorian hotel with its ghost-gaping tourists, hoping for a SCANC like me to show up and save her. “I will do everything in my power to see you through this.”

Lori offers a semblance of a smile and it brightens my heart, but she crosses her arms about her chest, as if she’s holding a baby and gazes back at me. Is she offering me solace now?

A loud knock comes at the door and I jump, placing a hand over my heart to still the heavy beating. As if I imagined everything in the past few seconds, Lori has completely disappeared. I swallow the grief that has risen thinking of Lillye and open the door to find Holly, my travel writing neighbor who writes for my favorite magazine. She’s an inch above me now due to her high heels and wears a tight-fitting dress that shows off her attributes. She says “Hey” as she puts on the last earring, tossing her long hair over a shoulder when she’s done. “I couldn’t remember if it was five-thirty we were supposed to be downstairs or six.”

If it was five-thirty we’d be very late, I think to myself, but instead smile and

welcome her in. “Six. We have about five minutes.”

“Great.” She strolls in and glances about my room. “Wow, yours is so much bigger. I wonder why I didn’t get the corner room.” She peeks into the bathroom. “Oh my, your bathroom is much bigger too.”

I have no idea why we get the rooms we do but I am a bit insulted that she would feel entitled to get mine over whatever room she has. But like the self-conscious woman I am, I mutter, “Sorry.”

Holly shrugs. “It’s just that I have to have the best for the magazine, you know.”

Don’t we all? Again, I say nothing but “Shall we go downstairs?” and we head for the lobby, Holly talking non-stop about the elaborate private gardens she witnessed that morning.

I’m thrilled to find Winnie by the hotel’s massive fireplace, another ordinary soul like me in comfortable clothes and flat shoes. I don’t know why I consistently compare myself with other women. Maybe because my wild curly hair, large feet and somewhat dumpy shape always put me at odds with modern fashion, or perhaps it was my mother’s voice all those years telling me I wasn’t ladylike enough.

My mother. She’s been calling non-stop ever since New Orleans and apparently been bugging TB as well. Something about a family gathering the day I return, although TB assured me it was nothing urgent. I make a mental note to call her back when I return from dinner. Might as well get it over with.

“You look nice,” Winnie says, and I’m about to discount the complement by telling her the clothes were on sale and the shoes came from Goodwill when the memory of my mother’s words stops me cold.

“Thank you,” I say instead, and mentally pat myself on the back.

We sit together in the van and I bring her up to date on what TB found at the library. I leave out the part about Lori reappearing — or appearing at all since Winnie doesn’t know about my SCANCy abilities — and concentrate instead on hard facts. The journalist in me still can’t wrap my mind around seeing intangible people who have died decades before but my heart tells me to stay on track. I can’t stop imagining my baby girl going through a similar situation and

that drives me on.

In every group conversation, there's an occasional lull that descends. Some people claim that angels are floating overhead interrupting conversation, others call it a pregnant pause. After we're all through discussing various topics in small groups in the van on the way to DeVito's, that break in conversation happens. Richard notices and laughs. "Did someone fart?"

It might have been funny if someone else had said it in a different situation, but Henry is driving and there is a certain professionalism to what we're doing. None of us knows how to respond and this irks Richard to no end. "It's a joke," he says a bit too loudly.

Henry smiles but I can tell he's not happy, although his temperament could be the result of one of his writers finding several crime scenes and maybe participating in a protest against the town's mayor, the woman who may be writing his check. He can't be having a good trip, considering.

We arrive at the restaurant and unload, but Richard's now got a chip on his shoulder. When he spots me entering DeVito's, I sense I will be the victim of his irritation.

"Must be nice for you being able to come on this trip," he tells me as I pass him at the door. Is he holding the door open for us women?

"Yes, it is. Been wanting to be a full-time travel writer all my life."

"Well it's more than getting free trips, you know?"

This stops me cold and Winnie almost runs into the back of me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Richard drops the door and it almost hits Irene in the face. "It means, sweetheart, that some of us worked to get here and not because anyone felt sorry for us."

At this point, even Winnie has paused to stare in his direction. "We've all worked hard to get here, Richard."

He throws up his hands and says walking past us, "Some of us got a nice hand-up because of a certain disaster."

My bloods boils quick and hot and I aim to follow him into the private room they have saved for us and tear up his ass, but Winnie holds me back. "He's an

asshole. It's not worth it."

I know she's right but I want to punch that man silly.

As if that's not infuriating enough, Richard plants himself next to the tourism folks and starts a rampage about government handouts to people who didn't have the sense to move out of flood zones and how the rest of the country foots the bill. I try my best to ignore him and focus on the conversation around me, even though Holly to my right is now telling everyone else about those local gardens, details she planted on me in the elevator, pun intended. I'm bored to tears listening to the importance of soil testing so I can't help but hear Richard at the other end of the table.

Winnie leans toward me from my left. "Screw him."

I want to laugh it off and agree but the pain and anger seething within me burns so intense I can't form the words. I've heard it before, why do people live in a city below sea level, as if the nation's produce belt in California doesn't exist in a desert on top of a fault line or most American cities aren't located next to a vulnerable water source. Even New York City is prone to hurricanes. Like New Orleans, they have been warned of a super storm for years but never take it seriously. I would never wish the likes of Katrina on anyone, even Richard, but I can't help thinking how nice it would be to say, "Why do you live *there*?" when disaster strikes somewhere else.

Winnie, thankfully, asks me about TB and the research he's uncovered and I explain how he found the scholarship girls and Blair Marcus in the school yearbook but I can't get Richard's comments from seeping into my ears.

Dinner stretches on forever, painfully so, while Holly drones on about the advantages of drought-tolerant Knock-Out roses and Irene, again, has issues with the food. Richard's still going on about entitlements, now picking on poor people and the welfare system, while Henry stares at his plate, no doubt thinking how happy he will be to get away from this group. As if he senses me staring at him, Henry looks up and offers me a nice smile. I grin cautiously, hoping upon hope that he still considers me valuable enough to invite back.

As if things couldn't get worse, Madman shows up, standing in the shadow of the threshold of our private room, tilting his chin up at me and nodding his



head in the direction of the restaurant lobby. Like an obedient puppy, I follow, heading to the entrance where a couple of chairs are arranged for those waiting for a table. We sit and Maddox pulls out his little black book from his back pocket, again like those guys on TV. Now that I think about it, I don't recall him writing much of anything in it, which makes me laugh.

"Something funny?"

I shake my head, regaining my composure. "Sorry, been a long day and there's a guy in there bashing New Orleans so my emotions are on edge."

"What guy?" There's a tone emerging in that deep, masculine voice and I know what lingers behind those words. New Orleans is like a mother figure; you don't mess with our city. I so want to relate everything that Richard said and sic Maddox on his sorry ass — how wonderful it would be to watch that man be arrested — but we have bigger fish to fry, sorry to use another pun.

"My husband...." I can't believe I called TB that, especially in front of Maddox, but a logical voice deep within me, not even audible, explains how this insensitive, clueless man is not worth my time. "He went to the library today and did some research. I suspected the identity of the girl in the cave but now I'm pretty sure."

Maddox leans back and eyes me suspiciously. "Blair Marcus."

I nod. "I believe she was a rich college student from Dallas, attending the Crescent College when it was part of the Crescent Hotel."

Thunder racks the building, which makes me jump; still haven't managed to calm my fear about storms.

"And how do you know this?" He's not buying it; Maddox's eyes are the size of penny slits.

I shrug. "I saw her in the cave. Yes, as a ghost, but there you have it." The words sound empty and his accusing gaze makes me feel like that puppy again, one that just peed all over the couch. "I wish I could explain how I'm seeing these dead women but I can't."

Maddox says nothing, stares at me and I grind my teeth in annoyance waiting for him to comment on something. Anything.

He stands, appearing like he's ready to go.

“Is that it?”

He doesn't look at me, slips the neglected black book back in his pants. “We found an old case file on a Blair Marcus from Dallas who went missing in the 1920s. We thought it might be her.”

“It is.”

When he looks at me now, those eyes are still black pricks inside that manly face. “I don't believe in ghosts.”

He doesn't believe in me either, I think, but I've done my duty here. I also stand, ready to return to my group. “If you saw what I've been seeing these last two days you would, but I'm not asking you to. Just use the information I gave you and see if it matches up. As for the others, you might want to check if there had been any other girls missing from the college. Perhaps three orphans from Little Rock who were there on a scholarship.”

He laughs, shakes his head and looks at the ceiling. “What?”

I slide my hand through my unruly curls, a sudden exhaustion spreading over me. “My husband did some research at the Carnegie Library, said there were girls on scholarship, orphans. Seems to me that if someone wanted to abuse young women, they would be the perfect target. Who would miss them? Doesn't explain Blair, since she doesn't fit that MO, but perhaps the perp made a grave mistake with her and left town right afterwards. Maybe there was an employee at the college who left around the same time as Blair's disappearance.”

Now that I'm on a logical path and away from ghosts, speaking police lingo, Maddox studies this scenario and nods his head. “I'll look into it.”

“Great.” And with that one word, I'm ready to be rid of the man. Imagine that? “You can double check all this with the librarian. She's been helping my husband with the research.”

Then, without so much as a by-your-leave, Maddox puts his hat on and heads off into the pouring rain. I can't help thinking he watches too many cop movies.

When I return to the private room where my colleagues are still enjoying dinner that hard rain pelts the building and everyone begins discussing the rain. I've never understood the need to comment on weather. Water falls from the sky on a regular basis, yet every time it happens we all exclaim, “Oh my god, is it

raining?” My favorite is those incredibly steamy days of August when people say, “Is it hot enough for you?” Well, yes, because it’s August in New Orleans.

I close my eyes, trying to will away the negativity. Suddenly, whether it’s Richard, the continued lack of sleep or the fact that I unearthed several murder victims in the last two days, but I’m exhausted and feeling out of sorts. Always my hero, Henry rises and announces that we will be taking our dessert to go because the storm has arrived and things are reported to get nasty through the night. Richard makes a comment about how silly it is to be scared of a little rain and I mentally picture him standing on my street at the moment of the levee break, when the rain was as horizontal as the trees. I’m standing on my porch watching him float away and as he yells for help I answer over the thunderous deluge, “It’s just a little rain.”

“What are you grinning about?” Winnie asks me, and I realize I’m sitting there having a great private laugh.

“Nothing but a little fantasy involving a man from Arizona.” She gives me a knowing look and I don’t have to explain. Gawd love Winnie, as we’d say in New Orleans.

The restaurant staff hands us each a plastic container with slices of tiramisu inside and Irene remarks about how she would prefer the cheesecake and can she see a menu, but I move past her to the van because I’m so done with her type. Apparently, she doesn’t get her choice of dessert for as I take my seat in the back with Winnie I spot her close behind, holding the same dessert as mine.

“Is it just me or are you tired of these people?” Winnie whispers.

“I never thought I’d say this but I’m ready to go home,” I whisper back.

The pregnant pause has birthed into a silent baby and no one says a word on the drive up the mountain to our hotel. We exit the van equally quiet and make our way to our rooms, desserts in hand. I’m dreaming of my luxurious bed and a solid night’s sleep after I devour this Italian slice of heaven when I open the door and find TB pacing the room, papers sprawled all over the place.

“You won’t believe what we found.” He’s so excited, he looks about to jump out of his skin. “I found those scholarship girls and they’re the same ones from the lake. Seems to be a pattern, too. These girls are in the yearbook and the next

year they're not."

There's no stopping that intense, sudden onslaught of lust. Love, you can justify and logically process, but passion arrives via hormones that kick in on a moment's notice and render your brain inactive. My ex-husband stands before me shirtless in a tight pair of jeans, beaming with information that will turn my present situation around, coming to my aid in ways I never thought possible, and my brain cells instantly disappear. It's like the old days, when we were at LSU and high from a winning football game and bourbon and cokes, falling into our beds with such eagerness you'd thought we might burst if we couldn't get our clothes off fast enough. It was that neglectful passion that led us to marry, for me to spend my days in that horrid job when I wanted to hit the road and explore life. And yet, all I can think of at this moment is how amazing we will feel blended together again.

TB feels the charge in the air and stops talking, gazing at me with that puppy dog face. I smile, take his face in mine and plant there a deep, passionate kiss. In a matter of seconds, those research papers come flying off the bed, along with all our clothes.

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## Chapter 16

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The Victorian velvet coverlet, half the pillows and whatever was left of the room service falls to the floor as we mangle in each other's arms. We're not thinking — at least I'm not — as we devour each other in kisses and I struggle with the buttons on my blouse. TB breaks away to pull off my pants, slipping them free and casting them to the other side of the room in one effort, almost knocking over a lamp. We laugh briefly and then go at it again, me climbing backwards on the bed like a crab while TB follows suit.

For a moment, my logical brain tries to break through the rush, to remind me that I've filed separation papers from my husband and a divorce is imminent, but I'm not listening and I swear I hear a childlike voice giggle and clap somewhere in the deep recesses of my consciousness. Finally, the buttons are freed and I struggle to pull off the blouse while TB leans over me fondling my breasts that are still constrained by my bra.

"Patience, patience," I mutter and we both laugh as I now struggle to get *that* damn thing off.

We've not made love since before Lillye's death and I doubt TB's been unfaithful — I know I haven't — and those three years feel like Hoover Dam after a massive spring rain. We're both about to explode so we forget foreplay niceties and yank off all remaining clothes. Suddenly, we're naked, then bonded and it feels so incredibly right, both of us moaning with exquisite pleasure. As TB rocks his magic, sliding one hand beneath my bottom to push himself deeper

within me — dear God, oh yes — I fall into that haze of lovemaking so delicious and divine. We both hit our stride and fall off the edge at the same time, moaning way too loudly and I laugh, thinking of Richard hearing us as he unlocks his door across the hall, hopefully not being able to get inside his room due to the ghostly Theodora blocking his way.

When we come down from the precipice TB whispers “Wow” in my ear and we giggle. Wow indeed.

We wallow in the after-glow of that fervent lovemaking, lying silently in each other’s arms careful not to ruin the moment with logical talk — I’m not going there tonight — until TB begins to snore. I gently pull the sheet over us, cuddle into his arms and follow TB into dreamland.

But what waits for me in that sublime land is nothing peaceful. This time, I’m floating through the Crescent Hotel, like a cloud following Lori around. I’m aware that I’m dreaming and yet it feels so incredibly real, as if I could reach over and touch her and we’d have a conversation like two normal women.

It must be late for the halls of the college are empty and dark and Lori darts between doorways as if she’s not supposed to be out this time of night. Up ahead a shadow moves around a corner as well, and I realize she is following someone. Since I’m part of the ether in this scenario I can’t make out Lori’s face but I sense her anxious and distraught.

As we reach the stairwell, which is open from the fourth to the first floor, I see James walking one flight down. He pauses at the stair’s entrance on the third floor to make sure no one is about, then continues down, repeating this process at the following floor. Lori watches and waits and when James reaches the bottom floor and disappears down the hall, she follows, not pausing to check at each floor like he did, but whisking hurriedly down the stairs. At the bottom floor, she peers cautiously around the corner, spotting James by the massive fireplace, the one where Carmine instructed me in the world of SCANCs. Someone else is there now and their whispers carry ever so lightly through the lobby.

“Did anyone follow you?” James asks his co-conspirator, his tone filled with his own anxiety.

“Don’t be silly, Professor. I’m a very careful girl.”

Lori inches forward ever so quietly but I fear her breathing, ragged and fearful, might give her away. I want to touch her, ease the crushing of her heart for I know that Blair stands before us, ready to steal her beloved teacher away. It’s so dark that it’s difficult to make out the two by the fireplace, so I venture forward. It’s a vision after all, I tell myself, but I can’t help feeling like I’m part of this scene and these people will all turn and ask me why I’m there.

As I make my way toward the fireplace, I spy James dressed in dark clothes and a black fedora while Blair has tucked her signature blonde hair beneath a boy’s cap and is wearing dark knickers and a man’s shirt. If I hadn’t recognized the voice I would have thought Blair one of the male townies, as she likes to call them.

“This is a bad idea.” James glances around the lobby. “You need to go back to your room.”

Blair places a hand on the front of James’ shirt, unbuttons two buttons and slides her hand inside. “Only if you come with me.”

That rush of passion I had experienced only minutes before is now emanating from James like a radiator. He’s young, so it’s raw and possibly never been unearthed. He grabs Blair’s elbow as if to stop her but his action lacks purpose. She senses this and smiles coquettishly, moving her hand back to the outside of his shirt and then sliding it downward.

James tenses. “Don’t.”

Again, his words belie what I’m sure is going on inside his head; he wants whatever carnal ideas Blair has roaming around her sexy blonde head to occur. Sure enough, even though I can’t see well in the dark, Blair’s arm has extended and she leans in close so that I fear her hand is in a place that will render Professor’s brain inactive.

He gasps so I know I’m right, then leans down to devour her lips. Blair releases him and steps back. “Not so fast, Professor.”

“We have to go somewhere.” James looks around the lobby nervously and Lori leans back in the shadows, emitting her own gasp.

“I know a place,” Blair whispers, her hands tracing the front of his shirt

again. “They never lock the doors of St. Elizabeth’s and there’s a lovely room with a couch in the back.”

“That’s sacrilegious. We can’t make love in a church.”

James acts appalled at the idea but his tone makes me think he’s excited as well. His actions reaffirm my beliefs for when Blair silently takes James’s hand and heads through the lobby to exit the back porch in the direction of St. Elizabeth’s, James follows obediently.

I may be from New Orleans and have seen more than my share of carnal delights but I’m disgusted with them both, one, because she may be as young as seventeen and he’s her teacher, unethical at least and unlawful at worse, and two, because there’s a child standing beside me with a hand over her mouth to mute the aching sobs raking her chest. I come to Lori’s side and try to comfort her, forgetting that I’m only a whisk of a thought floating around.

“Please don’t cry,” I whisper earnestly but she can’t hear me and there’s nothing either one of us can do.

Lori flees up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and even though I feel compelled to go after her, something encourages me to stay. For not the first time since I acquired my SCANCy habits, I feel a force guiding me, like dozens of tiny fingers gently pushing me one way or another. The thought that it might be Lillye flits through my consciousness and my breath catches in my throat. And yet, that same energy seems to remind me to focus on the issue at hand so I quell my beating heart and turn back toward the lobby, watching in the last few seconds of my vision, before it all fades to black, a truly skanky man appearing from behind the front desk. He heads toward the back porch and watches James and Blair from the oversized picture window, smiling grimly. A chill so intense floods my veins that when I jerk awake, I’m shivering to my bones.

I’m sitting up in bed covered in sweat, a rain-soaked morning light filtering through the bedroom curtains. TB whistles in the bathroom and I rub my eyes to make sure I’m not still dreaming. I’m not, damn it, it’s the next morning and my body aches from lack of sleep. It’s now been several nights of fitful dreams and my head feels like Ash Wednesday after five days of Mardi Gras fervor.

TB emerges from the bathroom shirtless and newly showered and shaved,



owning a sly grin. “Hey sexy.”

Oh my God, I suddenly realize through my fog of insomnia. I slept with my ex-husband! Before I can fully digest that thought and filter it through a colander of grace and kindness I blurt out, “What were we thinking?”

If I had slapped TB hard across the face I couldn’t have done more damage. I instantly regret my words as his smile falters but the deed is done. TB looks down at the floor and takes a deep breath, letting it out in a loud rush while shaking his head. “I should have known better. I should have known you’d do this.”

I open my mouth to offer damage control but my head’s cloudy and I’m too exhausted to figure out the right words. Instead, I lean forward, holding up my head with my hand and rubbing my forehead to try to think clearer. “TB, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean....”

TB grins sadly. “I get it, Vi. You’re sorry you ever met me, sorry we got married, sorry you had to put up with me all these years. But hey, what’s a good roll in the sack every once and a while.”

I look up which makes my eyes ache. “That’s not what I meant and that’s not what happened.” Truth is, I have no idea what happened.

He holds his hands up, looking like Bill Clinton being asked about Monica Lewinski. “Moment of passion. Big mistake. No worries.”

TB turns and heads back into the bathroom, slamming the door in his wake. I can hear him packing up his toiletries through the closed door. Why must I always say the first thing that pops into my head? I throw my legs over the bed and, still holding on to my throbbing head, manage to walk to the closet and pull out the last of my clean clothes, basically a comfortable shirt and cardigan sweater and a pair of jeans I’ve worn three days but still look decent. While I pull these clothes out of the suitcase, items that feel like they’re made of iron, TB emerges from the bathroom, throwing his toiletries and clothes into his backpack.

“TB, please don’t go.” This is what my mind is instructing me to say but the words fail to come. Instead, I turn to watch the man of which I’ve spent the last eight years of my life pack up what little belongings he now possesses and waltz

back into a nightmare. I'm engulfed in shame but I do nothing.

Fully dressed and packed, TB hauls the backpack on to his shoulder and hands me a set of papers. "This is what I found on the orphan girls. They started the program because the ladies social club in town wanted to do something good for the po' folks in the area. First, they brought in two sisters from an orphanage in Harrison, wherever that is. The following year it was a girl from Little Rock."

I can't stand this. I don't want to be married to this man any longer but the pain staring back at me is more than I can bear. "TB, I really didn't mean...."

TB thrusts more pages at me, which land on top of the pile of clothes in my arms. "These are pages from the yearbook and their names are beneath the photos so that may help you and the police identify those bones. All three of them were here one year and gone the next."

"TB, please."

"The librarian and I did searches through census records and city directories and we couldn't find these girls anywhere." He's rushing through all this as if he has a train to catch. "She was going to call the Little Rock Diocese this morning to see if they have any information, too."

"You don't have to go."

He hands me a business card, places it on top of the pile. "That's her name and number. Clarice Williams. When you talk to her, be sure and thank her for all her help. She's been tremendous."

"Yes, she has," although I'm not referring to the librarian.

TB gives me one last look, as if maybe he catches my meaning, but then he opens the door. "Goodbye Vi." And with those last words, my husband disappears through the crooked door.

I feel like a heel, on top of aching from lack of sleep and being tormented by several ghosts on my first travel press trip that was supposed to change my career and my life. I angrily throw my pile on to the mussed bed and those three faces I spotted at the lake stare back at me, as if to confirm that yes, Viola Valentine, you are the biggest bitch on the planet right now.

"No help from you," I shout back.

I stumble into the bathroom for a shower, checking the time because I'm due

downstairs for breakfast at eight and it's now twenty after seven. I start the water and gather my shampoo and conditioner when I spot a piece of clothing on the floor. It's TB's old T-shirt, the one he got at the turn of the century when everyone thought the world's computers would fail. He bought it on the streets of New Orleans when we took Lillye, then just a baby, to watch the midnight fireworks over the river. I pick it up and gaze at its message — "I caught the Y2K Millennium bug" — remembering what a great night that was. I inhale its scent, recalling, too, those moments when I enjoyed being TB's wife, the manly scent of him after work, his expert lovemaking and watching him with Lillye, such an amazing father. Even though I'm raked with guilt and shame, was that enough? Was Lillye the mortar that kept us together? Or am I the biggest fool that ever lived?

My head buzzes and I catch movement in the mirror. Sure enough, Lori is there, her eyes sad and pleading but I'm not in the mood. "What do you want?"

She reacts to my harsh tone but says nothing, glances down at the bathtub and holds her arms in that baby-cuddling fashion. My head hurts and I'm oh so incredibly tired. "Just tell me what you want. Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it and we can all move on."

Lori still says nothing but this time she points to the bathtub. This is new.

"Did you die here?"

She nods and finally, we're getting somewhere. It makes sense, too, since I never could figure out why I could see a ghost who committed suicide by throwing herself off a balcony, being that I'm a water SCANC and all. "Did you drown?"

She places her hands around her neck.

"Did someone strangle you?"

That's not it; she looks at me frustrated.

"I'm tired, Lori." I don't want to play this game right now, but then that avalanche of energy I felt in the dream returns. Someone or some force is urging me to *feel* what she's saying. I try to focus on strangulation. What does one feel like when they're being strangled? Lack of air. But in a bathtub? "Did someone hold you down under the water?"

She nods and I sense she's fading. It's dark in the bathroom because of one small window and the fact that it's pouring outside but her image isn't stable, like a lightbulb buzzing in and out. Once more she cradles her arms like she's holding a baby.

"I don't get it. A baby?" A wave of exhaustion rolls over me and I rub my eyes to clear my head but in those brief seconds Lori disappears. I feel like I'm taking tiny steps in a reality I can't comprehend and the frustration of it exhausts me even more, not to mention the grief that continually emerges thinking of my own loss.

I plop down on the toilet, still holding TB's shirt in my hands and try to make sense of it all. Is the baby Lori's referring to my Lillye? Is Lillye on the other side waiting for me to contact her? Could this ghost and those I sense in the ether show me the way to my daughter? Oh, how that would be such a sweet ending to this insanity of seeing ghosts. Hell, this nightmare of life as I now know it.

I pull TB's shirt to my face again and wish I hadn't sent my husband away. For the first time since Lillye's death, I want to discuss this with him, knowing he's the only person who would understand, would listen to my crazy ghost stories and not judge, offer some answers.

My phone buzzes and from the irritating vibration I know it's my mother. I let it go, sitting on the john of my tiny Victorian bathroom clutching my soon-to-be ex-husband's T-shirt, crying my eyes out. But it's so like my mother, stops and starts, stops and then starts again, so that no matter if you're hanging upside down from a tree like the damn Tarot Hanged Man, you must pause in your dying to give that woman attention. Finally, I can't take it anymore, grab the phone and push talk while wiping the tears and snot off my face with my other hand and practically yell, "What?"

"So nice to talk to you too, darling." Of course, it's my mother. And like usual, she doesn't inquire as to my fragile state of mind, just starts rattling on about her insensitive daughter who never calls her back, even though she's lost her job, her house is a mess from the storm of the century (wasn't flooded, mind you) and she must revert to calling constantly to talk to the inconsiderate child.

And, as always, I'm sitting there with tear streaks on my cheeks, wondering how a woman can be so clueless.

After a long tirade, I stand, glance at myself in the mirror and start wiping off the trails of grief and pain; I need to be downstairs in ten minutes. I place the phone on the pedestal sink while she complains incessantly and try to tame my unruly hair that's a mess because I insisted on making love to my ex-husband the night before. I then attempt a spit bath in the sink because I haven't the time for a full shower and I'm aggravated because I could use that delicious stream of hot water pouring over my body right now. All the while, my mother never stops talking.

"Viola, are you listening to me?" She doesn't wait for a reply, begins telling me about an apartment her friend from Tulane has for rent, some efficiency in Metairie I could have if I must leave my poor, heartbroken husband and live on my own.

That particular guilt hits hard and I've had enough. I pick up the phone and interrupt her. "What do you want, Mom."

I think she gets it, or is heading to that serious guilt place and will start admonishing me for talking to her with that tone. Thankfully she gets it, but adds on the guilt anyway. "Am I bothering you?"

"Yes, Mom, as a matter of fact, I have to be somewhere. You could have asked me that in the beginning."

"I'm sorry, are you late for your spa treatment?"

How does she know this? Then I remember, she's been bugging TB all week. I don't care. I don't need to explain my job one more time. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. Now if you will excuse me...."

She's not giving up that easily. "Will I see you when you get back? The family's getting together Friday night at the house. You know, the one with the tree in the roof."

My mother's house had a pine tree snap in two and fall through the game room. She had to replace the roof, the game room floor and its walls of damp sheetrock that experienced water damage from the rain pouring through a very small hole. The repairs happened all within a month after Katrina because my

poor mom was “devastated” by the experience and bugged the shit out of her insurance agent. Meanwhile, everyone I knew with water to their ceilings — including me and TB — were still waiting for the Allstate man with his good hands to arrive.

“Fine,” is all I can manage. “I’ll see you there.”

I’m about to hit the end button when she cries out “Wait. Have you seen your Aunt Mimi?”

This stops me cold and I pick up the phone. “What about Aunt Mimi?”

“She lives up there. Where you are right now. If you’d have called me back, you would have known this.”

I had heard Aunt Mimi was in an assisted living facility in Branson, but I never put the two together. Was Branson that close by?

My mother answers that question. “She’s about an hour away in that horrid town, Disney World for middle America. How anyone would want to visit, let alone live in Branson is beyond me. But I know she’d love to see you.”

I’d love to see her too, but I’m on a press trip, not a vacation, and having to explain that one more time is about to send me over the edge. I’m now five minutes from breakfast so I take a deep breath and assure my mother I will look her up, write down the number and make a hasty goodbye. Of course it takes longer than I realize because my mother has to update me on her job situation — she’s working as an adjunct professor in Baton Rouge until the universities in New Orleans get on their feet and the hour drive is about to kill her — and I’m late so I grab my purse, my camera and run for the elevator, realizing I have no earrings on and my socks don’t match. Could this morning get any worse?

Why did I have to ask that, I think, as Richard enters the elevator in his running shorts and starts telling me how he just exercised for an hour and the trouble with Americans today is they’re lazy and eat too much and expect the rest of the world to pay their healthcare bills. “La, la, la” I sing inside my head to drone his diatribe away.

When the doors of this pitifully slow elevator finally open I make a dash to the dining room. I’m almost there when I catch a handsome man to my left — yes, I’m easily distracted by good-looking men — and I find Madman casually

leaning against the concierge desk laughing with Kelly as if they're old friends. I don't know why I'm jealous since I've written this self-centered man off my list, but he's talking to this stranger with more animation than he ever offered me and we worked together for years, not that he remembers.

I walk up gingerly and the two keep laughing but now Kelly notices me. "Vi," she says, touching my arm and laughing again. "Your socks don't match."

The two enjoy the mistake, although it's more of the laughing with you kinda chuckle and not the high school you're-so-stupid laugh, but it bites just the same. I look down and smile, shrug, assure them it's all in fun. I wink. "Yeah, well, had a romantic night and it was rough getting up this morning."

This takes the winds out of their sails and I wonder if we're really not still in high school. Kelly decides to say her goodbyes and heads off to breakfast. Madman sobers and becomes the man I know him to be, all business. "Have a minute?" he asks.

We head to the fireplace couch that's beginning to get on my last nerve and sit, while he pulls out that stupid black book. He doesn't waste time. "I called that librarian this morning and she said the Diocese did send three orphan girls to the college but they never heard from them again. In the words of the guy she spoke to in Little Rock, it was like they disappeared."

I should feel happy that I've been vindicated but I'm tired and aggravated so all I do is nod.

"So it looks like someone may have been preying on these girls."

Ya think? So glad *you* came up with that.

"Might be the same person who killed Blair Marcus."

Wow, aren't you the smart one. I need coffee, I think. I stand, ready to head over and fulfill my caffeine quota. "So we're done?"

Maddox looks up surprised. He wasn't expecting me to write him off so quickly. "I thought you'd be pleased with this information."

I smile sarcastically. "Already knew it. Remember?"

He rises and we stand eye to eye. "Oh yeah, ghosts."

The way he says it, you know he doesn't believe. "All this information you just uncovered," I say using quote marks with my fingers for "uncovered." "I

told you yesterday so forgive me if I'm not impressed that you validated what I already knew." I can't believe I talked to him that way but I'm done with letting people push me around.

I turn to walk to the dining room but he catches my elbow. "Any ideas who it might be?"

Are you kidding me? I look at him as if he's sprouting three heads. I'm about to give him a choice piece of my mind when I hear Henry calling from behind me that we're ready for breakfast and a local chef from town will be discussing the town's culinary scene.

"The college's groundskeeper," I tell Maddox against my better judgment. "I think he's your man."

Maddox nods. "Where are you going to be later?"

I don't want to see this man ever again, although curiosity will make me check up on the case to see what they turn up. I'm about to say that we're leaving today to return home, when Henry pipes up behind me, "We'll be at the tea house for lunch, then hopefully heading out to Bentonville and flights home, if the rain doesn't stop us."

I'm disappointed that my last meal on my once beloved virgin press trip has to be tainted by this man yet again, but how much information can police uncover in a morning? I turn towards breakfast and pass them both without looking up, heading for that cup of coffee that may make this morning more bearable.

When I enter the dining room, the chef has already launched into her culinary talk and Winnie motions for me to join her at her table. I grab a cup of coffee from the buffet bar and sit down, slurping down the java like a five-year-old.

"Where's TB?" Winnie whispers.

After a significant amount of caffeine enters my bloodstream I answer. "He went home."

Winnie gasps. "In this weather?"

I gaze out the windows that overlook the hotel's gardens and the mountain slope that dips toward town. Trees, plants and even shrubs blow frantically as if



the hand of Katrina sweeps through. I can't see more than one hundred feet ahead for the low-lying clouds and rain and the wind exhales so hard the windowpanes rattle, as if demanding entrance into our warm, dry oasis.

“Shit” is all I can manage to say.

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## Chapter 17

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After several tries through breakfast, I finally reach TB on the third call while waiting for my spa treatment in the basement of the Crescent Hotel.

“Jesus, Vi, you’re as bad as your mother.”

Not what I want to hear this horrid morning but I ignore him. “Where are you and why are you driving in this weather?”

“Actually, I’m sitting in a Waffle House having eggs.”

“Where are you?”

He sighs and I hear the rustling of newspaper in the background. Give that man one thing, he’s among the American minority who still read newspapers, bless his heart. “I’m in some place called Fort Smith. And it’s not raining that hard right now.”

“They’re talking about cancelling our flights tonight, so the weather is too bad to be driving in.”

“What did you have in mind, me sleeping at the Waffle House?”

“Come back.” I say this to ease my guilt as much as for his safety.

He sighs again. “Vi, I’m two hours away.”

I’m on the verge of tears, can’t believe being so immune to crying all these years I’m suddenly wearing my emotions on my sleeve. “But coming back to Eureka Springs has to be safer than driving to New Orleans.”

I hear what sounds like TB telling the waitress to keep the change and yes, another cup. “I’m fine. I’ll wait here for a little while until it clears up some

more, heard the truckers say the weather's better further south."

The spa lady holding a clipboard waves to me; it's my turn. I want to end this conversation, pretend the last few days never happened and disappear into spa heaven, but my heart drops between my knees. "I'm sorry," I tell TB and I mean that on so many levels.

There's a pause and I wonder if he's heard me. "It's okay," he answers quietly. "I'll be fine, Vi. You'll be fine. We'll get through this. We've weathered worse storms before."

I know I want out but there are many times I doubt my feelings toward my husband. Sometimes, he can be so spot on, so understanding. Right now, I wish him here so I can hold him close and pretend all our problems never existed.

The lady with the clipboard looks annoyed — she gave me grief for having to change from a couples massage to a single because TB had split — so I say my goodbyes and TB assures me he will be careful on the road. Swallowing the emotions still choking me, I follow Ms. Clipboard down the long hallway that leads to the creepy morgue. Just before I fully digest what lies at the end of the corridor, we turn right into the massage rooms where soft lute music and lavender scents greet me at the door and a painting of a sublime owl above a waterfall hangs at the rear. A mousy woman with oversized eyes and braided hair awaits, instructing me to disrobe and slip on to the massage table underneath sheets that have been warmed for my arrival.

After she leaves, I take a deep breath and try to inhale the peaceful surroundings, shaking out the stress from my shoulders and neck, trying desperately to forget — or at least put aside for one hour — the weird happenings of the last few days. I do as I'm told and undress, then lie face down on the table, my arms dangling at my sides. When the mouse returns, she places my arms on the table, palms up, and rearranges the sheets for easy access to my body feeling as tight as the moment I heard the levees pop. Breathe, I tell myself, but instead realize I'm holding my breath because I can't stop thinking of TB driving through the storm, my mom and her irritating ways, knowing that I must sit through her lectures and demands Friday night and Lori remaining in my room, hoping I will solve her mystery and set her free.

“Relax.” I feel Mouse kneading my shoulder. “You’re wound tight.”

“Sorry,” I murmur through the headrest.

She keeps plugging away and I keep attempting to breathe and relax but it’s not happening; I’m so incredibly tired but too exhausted to release. I attempt one long breath and exhale, feeling some semblance of tension remove when suddenly, that familiar buzz arrives. I ask my masseuse, since she’s so close to the morgue down the hall, if the massage rooms have ghosts. Mouse laughs and says she’s heard doors closing on their own but that could have been the wind. One therapist felt a cold spot, saw a shadow, but no, nothing out of the ordinary.

I wonder how cold spots and shadows are ordinary as the buzzing continues, only louder this time, and I sense a child’s voice whispering, “Listen.” I’m now so intent on focusing on whether Lillye is coming through that I ignore Mouse instructing me to “breathe and relax,” her petite hands working overtime. My poor masseuse continually struggles with my taut muscles but I’m not going to worry about her. Instead, like a child chasing a dog down a long hallway, I follow the ethereal source to whatever it hopes to tell me.

We’re still in the basement, in a tiny office filled with gardening tools and building materials. That creepy man I spotted in my dream where James and Blair organized their sexual assignation plot in the hotel lobby now sits behind a desk, his face darkened by the shadow of a cap and his hands folded across his dirty calico shirt and overalls. I was right, I realize, this man is involved in the upkeep or landscaping of the college.

James rests his back against the doorframe, one foot inside the office as if he’s too scared to venture forth or he’s hoping to spring a fast getaway.

“I know what you did.” James’ whisper elicits no response from the gardener, except a small, sly smile that causes me to shiver. Violently, if only for a moment. I hear Mouse on the other side of the world ask if I’m cold but I ignore her, wouldn’t know how to respond anyway.

“And I know what you’re not.” The gardener looks up at James and I can make out smoke-colored, beedy eyes that chill me to the core.

“I don’t care anymore,” James answers.

“Really?” The gardener leans back in his chair, that psycho smile still

playing his lips. “Mr. Caballero from nowhere Ohio, son of an Italian immigrant, who never went to college, doesn’t have a degree.”

James closes his eyes and his hands draw up in fists. His words are filled with pain. “You killed those girls. You killed Blair.”

At this, the gardener rises, places his hands on his desk and leans forward. “And you made love to an underage student, you ignorant wop imposter.”

James runs his fingers through his hair nervously. He’s cornered and he knows it. If he rats on this man, his secret will be unveiled, his career ended and he’ll be hauled off to jail. If he doesn’t, more girls will die.

“Why?” he whispers. “Why Blair?”

The gardener laughs and again I shiver. “So only some rich spoiled brat from Dallas matters?”

“That’s not it and you know it.”

“You knew what I was doing.”

James steps backwards, stopped by the door’s threshold. “I only assumed about the orphans....”

The gardener moves from his place behind the desk and steps within inches of James, his face so close to his that James holds his breath to draw back as far as he can, his head touching the wood behind him. “You saw me with those two, and you knew what was going on. The only reason you never said anything and won’t now is because I know what and who you are.”

The two men stand facing each other for only seconds but it feels like minutes and I watch a tear drop down James’ face.

“I couldn’t afford college, I told you that.”

“Oh poor professor. My heart bleeds. I’m cleaning rich girl shit from toilets and I’m supposed to feel sorry for you?”

“But why Blair?”

The gardener leans so close to James their noses almost collide. “Because she was a spoiled brat and a tease and thought she owned the world. You people and all your education, what the hell do you know when someone throws a hammer on your skull? What’s your education going to do you then, huh? She deserved everything she got. Everything.”

James is now crying. He closes his eyes to escape the gardener's stare and angry words so the creep finally backs up, returns to his desk and sits down.

"Tell you what," the gardener says in that icy voice that makes my heart stop beating. "I'll leave this place, tell the president my mother is dying and go far away. You won't tell anyone about what happened to those orphans and little Miss Dallas Socialite and I'll take your secrets to the grave, *Mr. Leatherwood*."

Naturally, James is torn and I sense he wants to do the right thing. But I'm also doubtful that any teacher who has had sex with a student will make the right choice here. I'm correct for James nods, covers his mouth with a handkerchief and leaves the dark office. He practically runs down the hall.

I wonder why I'm watching only James in action here, consider that he may be haunting me as well, when I notice a shadow emerging from a corner of the basement, the same place where the spa lobby now exists, where I stood only minutes before talking to TB eating eggs in a Waffle House. Of course, it's Lori, following her beloved teacher around, but how much has she heard?

Lori ascends the staircase, following James to *his* office and as soon as she's inside, shuts the door behind her, which makes James literally jump in reaction. "Jesus, Lori, you scared me to death." In that moment with his guard down, I detect an Italian accent lurking behind that false educated veneer.

Lori says nothing, doesn't mention the meeting between him and the gardener or the fact that four girls have been murdered in their midst and James was party to letting it all happen. She silently walks toward her English teacher in their tight space of an office, slips a hand around his cheek and wipes the tears still lingering on his face, then kisses him soundly.

I'm as shocked as James, who pulls away and stares at his student bewilderedly.

"Don't you like that?"

James holds Lori at arms' length, gazing at her like the stern teacher he needed to be. "Go back to your room, Lori."

"I can give you what she gave you." Funny, for such an innocent, homely girl Lori stands before him confident and sensual, more powerful than anything Blair could have concocted. I gasp at this transformation and for a moment am

convinced they have heard me.

They haven't, of course, but James feels this new empowerment emanating from her too. This time, however, his commands lack enforcement. "Please, go back to your room."

Lori moves in close and kisses him again. Hard. He doesn't resist but his hands remain at his sides. She leans back slightly and whispers, "Kiss me like you kissed her."

James grabs her shoulders to keep her from doing it again but he's unable to move her. "Don't do this."

Lori slips her hands up the front of his shirt and then tightens them around his neck. She tilts her head and opens her lips, letting out a warm breath that becomes James' undoing. He meets her lips and devours them, pulling her close to him and sliding his hands up and down her back until they finally pause at her bottom. When he pulls her into him and together they tumble backwards on to the desk, I want out of there. I stumble backwards myself and knock over a lamp.

Just as I'm about to wonder how I managed to physically be part of this scene, I'm now in Lori's room, watching her pick up the lamp from the floor, her eyes red from crying. She's packing to leave, stumbling about the room in distress. Time has passed because the trees outside the window have no leaves, or was I imaging fall weather during the previous dreams and visions? "It's important" comes that quiet little voice and I try to cry out "Lillye?" but no words emerge. "Look at her," the voice urges me, and I study Lori one last time before the vision fades away. Lori's face appears swollen from her crying but there's something else causing her cheeks to plump up and her belly to swell. Lori's pregnant.

Gasping like I emerged from deep underwater, I hear another girl crying — but it's not Lori. This one's standing over me in braids.

"I can't do this," she mutters through sobs and runs from the room, leaving the door open so that Miss Clipboard can peer inside with wonderment.

"What happened?" the spa Nazi asks me.

I grab the sheet to my chest and try to rise gracefully, which of course I fail

to do. I look around the room for clues and find none. "I have no idea."

Still holding that damn clipboard to her chest with an aggravated look on her face, the woman heads down the hall in the same direction Mouse had fled, failing, of course, to close the damn door. I manage to get my feet on the ground still clinging to all those warmed-up sheets and stumble to the door to close it, then turn to locate where I put my clothes. I head to the chair on the other side of the room and let some of the sheet drop when a man opens the door and looks inside, getting a nice glimpse of my bare rear end.

"Hey." I grab the sheet that had fallen on the floor but all that does is release the rest of the cloth covering my body.

"Sorry," the man says and looks away, and I struggle to gather material to save my dignity. "I was told you needed a masseuse."

I'm finally covered although I must look like a cream puff so I turn and face the man. He's young and cute with muscles that could do me justice, but something tells me this day has been cursed from the moment I opened my eyes and nothing will make it better. "I don't know what happened but my last masseuse ran crying from the room. Are you sure you want to be here?"

"She's new."

"And I'm wound tight, or so she said."

The new guy steps backwards over the threshold and I figured that's it but he motions for me to follow him. "You need a new massage table since you took all the sheets with you so how about you follow me to my room and we'll start over."

I grab my clothes and follow this man with a lovely Irish accent out the door, then realize we are heading deeper into the bowels of the hotel, closer to the morgue. At this point, I really am done, am ready to call it a day, say goodbye to Lori and catch my plane, if there is one, but the man starts talking and his deep, Celtic voice entices me to enter the new room and follow his instructions: disrobe when he steps out of the room, get back on the table beneath warm sheets, place arms at my side and stick my face in that hole in the table.

Once again I do as I'm told and this time, when my masseuse returns, I engage him in conversation. Usually I don't like talking during a massage, prefer



to thoroughly relax in quiet, but I don't want a haunting repeat and I'd love to listen to that delicious accent. He senses this — in addition to mentioning how tight my muscles are, gee thanks — and we get a nice back and forth going. Finally, when I have the nerve, I ask him about seeing ghosts so close to the morgue. Unlike Mouse, Irish man has stories to tell.

“It's pretty creepy down here sometimes. The hotel's definitely haunted. Although, it's what you believe, really. I'm from Ireland where we're more open to believing in ghosts.”

I don't know why but I blurt out, “I've seen a ghost in my room. Pretty sure it's the girl who jumped the balcony.”

That ethereal voice returns, insisting that I have it all wrong, but I ignore her. I'm waiting to see what Mr. Muscles thinks.

“Yeah, think I've seen her too.”

I want to turn and face this guy but his oversized thumb is on the base of my neck, working on a knot no doubt. “What did she look like?” I mumble from my head-rest.

He doesn't say anything, rotating that thumb down a muscle into my shoulder blade that releases the tension like a door spring. He's not massaging me like most masseuses, something more rough and tumble like a family member would do but I don't care, it's working. I start to repeat the question but the feeling of his hands on my shoulder's so incredible delicious I let it go. Maybe the universe is finally allowing me a few moments of pleasure on this press trip from hell.

Unfortunately, Celtic Man finally pipes up. “I don't think she jumped.”

“Me neither,” I say through the head-rest which comes out sounding like something in a drive-through intercom.

Muscle Man gets quiet, now fully concentrating on my rock-solid shoulders, again kneading me like bread dough in a half-hazard way but it feels good so I don't mind. I wonder what he knows about Lori and how he knows it but on the other hand I want to relax and enjoy this. I breathe deep and exhale and feel better for the first time this morning. After he's finished with my back and legs, I turn over face up as instructed.

My masseuse has nice eyes, I realize, and a kind demeanor. "What's your name?" I ask as I adjust myself on the table.

He guides my head back down on the head-rest. "Michael."

I take the plunge. "Why do you think that ghost's still here, Michael?"

He starts on my arms, working his magic down to my fingers which feels so incredibly good. I realize I'm missing my writing, will look forward to getting back home to my words.

"I think she went to school here but I don't think she was attending school when it happened," Michael says. "I think she came back for a reason, possibly to let someone know something, which might have been why she died."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because the timing's wrong. The year she died she wasn't enrolled."

"You looked that up?" I ask because I want that proof so I can show Madman, if it comes to that.

"I think she's also trying to connect with someone."

"Who?"

I attempt to rise on my elbows but Michael pushes me back down on the table. "You really need to relax."

I let out a deep sigh and try. "I haven't slept well the whole time I've been here. I keep dreaming about her."

He nods but says nothing, moves back to my shoulders and kneads deeply. My eyelids flutter. "Take a nap," he whispers above my head, and it's the last thing I remember before feeling a sharp poke in my upper arm.

I open my eyes to find Miss Clipboard standing over me. "Are you going to sleep here all day?"

I'm so confused I rise to a sitting position and the sheets go tumbling everywhere. I grab cloth to cover my chest and realize those sheets are mussed and tangled over my body. "What happened?"

"What happened is I have another client who needs this room."

I glance around to see that I'm back in my original room, my clothes lying across the far chair as I had left them when I disrobed for Mouse. That creepy owl still stares at me from its perch above the water. "Where's Michael?"

“Who?”

“My masseuse.”

Spa Nazi glares at me. “You scared her and she left. She was distraught so we had to give her the day off. Now, will you please get dressed and free up this room?”

“Okay.” I want to explain myself and ask about the Irish guy but this woman unnerves me to no end. She gives me one last scolding look, then heads out the door and closes it this time, so I jump off the table, this time letting the sheets fall where they may, and get dressed in record time. When I return to the spa waiting area, Clipboard Queen is nowhere in sight but Stephanie greets me, her spa hair flying in all directions. “Wasn’t that delightful?” she asks me, but I smile weakly and head up the stairs, can’t get to my room fast enough.

I open the door to find a note on the floor.

“Hope you enjoyed your spa visit,” the note reads. “It looks like the Bentonville Airport will be closing this afternoon but we’ll discuss new flight times at lunch. Meet us down in the lobby by 11:30 a.m. for a great meal at Miss Mary’s Tea House! — Alicia”

Always so happy, those PR folks, even when telling us we’re screwed.

I think I have time to change, but when I glance at the clock I realize it’s 11:15. Where did the time go? I must have fallen asleep while the Irish Man worked his magic and I do feel more rested, but something’s not right. Who was that guy and why didn’t the spa manager know what I was talking about. On a lark, I call down to the spa and ask for the male masseuse.

“The who?” the woman says on the other end.

I realize it’s the Clipboard Lady so I disguise my voice so she won’t guess it’s me. I avoid saying his name so I don’t give myself away. “The young man who works there, the one with the Irish accent.”

“You have the wrong number,” she says a lot nicer than the tone she offered me earlier. “We don’t have male masseuses here and definitely not one from Ireland.”

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## Chapter 18

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Winnie's got the mommy look going, staring at me across a table full of teapots, scones, miniature cucumber sandwiches and a chicken salad laced with pecans I would normally devour. I'm starving, having missed breakfast, but I'm too tired and confused to consider raising a fork to my lips.

"What is it?" Winnie asks.

There were so many times on this trip where I doubted my sanity, figured Lillye's death and Katrina's wrath had finally tossed me over the edge, but Carmine's revelations and TB's research that backed my ghost sightings had given me hope that I wasn't stark raving mad. Now, I'm back to the beginning.

"Did you have a nice spa visit?" Winnie places two sandwiches on my plate, then attempts to plop another scoop of chicken salad to the one I haven't touched.

I hold a hand over my plate. One thing I can't stand is wasting food. "No, the spa visit didn't go so well."

Winnie leans in close. "Did you see another dead body?"

I start laughing because I haven't a clue what I just saw. Was Michael a ghost? Was he an imposter like James had been at the college, imitating a masseuse because he couldn't afford college? Or maybe the Spa Nazi recognized my voice on the phone and decided to mess with my head. "I don't know, Winnie. I don't know anything anymore. I can't believe I'm actually looking forward to going back to war-torn South Louisiana."

Winnie touches my hand and it feels good to have a friend. I send her a sad smile and she squeezes my fingers. “I’d usually say something uplifting right about now,” Winnie says, “but guess who just walked in the door?”

I’ve completely forgotten about Madman, which makes me laugh even more. “You know things have gotten really bad when the last person I want to see is my sexual fantasy of the last few years.”

Winnie frowns, not knowing what I’m talking about. I don’t feel like explaining so I rise and head toward the front door. There, in all his cop glory, hat upon his head, gun belt cocked off his waist like John Wayne, stands Maddox, smiling as if he’s happy to see me. I stop cold, washing in that congenial greeting, imaging that maybe this day isn’t so bad after all. Maddox waves and grins seductively like there’s some carnal secret between us. Although this sets afire a few firecrackers in my female places, I can’t help but wonder why the transformation.

The closer I get, however, the more I realize those eyes are not quite meeting mine, just a hair off to the side. I turn and look back toward the group. Sure enough Kelly, our Southern Belle from Georgia, is waving at him from across the room. I want to say this day could not get any worse but I’m afraid to jinx it because after you watch the levees break in a town where they insisted they would hold forever, you know it can always get worse.

As I approach Maddox he turns his gaze to me and his smile fades. “Miss Valentine.”

Business as usual. “Mr. Bertrand.”

“We need to talk.”

We look around for an empty table but Miss Mary’s Tea House is packed with our large group and the regular lunch crowd; the rains seem to be attracting people not able to get outside. There’s a cute little gift shop in front that offers more privacy so I head off in that direction, not even bothering to ask. When I reach the front door, I turn abruptly, my arms solid across my chest. I want to get this nightmare over with and go home.

Maddox must have sensed my aggravated energy for he takes a step back. “Uh, I wanted to let you know what we found out.”

“Okay.”

“You were right, there was a groundskeeper at the college who left after the murders. If they were indeed murdered, but we’re treating them as homicides.”

I say nothing, just stare, which unnerves him. I desperately want to say, “Tell me something I don’t know, you cocky son-of-a-bitch.”

“Uh.” He pulls out that stupid black book from his back pocket and low and behold he has written something in it. “It was a man named Gene Tanner, originally from St. Louis. Worked at the college the same years as those girls were killed.”

I exhale but my arms stay locked and Maddox keeps watching me as if I might grow horns. “Did he leave right after Blair was killed?”

“Yeah.”

I nod. “Did you find anything else about him? Priors? Arrests in other states?”

“Yeah.”

I tilt my head and cock my jaw. “Are you going to tell me?” I’m treading on sensitive ground with a cop and I know it but I can’t help myself and he’s taking it so I keep going.

Maddox looks at his notes. “He was arrested in Washington state a couple of years later, convicted of sexual assault and the killing of two young girls.”

This takes the wind out of my sails. James let this monster loose to save his career and keep himself out of jail and two young lives were lost in the balance. I drop my arms and exhale. “What happened to him?”

Maddox glances back at his notes. “He was sentenced to hang right after the trial.”

I drop my head and study the knots in the wooden floor, remembering the faces of those girls this monster killed and secretly buried. “Good riddance.”

“There’s something else.”

I look up and realize Maddox is talking to me like a colleague and not a stranger, a prying journalist or a person of interest. The change in the atmosphere between us is almost palpable. No matter what occurred over the past few days nor his dalliance with Miss Georgia, I decide to drop my defiance. “Hopefully,

you found out he's burning in hell.

Maddox shakes his head. "Hell's right here," and for a moment I recognize that all-too-familiar pain, realize we share an experience witnessing the same horrors, only our dead bodies floated in floodwaters. Before he wallows into those depths, however, Maddox gets back on dry ground, returning to his stern cop demeanor, and I chide myself on using too many metaphors.

"Right before the hanging, they asked Tanner if he had any final words."

"Did he?"

Maddox flips a page of his notebook and reads, "'You might have gotten me on these crimes, fellas, but you'll never find the girls of Arkansas.'"

A laughing couple enters the restaurant and the cold wind rushes through the gift shop, sending a violent shiver up my back. Maddox flips the book closed and slips it into his back pocket.

"Why didn't they ever put the two together?" I ask.

Maddox sighs and looks out the window where the wind is forcing the rain to dance against the parking lot in horizontal sheets. "Maybe the Washington guys told the police here what he said, maybe they didn't. My guess is that if they did, city officials didn't want anyone to know that a murderer was living at the school because then who would want to come to Eureka Springs. The Blair girl alone really did a number on their enrollment. If her body had been found murdered and sexually abused, that would have closed the school for sure."

"In the meantime, Mr. Tanner kills two girls in Washington."

Maddox watches a man struggling with an umbrella run from the neighboring antique store to his car, getting soaked in the process. "Welcome to my world."

I still don't like the guy, and I don't believe we've graduated to friends, but I think I understand him better. It's a good way to part company so I place a hand on his forearm and squeeze, much like Winnie had done only minutes before, and head back to my table.

"Don't you want to know about that girl who jumped off the balcony?" Maddox asks to my rear.

I close my eyes and exhale. Do I? I ask myself because I so want Lori's

haunting to go away and the more information I receive, the worst this nightmare gets. On the other hand, I want to help Lori make whatever transition happens when you solve a ghost mystery.

When I turn back to Maddox, he's holding a paper in his hand. "I don't know how you know these things and I still don't believe in ghosts, but you should read this."

I take the paper, and Maddox opens the front door and lets a blast of wet air inside. "You didn't get it from me," is the last thing he says as he disappears into the brutal weather.

It's a police report from the day Lori died, a Xerox of something old and faded. Underneath it lies a copy of the coroner's report. I fold both up and head back to my table because Miss Mary or whatever her name is has arrived with a platter of desserts and is making an announcement. I sit down and slip Lori's reports into my purse while I half listen to what the proprietor is saying about chocolate mousse and apple tarts.

"I'm going to get the fruit cocktail," Richard announces to my right. "It's ridiculous to eat all these unhealthy sweets they serve us."

I hadn't realized Richard was sitting next to me, had been so preoccupied with my mysterious masseuse and TB hauling home in the storm. I'm so not in the mood to listen to his diatribes and for spite, I ask for two desserts, a pecan pie topped with vanilla ice cream and a strawberry shortcake. I gaze at Richard and his cup of peach slices and moan with every bite I take of my rich pie.

"Go ahead," Richard says to me. "Kill yourself."

"I will." I slide the fork over my lips seductively so that every crumb of that pecan pie rests in my mouth while I close my eyes in pleasure. "And I will love every minute of it."

Richard doesn't let me have the last word, however. "Typical."

I can't help myself, even though my brain is screaming to leave it alone. "Typical what?"

"Take as much as you can get, sister. That's what you guys in New Orleans love to do, isn't it?"

It's common science, the way a levee breaks. No matter how high you build



the hill, no matter how many you spread throughout a city's waterways, the pressure that builds from massive amounts of water will eventually cause the earthen masses to crumble and break.

All the hauntings and aggravation of the past few days — not to mention the pain of Katrina and the years living in abject grief — have built up to this moment and my levee bursts open. I grip my fork tightly like a weapon and stab it hard into the uneaten scone lying on Richard's plate. I raise myself up enough so that I'm right in his face. "Don't you dare talk about my city, you asshole. Just Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

Richard says nothing, his eyes wide in astonishment. I would have laughed had he not leaned back in his chair to get away from my insanity and it reminded me of James standing on the threshold of Gene Tanner's office. Shit, what have I done?

I feel two strong hands on my shoulders and a soft voice telling me to drop the fork. I do as I'm told, now alarmed at my actions as if someone took over my body and did that crazy deed, while those hands guide me away from the table and the shocked expression on Miss Mary's face. By the time I'm a few feet away, I realize it's Henry at my side and he's telling me we're heading back to the hotel. Suddenly, Winnie's there too, placing my purse on my shoulder and whispering that everything's going to be okay. Before I can fully gauge what's happening, Henry and I are heading out the door of Miss Mary's, into the rain and the nearby van. Henry says nothing as we climb into our seats and we drive away, the windshield wipers beating out an exhaustive rhythm and his silence shames me more than any words would ever do.

"I'm sorry Henry."

"It's okay, Vi."

I'm not convinced. He must be furious with me and now I'll never be asked back on a press trip. "I didn't mean to. Richard's such an asshole and he won't shut up about New Orleans."

"I know, Vi. It's okay."

I look over and Henry's not smiling. He's pissed, I know it, and I just ruined my new career, stabbed it with a fork, no less. I pull my knees to my chest and

bury my face there.

“Have you thought about counseling?”

He says it so softly I’m not sure I heard right. “What?”

“I don’t think you’ve realized what you’ve been through. Post-traumatic stress comes in a variety of forms. It can sneak up on you when you least expect it.”

Henry sounds like he’s speaking from experience, but I doubt that. He’s such an easy-going guy, always smiling, always peacefully amiable. Although right now he’s probably ready to strangle me silly. “It was a hurricane, Henry, not like I went to Afghanistan.”

“The worst hurricane in U.S. history.”

Being the journalist I am I want to say that Galveston suffered the worst hurricane in 1900, although that’s probably registered from the massive death toll. I start to compare Katrina’s damage costs to the Texas island, and maybe add the deaths of New Orleanians who died after Katrina, when my brain screams for me to shut up. “Maybe I am losing my mind,” I whisper out loud.

“You’re not going crazy, Vi. You had a horrible thing happen to you and it’s best that you get some help, to work through it all.”

Tears pool in my eyes. It’s one thing for me to worry about my sanity but not the man who is part of a new life that’s supposed to heal me, rescue me from boredom, grief and non-fulfillment.

As we climb the mountainside to the Crescent Hotel, I feel a hand touch my forearm, which makes the tears pour over. “Promise me you’ll get some counseling,” Henry asks.

I nod, even though I know he can’t see me, since he’s so intent on driving through the rain, and that warm hand moves away. We pull up to the overhang that leads to the hotel lobby and I wipe the tears away.

“Get some rest,” Henry instructs me. “I’ll go back and get the rest of the group and we’ll meet in the lobby in about forty-five minutes for the trip back to Bentonville. We’re not going to fly out today because of the weather so I have a hotel reservation for us near the airport. Flights should resume in the morning.”

Having to face another night with Richard makes my heart sink. As if Henry

reads my mind, he adds, "I'll talk to Richard and make him behave. I promise."

"Thanks" is all I can manage and I grab the door handle to leave.

I don't know why I confess my secret but something out of this world encourages me to do so and for the first time since I started seeing dead folks, I really listen and take their advice, whoever they are. I turn back to Henry. "I see ghosts," I tell him, not caring what his reaction will be. I know my career is sunk so what difference does it make? "I saw those dead girls as clearly as day and I don't know why except that maybe they wanted to be found. The cop today, he found their killer and solved an old mystery. I know how crazy this sounds but I swear Henry, it's true."

Henry doesn't answer, nods his head.

I hear something else, an ethereal message that comes through now that I have left the front door open. Again, I embrace it, spilling my guts without even thinking. "And your brother wants you to know that it wasn't your fault. He decided to take the car out that night and now wishes he hadn't but he takes full responsibility for his death. He says you should not feel guilty about it. He's in a very good place and is very happy and at peace."

Henry looks shocked and pained at the same time, turns away from me and stares out the front windshield. I don't know where that information came from and what I just told him but I sense Henry needs his privacy now that I have passed on the message. I quietly exit the van and head into the hotel holding my collars high to ward off the rain. When I look back to the van, Henry is still waiting there, his gaze staring vacantly out into the rain.

I pull a Richard and run up the three flights of stairs to my room, anything to help relieve the anxiety that's gripping my heart. As I gasp my way down the fourth-floor hallway, past the crowds enjoying lunch and beer in the Baker Bar, I can't help thinking how I've royally screwed up this time. When I finally get inside my room, I'm greeted by the remnants of TB and the tossed sheets from our rabid lovemaking the night before. I lean back against the door and slid to the floor. There's nothing for me here — my new career is shot — and there's literally nothing for me back home, so I close my eyes and wish with all my soul that I could crawl into a cave and disappear — one without a spoiled debutante

who's dead, of course.

But I'm never alone anymore. I sigh and gaze up at Lori, dripping on my carpet outside the bathroom door.

"I can't help you," I plead. "Please leave me alone."

She looks inside the bathroom, then back at me with those sad, pleading eyes.

"I don't know what you want from me." I sound like a two-year-old whining. "My life is over as I know it so can't you leave me alone?"

Lori appears as if I stabbed her and begins to fade. I've hurt her feelings and the idea that I can do that to a ghost startles me.

Then I remember the police report. "Wait," I tell Lori, and her image remains steady. "I might have answers."

I pull out the papers Maddox gave me, and read the police report first, which states that Lauralei Annabelle Thorne — her first name is blurry which might be why the tour guides call her Annabelle — fell from a fourth-floor balcony at approximately ten-thirty September third, nineteen hundred and twenty-four. She was barefoot, no socks or stockings, and dressed in her college uniform, which appeared to be a size too small. In parenthesis, it notes that her skirt was on backwards.

"Odd," I say, glancing up at my haunting. "Was the skirt tight because you were pregnant?"

She shakes her head and I continue reading. "The subject appears to have died from her head hitting the pavement after the fall."

I look up again and Lori is still shaking her head.

"This is odd too," I tell her, reading the last part. "It says your hair was soaking wet. The cop mentions it raining that night but not between the hours of eight and midnight so he wonders if he has the time wrong. The person who called in the accident did so around ten forty-five, so the cop, in his notes, has 'before eight?' at the bottom of this report. But, he adds, the basketball team went jogging around eight once the rains stopped and they left the building at this spot and returned one hour later and never saw the subject," I glance up at Lori and add, "That's you."

I read aloud the last sentence that appears to be typed on to the report at a later date; the ink is different: ““With no other evidence to support differently, the subject committed suicide at ten-thirty p.m.””

That’s it? Nothing more? Certainly suspicious to me but the report is brief and conclusive. I look at Lori who implores me with her eyes. “Okay, okay.” I pull the other paper out and read the coroner’s report.

“The suspect died from a head injury after falling three floors to her death. There was significant blood pouring from the cranium, which appears to be the cause of death.”

Again, brief and conclusive. I look at Lori and she shakes her head, so I keep reading, “The subject had blood on her genitalia and thighs, the post-partum bleeding of a pregnancy. She likely had a child within the week.”

There’s more but I pause to let this last piece of knowledge sink in. “Where is the baby?”

For the first time since I have set foot in this hotel, Lori’s eyes light up and she appears almost happy. That’s it, I think, she died here after giving birth and she probably wants to know what happened to her child but how the hell am I supposed to figure that one out?

“So you got pregnant by James in the fall of nineteen hundred and twenty-three and came back here in September of twenty-four for what? To tell James about the child?”

She’s fading and I can’t tell if she nodded or not but the light remains in her eyes so I assume I’m on the right track.

“Then someone drowned you in the bathtub, dressed you in someone’s uniform — possibly the girl who lived in this room at the time since it didn’t fit and you weren’t going to school here then — and threw you off the balcony to make it look like a suicide?”

I’m on the right track, I feel it in my bones, but Lori’s starting to look aggravated again, like I’m missing something. Still, I focus on the murder.

“Was it James who killed you?”

She shakes her head but she’s really fading now, imploring me again with those sad grey eyes.

“The girl in this room?”

Now, she looks angry but I haven’t a clue who it might have been, so I’m angry myself. “I don’t know who killed you, Lori. And I have no idea where your baby went.”

She fades instantly, but not before sending me a look defining me as the failure I am.

“It’s not fair,” I yell to the empty space she leaves behind. “I didn’t ask for this.”

There’s a knock on the door behind me and I jump. The only thing that would be the cherry on top of this horrid day would be Henry standing on the other side with two men dressed in white holding a straightjacket. I could take Henry’s arm and say in my finest Southern accent, “I’ve always relied on the kindness of strangers.” Alas, there’s no Tennessee Williams for me as I gingerly open the door and peer outside and find Miss Georgia looking at me wide-eyed and cautious.

“Who are you talking to?”

I laugh nervously. “No one. Just the TV. Dr. Phil had some whiner on there and I tend to talk back to losers like that.”

She doesn’t share in my mirth, looks at me like the crazy person I am. And I’m not in the mood. “Something you want?” I ask a little too brusquely.

Kelly looks off down the hall as if she’s doubting her visit to my doorstep, but she responds, “We’re leaving in about twenty minutes, heading back to Bentonville.”

“Yeah, I know. Henry told me.”

Finally, she looks me in the eye. “I don’t know if you remember but I had to drive here the first night, so I have a rental that needs to be returned.”

How does this affect me, Beauty Queen? I want to ask. Instead, I politely say, “Okay.” Such a woman of words I am.

“I can return it to the airport in the morning but I checked Springfield and they have flights going out tonight so I thought I would drive back to Missouri instead.”

“Good for you.” What does she want, a pat on the back?

“I also checked the radar and there’s a lull in the rain for the next two hours, thought maybe you’d like to drive with me to Springfield.”

Hot dog. Now we’re talking. Maybe the universe is finally showing pity on my sorry ass. “Yes,” I answer way too enthusiastically, which makes her step back. “Yes, yes.”

“O-kay,” she says like a true Southerner, using three syllables instead of two. I can see she’s having second thoughts about asking me, probably thinking I’m nuts after all, but my instant eagerness won’t let her change her mind without appearing rude and I’m running with that.

“I really would rather not ride in the van with Richard,” I quickly add with a smile as sane as I can manage. “Know what I mean?”

Finally, Kelly relaxes. “He’s such an asshole.”

I nod and smile, still trying to appear as if I didn’t have a conversation with a ghost only minutes before and hadn’t stabbed a scone to death over lunch. “When do you want to go?”

“Five, ten minutes?”

“Yes, yes.”

Again, I’m way too enthusiastic and I can tell Kelly might be regretting asking me, but she smiles and heads back to her room. “Just knock when you’re ready.”

I throw everything I own into my polka dot suitcase, take one last look at my haunted room — sans ghost — and am at my next-door neighbor’s door in four. Surprisingly enough, Kelly’s ready to go, although she pulls two designer bags behind her to the elevator, enlisting my help with her laptop and giant makeup bag. I struggle balancing my suitcase and laptop plus her stuff but I don’t complain; I’m heading home without having to face Richard or Henry.

Once we get to the car and load up the trunk — the rain has indeed decided to pause — Kelly hands me the keys. “Do you mind driving first? I had an exhausting night last night.”

“Sure.” Whatever. Just let me leave this place in peace.

We head north out of Eureka Springs toward Missouri and even though I’m glad to be away, my heart drops. I loved this town and had such hopes for my

new career, so wish things had been different. I strike up a conversation with my co-traveler to escape the pain of thinking of the last few days. “What happened last night? Couldn’t sleep?”

Remember when Scarlet grins thinking of Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With the Wind*? That’s what Kelly looks like now, her elegant curls falling about her shoulders as she shrugs coquettishly. Seriously, the scene could be something out of a movie.

“That adorable cop you were talking to? Maddox? He kept me up all night, that rascal. I would have sent him home, but he was so good at repeatedly taking away my sleep, if you know what I mean.”

No, darling, I really don’t, I think inside my head as blood pressure builds. Silly me, thought my day was improving.

Thankfully, Kelly slides down low in her seat and rests her head against the window on top of a cashmere sweater and falls fast asleep. I’m grateful for the quiet, although right now I wish I had another fork.

The drive through the rest of Arkansas is uneventful but once we hit Missouri the rains start up again and I clench the steering wheel so tight gazing out into the pelting rain that I’m afraid Enterprise will have to pry my fingers off when we get to Springfield. It’s like this for miles and I’m exhausted, fighting to keep my eyes open and alert. After an hour of slow moving along the interstate I decide to stop at the next exit and get some coffee. Amazingly enough, the sign announces exits to Branson and I almost start crying. I grab my phone and flip it open, hope to god that I can pull up Aunt Mimi’s number easily and not go flying off the road into water-logged ditches. After thumbing down the list I finally spot her and hit talk. She answers on the first ring.

“Vi?”

Now I am crying. Can’t explain why. “Aunt Mimi, I’m driving outside of Branson and I would really love to see you.”

“Where are you?”

“Interstate 65, just past Highway 76, heading north.”

She doesn’t miss a beat. “Get off at the Branson Hills Parkway and go left. Once you cross back over the interstate you’ll see the Branson Tourism Center



on the left. I'll meet you there."

"Okay," I squeak out and she hangs up.

It's about ten more minutes up the road and I do as I'm told. I can't remember the last time I've seen Aunt Mimi but family right now — *concerned* family I might add — is filling my heart with hope.

I pull into the parking lot of the tourism center and spot her right away — easy, considering she's the only one in the lot on this weather day from hell. She flicks her lights and I pull up next to her, turn off the ignition, pop the trunk and give brat a hard shake.

"What?" she barks, giving me the satisfaction that I was right, that there might be an ugly interior to all that beauty.

"It's all yours." I place the keys in her hands and jump out of the car, grab my suitcase and hurry to Aunt Mimi. Once I'm inside Aunt Mimi gives me the hug of a lifetime. Just before everything blurs with a flood of my tears, I see Miss Georgia's angry face in the windshield and I close my eyes to shut her out.

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## Chapter 19

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I'm submerged in a retro blue tub of steaming water with a variety of herbs floating on top, waiting for Aunt Mimi to return with a cup of herbal tea. I smell eucalyptus and lavender and other heavenly scents, and the soft glow of candles illuminates the pink walls straight out of nineteen sixty-nine. I'm finally able to relax and sink deeper in the water while wondering when my rural Alabama aunt got so New Age.

I can't believe I cried continuously from the tourism center's parking lot all the way to Aunt Mimi's assisted living complex. I was bawling when we came in the door, frightening the nice security guard out front.

"It's okay Frank," Aunt Mimi told him, holding me in her arms and leading me to her apartment. "She's my niece and she's going through some really hard times."

It was like that when Lillye died, people excusing me when I headed off to Neverland and retreated into my dark abyss. Even when TB implored me to talk and share our grief together, I ventured inward and heard others telling him to give me time. Somewhere along the way, however, those excuses stopped and everyone expected me to be normal again, TB asking for more. All of which was an impossibility.

The truth is, I'll never be normal and it will never stop hurting. As Aunt Mimi places the cup of tea in my hands, I know she understands this.

"I'm so sorry."

Aunt Mimi makes herself comfortable on the toilet, cradling her own cup of tea, elbows on her knees. “Sorry for what?”

“I heard you were at the funeral; Mom told me afterwards. I wanted to write you and thank you for coming but then months went by and I was embarrassed it had taken me so long so I never wrote.”

Aunt Mimi leans forward and those dark brown eyes stare deeply into mine. “You have nothing to be sorry about, Sweet Pea. You buried your child.” At this, her eyes fill up with tears and she looks away. “I can’t imagine.”

There’s that uncomfortable silence that follows people offering sympathy; I never know what to say so I usually blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “You lost Uncle Jake.”

Aunt Mimi shakes her head. “Not the same thing. He lived a good life. Besides, your mom has kept me up to date on what you’re doing.”

I start playing with the herbs floating around my knees. I should have been at his funeral. I feel ashamed on many levels. “Did she tell you I was in Eureka Springs and that it never occurred to me to call you?”

Aunt Mimi takes a sip of her tea, then places the cup on a doily on her knee. “Don’t worry about it, Vi. I know you’ve thought of me all these years.” And she means it, I know.

I look up. “I have.” I mean that too, from the bottom of my heart.

She smiles and nods. “I know.”

And that’s that. Everything’s cool between us and it suddenly feels like old times. I lean back and let out a giant sigh that causes bathtub waves and the herbs float around the tub like flotsam after a flood. “I was in Eureka Springs on a press trip trying to start my travel writing career. But I blew it bigtime.”

There’s a hand on my forearm, a simple comfort from one person to another I’m beginning to understand guides one back into the light. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

So I spill my guts to Aunt Mimi, starting with the storm and the loss of Lillye’s photos to the moment I recovered them and decided to leave TB. From acquiring the potting shed in Lafayette and reconnecting with Henry to turning into a SCANC and stabbing Richard’s scone and waking up Sleeping Beauty.

After my lengthy news update, ending with my last conversation with Lori and how I failed her, Aunt Mimi leans back against the toilet and studies me.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

She smiles sadly and shakes her head. “You never met my mother, did you?”

“Grandma Willow? She died when I was young. I remember her a little, had a thick Southern accent.”

“Well, we are from Alabama, Pudding, no matter what your highfalutin mother says.”

“Why do you ask?”

Aunt Mimi decides to get closer, slips on to the tile floor next to the tub so we’re eye to eye. “She had a gift.”

A snort emerges and shoots out my nose. I’ve heard this my whole life, how smart my family is: Portia and her legal expertise — she once represented a yoga instructor who sued his establishment over intellectual rights of the Sun Salutation and took home two million — and Sebastian who created a masterpiece from SPAM, three eggs, toast and an onion, which won him a place on “America’s Best Redneck Chefs” (which royally pissed my mother off, although she still brags that he’s a TV celebrity). There’s my mom, of course, who would argue with Shakespeare over what his plays *really* mean.

Mimi senses where my mind’s going for she pokes me in the side. “Gifted as in psychic.”

This gets me to focus. “Grandma Willow was a psychic?”

Aunt Mimi grins broadly. “Not just any psychic, but the best in Alabama. People came from everywhere. She made a small fortune doing it, although that’s mainly because Dad insisted they pay. She would have done it for nothing if she had had her druthers.”

I sit up and the water starts rocking again. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

We’re so close to each other I notice the thin strands of gray in Aunt Mimi’s hair, shining like silver in the soft bathroom light. I’ve missed her. Why haven’t I contacted her before now?

“Darlin’,” Mimi says, taking my hand in hers. “You come from a long line of gifted people.”

It doesn't take me long being around people with Southern accents before I step into line. "Well, shut my mouth."

We laugh, until I remember the stone and the cave and those crazy people praying over me. Mimi senses that too and sobers. "I'm sorry about what happened that summer. Your Uncle Jake was so understanding about my particular talents but we wanted to work the family farm he inherited, start an organic food company, and it was out in the middle of nowhere and that church was the only community we had."

"Wait, did you say particular talents?"

"It was a lovely church, actually. The preacher was pretty open-minded and his sermons uplifting, even if he did get a bit preachy at times. When you heard those voices in the cave, you see I had heard them too. But I sensed something more sinister deep in the back of that cave and I was afraid a dark spirit might have attached itself to you, being an adolescent; spirits tend to like teenagers going through emotional change. I asked the church members to pray for you just in case. I had no idea they were going to equate ghosts with the devil."

"Mimi," I interrupt. "Your talents?"

She cocks her head to one side. "Well, I'm pretty good myself."

"You're a psychic too?"

"Actually, I'm a medium. There's a difference. Psychics can tell things about people, read their past, tell the future. Mediums talk to the dead."

"And you do this for people, help them connect with their loved ones?"

At this Mimi smiles proudly. "How do you think I could afford to buy this place? Well, that and selling the farm." She leans in close as if the walls have ears. "I actually make a nice living here. Branson may look religious on the outside but there is an endless line beating to my door for readings, I can assure you."

"I'm so confused. When Mom said assisted living..."

"That I live here? Jesus, Vi, I'm only fifty-seven. I'm younger than your mom!"

Honestly, I never could gauge age and I don't know what to say. I feel the soap slipping around my ankles and I play with it with my big toe while I think

of some way to change the subject. “Is this ‘talent’ hereditary?”

Mimi laughs. “If it is, it skipped your mother.”

“And me?”

Mimi pulls her hands through those silver strands and looks down at her knees. “Now I’m the one to apologize. I made a mistake asking those people to pray for you. I made a bigger mistake not clearing the air afterwards. I should have driven to New Orleans and taken you out for ice cream or something and explained.”

“I saw you all at holidays.”

“But I never told you the truth. And now you’re a SCANC.”

I still can’t get use to this SCANC business and the way she utters the word you’d think it was a bad thing, as in the word’s real definition. I would laugh if it wasn’t so depressing — and I wasn’t talking to the wrong people.

“Can I speak to Lillye?” I ask so quietly I’m not sure Aunt Mimi hears me.

She keeps looking at her lap, straightening the wrinkles from her pants. “Probably not, Hon.”

Of all the horrible, crazy things that happened that day, this piece of news hits the hardest. I want to slip beneath these waters and call it a life. “Why not?”

She looks at me then, her eyes filled with empathy. “Maybe you would have if you hadn’t repressed this gift. But now you only see those who have died by water.”

The bathroom becomes a blur of Baby Boomer blue and pink. I can’t speak for the blockage in my throat. I feel Mimi’s hand again on my arm. “Maybe in time,” she says. “Maybe you can develop your broader talents once again.”

I can’t control my emotions at this point so Mimi whispers something about checking on the vegetable soup on the stove and leaves me to finish my bath. By the time the tears abate enough for me to wash my hair, the water’s freezing cold.

I finish my hair, dry off and get dressed in a daze, then meet Mimi in the kitchen. It smells heavenly but I’m not hungry and she appears disappointed when I tell her.

“I called the airport and have you on an early flight so it’s probably best that

you get some sleep.”

I do as I’m told, Mimi tucking me into bed and kissing me sweetly on my forehead. Again, such a simple gesture, but it provides comfort of which I haven’t felt in a very long time. I want to thank her but that apple lodged in my throat won’t budge. Mimi understands, pats me on the shoulder, turns off the light and closes the door. Thinking of Grandma Willow and how she made us all kneel at our bedside and say prayers before we went to bed, I thank God or whoever is out there for my Aunt Mimi, my angel in a thunderstorm.

The smell of bacon wakens me but it’s still dark outside. I glance at the clock and it’s four a.m. I remember Mimi saying something about an early flight so I pull on clothes that aren’t too bad smelling — I’ve run out of clean ones — and head to the pork source. Mimi acknowledges me with a nod of the head as she’s busy cooking up eggs, then we eat in silence, neither of us much of a morning person. Then quietly we pack up the car in darkness and head up Interstate 65.

“I have questions,” I venture.

Mimi gulps down coffee from a thermos. “Let’s hear them.”

“Do I have to solve every mystery that presents itself?”

“No,” she answers emphatically. “You wouldn’t have a life if you did.”

“So how do I turn it off?”

“There are ways of blocking the incoming messages. You have to tell them to stop or to go away.”

That doesn’t seem possible to me and I tell her so. After a few pieces of advice, including repeating how Carmine snapped his fingers in the New Orleans airport on the way to Eureka Springs, she concludes with, “I’ll help you with it.”

“Will I see everyone who died by drowning?” I think of New Orleans and all the people who died there, realizing it’s a good thing I don’t live there anymore.

“Only those who are stuck on this plane for some reason.”

“Like in the movies, people who were murdered or committed suicide.”

She grimaces. “That’s too simplistic and Hollywood loves to play up the dramatics. It’s more complicated than that. I’ll help you with that as well.”

“Can you talk to anyone who’s passed?” The biggest question of all and it emerges like a whisper.

She glances over at me but I only spot the whites of her eyes in the darkness. “Not always.”

We ride in silence for several minutes and then Aunt Mimi shifts in her seat and begins humming and shaking her head. “What is it?” I ask her.

She lets out a huge sigh and for a weird moment I think she’s mad at me. “She was only five, Viola. Hard for a child to communicate at that age. All I’m getting are images.”

I’m starved for *anything* of my child so I sit up straight and grab Mimi’s arm in excitement. “What is she doing?”

“She’s in a store of some sort. I see rocks everywhere, maybe because you love stones so much?”

A burst of happiness rushes through me like I haven’t felt since college. It’s difficult for me to speak, let alone breathe. “What else?”

Mimi looks at me briefly and smiles. “She’s happy, Vi. She’s dancing and laughing. She’s at peace and wants you to know that.”

I should be crying at this point but I’m too filled with joy. “Can you tell her I miss her?”

Mimi’s smile broadens. “She knows that. But she keeps pointing to the stones, baby blues ones.”

“My angelite?”

Suddenly, Mimi covers her mouth with her hand and I see tears well up in her eyes. “Oh my goodness. She’s with my mom.”

Part of me wants the focus back on my child but I’m thrilled that Aunt Mimi got something out of this “reading” as well. It’s also comforting to know my baby girl is with family. Still, I long for more.

Finally, Aunt Mimi straightens and wipes the tears away and my heart sinks knowing that this brief foray into heaven is over. “They’re good,” Mimi says, smiling. “They’re both so good.”

If only I could say the same for me, I think, as I stare off into the bleak, dark highway as my old friend, that familiar heartache, returns. We pull up to the airport and Mimi pulls my luggage out of the trunk and gives me a hug that knocks the breath from my lungs. It’s awesome.



“You write to me,” she tells me sternly when she finally lets me go. “And you call me anytime you have a question or need something.”

“Yes ma’am.”

We stand there awkwardly looking at each other, waiting for one of us to move away. “Okay then,” Mimi says, but she hugs me once more and whispers in my ear while she does it. “Just remember, Pudding, that those who have passed are there to help us, too. It’s not all you helping the departed. All you have to do is ask and they will come to your aid.”

She pulls away and I nod, message received. I grab my silly polka dot suitcase and laptop and head toward the ticket agent, when Mimi calls out my name. “If we knew about all the people who are on the other side looking out for us,” she shouts out, “we would never be scared.”

I wave goodbye and we both head off in different directions.

After the flight to Memphis where I slept most of the way, I caught the ten o’clock to New Orleans and was feeling renewed and recharged by my visit to Aunt Mimi’s until the pilot called for the final descent into the Crescent City. Looking down on the massive Lake Pontchartrain whose waters knew my home intimately and the endless blue tarps covering rooftops, my heart plummets. I have no home. I have no job. My marriage is over and my career dead before it even began. This afternoon, I must endure supper with my crazy ass family and hope my mother doesn’t ride me too hard on coming back to New Orleans where too many dead by water walk the earth.

And then there’s the opera singer. I look for her when I exit the plane but the airport’s rowdy for a Friday and the crowds no doubt keep ghosts at bay (I’m assuming). I find my car after walking up and down aisles for fifteen minutes, all the while scaring tourists and couples with children with my cussing and ranting. The Interstate’s clogged with traffic, mostly displaced New Orleanians arriving home from Baton Rouge and other cities they now live or work in and the usual hordes of tourists wanting to eat, play and let loose despite that a hurricane once ploughed through. After an hour of more foul language, I drive up to my mom’s house with its spanking new roof and landscaping. You would never know that Katrina hit this house, I think, as I grab my purse and brace myself.

“I’m home,” I announce as I walk through the front door and my mom appears at the kitchen threshold, wiping her hands on a dishrag. She’s not happy to see me, although with all those phone calls and bugging the shit out of me to move home, you’d think she would be.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

I plop my purse on the couch and give her a kiss on one cheek. “Wow, Mom, I would expect something more original for a Shakespeare professor.”

“And I would expect my daughter to care what happens to her mother.” She huffs and disappears into the kitchen and I, like the obedient daughter I used to be, follow her to get the verbal thrashing over with. My mom’s dressed in a blue suit with semi-high heels and an apron, stirring a pot of something that smells heavenly.

“Gumbo?”

My mother never was much of a cook, relied on Sebastian’s culinary talents and the local take-outs for our sustenance. But she makes a damn good gumbo, now that the requisite roux comes in a jar and all one must do is add the trinity — onions, bell peppers and celery — and whatever meat you choose. My mother prefers chicken and Andouille sausage.

“Your sister went to get French bread and your brother’s due any minute. I didn’t have a problem reaching either of them.”

I steal a piece of lettuce from the salad bowl, realizing I’m starving. “That’s funny because my dear twin Sebastian never answers me.”

She turns at this point, roux spoon perched on her hip, and looks at me sternly. “You didn’t lose a tenured professorship at Tulane only to have to commute to a community college in Baton Rouge. I’m teaching English 101 now! At the community college! And the man who did my roof? There’s a leak in the hall bathroom.”

I’m too stunned to speak, don’t even know where to begin. But what did I expect? I love my family, I truly do, but their narcissism drives me insane and after the week I had... I grab a beer from the refrigerator and pop it open. “Sorry Mom,” I manage and head for the living room.

“That’s it? Sorry Mom?”

I fall into the couch and stare at the floor. “New carpeting?”

Thankfully, this derails her. “Of course. We had water damage from the roof.”

“In the game room.”

She stands over me like a sentinel. “It had to match.”

“Of course,” I repeat, taking a long sip of my beer and trying not to remember what my house looked like after the storm and the baby steps it’s taking to bring it to livable status, thanks to our slow moving insurance company. I say my house; it’s TB’s now.

My mom’s eyes narrow. She’s not used to me being this confident. Usually, I wallow at her feet and give her what she wants. “What happened?”

When I look up I find my mother staring at me as if she senses something’s wrong, that she actually cares. And truth be told, she really does, was constantly by my side when Lillye died. She just lets all that self-centeredness get in the way.

I’m debating whether to let down my guard and talk about my problems when Portia enters the house, her belly crossing the threshold before she does, followed by three-year-old Demetrius (it’s a girl, Demi for short; she’s continuing the Shakespeare tradition). When my greatly pregnant sister sees me sprawled on the couch, feet splayed on the coffee table, beer in my right hand, she gives me a stare worthy of our mother. “Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

I can’t help but laugh. And *I’m* the least intelligent member of this family?

Portia drops the bag containing French bread like it’s a sack of bricks, placing her hands at her lower back to stretch. She’s looking for help, sympathy, who knows what, and sitting between these two attention whores leaves me speechless, considering the horrid week I just had.

“I know you’ve been on vacation which must have been so tiring but do you think you can help out here?”

Ordinarily I would grind my teeth and pitch in, appease the family members while stewing over the experience for weeks. Not today. “You’re right Portia, I did have an exhausting week because I was working the whole time. Thanks for noticing.” I look up and give her a smug smile. “I’m sure you can handle one

loaf of French bread.”

Mom smacks me on the arm with the roux spoon. “You should help your sister.”

Portia pulls the plastic bag carrying the bread on to her elbow, then picks up Demi — who’s quite happy climbing on the living room furniture and doesn’t need a lift — and sighs heavily as she follows mom into the kitchen. “Great,” I think, “back to being by myself.”

The two of them are mumbling in the kitchen, no doubt about me and my selfishness, so I down the rest of the beer. It’s then that I notice there’s a box on the floor by my feet with my name written on the side. I pull the top open and find a note and a set of Bentonville mugs.

“Mom, did TB come by?”

“Why don’t you come in here and help us, maybe we’d tell you,” Portia yells back.

I open the note and TB has written:

Vi,

*Got home okay but you’ve probably figured that out by now. Ha, ha. Here are those things that you wanted me to bring home for you. Hope you don’t mind but the hotel manager insisted I pick out a polo shirt for you too. It’s on the bottom. I swear he insisted!”*

I PULL out a gorgeous blue shirt with the hotel’s logo on it, glance around to make sure no one’s looking and pull it on so I no longer smell like I’ve been on the road for a week. It’s a lovely shirt, fits me perfectly and I wish I had been kinder to TB about accepting the graft. The rest of the note adds to the guilt.

*I MISS YOU, Vi. Always will. I know you have to do what you have to do but please always remember how much I love you. We are connected through a love*

*and a grief that people will never be able to understand. For that alone, we need each other. No matter what you decide going forward, I am and always will be your friend. TB*

I LOOK at the ceiling to fight off the tears. Damn that man.

*PS, that cop you think is so cute called me. (He's a bit of an ass if you ask me.) He lost your card and he somehow remembered my name. Anyway, he said to tell you that the groundskeeper moved to Pennsylvania after the murders, then showed up in Washington two months later, so there was two months in between where they can't place him and it was about the time of Annabelle's murder. Does that make sense to you? Call me if you want me to explain more.*

I SIT up and that familiar buzzing returns, although I'm hundreds of miles from Lori and the Crescent Hotel. Did Gene Tanner return to Eureka Springs and kill Lori? Why? I'm raking my brain trying to make sense of this when who should waltz in the door but my brat twin brother. "Hey girl!" he announces as if he hasn't been away for months and ignoring me.

I can't help myself. I smugly say, "Well, look what the cat dragged in."

He plants a kiss on the top of my head and heads toward the kitchen. "That's original. Is there more of that beer?"

I hear my mom and sister greet him with delight and the old jealousy emerges. Always the odd person out in this family. "I'm not going there," I command myself, although it's harder this time to believe it. I gaze into the box to see if I missed anything and there on the bottom lies another envelope with TB's handwriting exclaiming, "Look what I found!" I gingerly open the envelope and find a baby blue stone inside, my angelite from the cave in Alabama.

“Oh my god,” I whisper as I close my fingers around it tight and feel it humming within my grip.

“What’s that?” Sebastian joins me in the living room, stretching out in the easy chair opposite me, sipping a beer.

“Where the hell have you been?”

He looks injured and confused. “Working in Atlanta.”

“You never answer my texts or emails.”

He shrugs and smiles like I’m saying something ridiculous and I want to slap him. “I’m a chef, Vi. We work all the time.”

For years Sebastian was my best friend, my confidant, the jester who made me laugh when Mom gave me a hard time, when Dad left. We shared a womb, then a childhood together, followed by weathering a bitter divorce. But now that he’s been on The Food Network and named one of the city’s Top Chefs by Big Easy magazine, I rarely see the man. And it hurts deeply.

“Know what I did this week?” he asks, not waiting for an answer. “I cooked for the CEO of Delta Airlines on his private jet.”

“That’s great,” I say half-heartedly. This is the new Sebastian, the one that talks non-stop about his cool jobs and the famous people he meets.

“Half the plane were celebrities,” Sebastian says and starts naming them. Yep, there it is.

“I started my new career as a travel writer,” I say, leaving out the part of it crashing and burning. “Went to northwest Arkansas on my first trip.”

“Arkansas?” Sebastian says with a sneer. “Wow. How exciting.”

“Actually it was.” Snob.

“Oh,” Sebastian says, pulling something from his breast pocket, “as a tip, the CEO gave me a voucher for a roundtrip plane ticket anywhere in the U.S. On Delta, of course. I was thinking of Hawaii but I have a couple of friends throwing a party this weekend in Key West. Can’t decide.”

“You’re leaving already?”

He completely ignores the meaning behind that question, that I miss him and want him to stay and spend time with me. “I have to check flights and see. If I can’t get out in the morning, I’ll probably stay a couple of days and go to

Hawaii.” He finishes the beer and rises, points his bottle at me. “Want another?”

I shake my head and watch him leave, feeling my confidence leak out my pores. Funny how those who say they love you the most make you feel like crap.

I rub the stone still lying in my palm and ask for help. Aunt Mimi said those on the other side would come running if I did. I hear nothing and am about to slide back into that familiar darkness I’ve called home for so long when I see Lillye — or imagine I do — dancing around Meredith’s rock shop in Eureka Springs. She’s happy and carefree, as Aunt Mimi described her, but she pauses next to a shelf of baby blue stones. She looks back at me and puts her hands on her hips. “Mom,” she says as if I’m failing to see what’s in front of me.

The image disappears as fast as it arrived and directly in my line of vision is Sebastian’s voucher lying on the coffee table. “Thank you” I whisper to Lillye and the universe, grab my purse, the voucher and slip out the door.

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## Chapter 20

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I'm cradling my coffee outside Merrill's shop, waiting for ten a.m. to roll around. By the time I had reached the New Orleans airport and caught the first flight to Atlanta, it had been close to five o'clock so I ended up in Bentonville as they shut down the airport. I stayed the night in a cheap motel in Rogers, amazed at the irony of me escaping the very scenario only to return and do it anyway. At least I didn't have to face Richard this time.

I rented a car, determined not to care that I was driving up the credit card I worked so hard to clean out, and drove over to Eureka Springs first thing in the morning. I paused along the way at a mountainside diner and enjoyed a huge breakfast of eggs, country ham, biscuits and grits while I watched hummingbirds flit about the patio feeders and fog drift lazily across the Ozarks.

I had purposely ignored my phone the whole trip but over breakfast decided to check my messages. And there were plenty: Sebastian furious that I stole his voucher, Mom "disappointed and hurt" that I didn't stay for supper and Portia fusing because she didn't want to be excluded and oh, by the way, could I babysit Demi next week? I texted the three of them, "I love you too" and threw the phone in my purse, grinning, which made the waitress smile while she poured me another cup of coffee.

"Having a great day?" she asked.

I smiled back. "Yes, ma'am."

She gave me a lovely coffee to go and here I now sit in the still damp



Crescent Hotel Polo I managed to wash out last night. I'm waiting for Merrill to arrive, staring at that damn Hanged Man gracing her window.

I flip him the bird.

A light comes on inside the store but it's only nine-thirty so I hesitate to knock. I peer inside, though, and see an elderly woman in a flowing rose kimono over jeans who's opening up the cash register. She notices me before I'm able to pull back and she heads for the door, sticking her head out slightly. "We don't open until ten."

"I know. I was waiting for Merrill."

The lady opens the door wider. "Can I help you with something?"

Suddenly, I see the resemblance and my instincts prove me right. Of course, why hadn't I put these clues together before?

"You're Merrill's mom."

Now the door opens wide and the woman studies me intently. "Do I know you?"

I shake my head and hold out my hand. "No ma'am. I'm Viola Valentine, one of the travel writers who was here this past week."

She takes my hand in her right, then cradles our greeting with her left. She's genuine, this Southern lady, all etiquette and warmth. "Annie Seligman. I heard all about you. You're the one who saw those poor girls."

"Yep, that's me."

Annie releases my hand and heads into the store, motioning for me to follow. "There's a big story about those poor girls in the paper today. Come on in. I have a copy."

I follow and spot that row of angelite on the center display case, like I had witnessed in my vision with Lillye, and goosebumps run up my spine.

"Are you cold?" Annie asks, as she flips through some papers on the counter. "I can turn up the heat. It looks like warm weather hasn't arrived after all."

"No thank you ma'am, I have a sweater." I'm loving the crisp spring air, knowing that my oppressive Louisiana summer is right around the bend.

Annie finds the newspaper and holds it up proudly. The article states that a decades-old mystery involving the disappearance of three young coeds has been

solved, accented by the manly face of Madman Maddox speaking at a podium. Of course, he gets all the credit, but then what would I have added to the story? Mentioning ghosts was something we had all avoided.

“Cool.” I take the newspaper from Annie’s outstretched hands and pretend to read. I really don’t care at this point. When I feel her gaze staring at me, I look up and find she’s studying me intently.

“Did you really see those girls? Merrill said you can see ghosts.”

Annie doesn’t appear distrustful or defiant so I assume I’m on safe ground. But then what would you expect from the mother of rock-loving, New Age following, anti-establishment Merrill Seligman, aka Cassiopeia? “Yes ma’am, I did see them. But I don’t see all ghosts, just those who have died by water.”

“That’s incredible.” Again, she’s genuinely impressed and for once I’m glad to be a SCANC. Sort of.

“I’m hoping so. It’s been rather crazy so far.”

With that thought, I hand her back the newspaper and take a long drink from my coffee, gathering up courage. Standing before me is the woman holding answers to the bigger mystery of Eureka Springs. I venture forth, “By any chance are you adopted?”

The blood drains from Annie’s face and that affable demeanor disappears. Either I hit a nerve or said an inappropriate thing for Annie stares at me like a zombie and the papers in her hands begin to rattle. I’m about to apologize and explain when the door swings open and Merrill strides through, wearing a loose-fitting dress made of some organic material like hemp and a bright pink scarf tossed about her aka Grace Kelly. The apple didn’t fall far.

“I thought you left,” Merrill says when she spies me in the center of her store. “They said you checked out.”

“I did. I came back.” Why is everything I’m saying this morning sounding so incredibly bizarre?

Merrill looks at me puzzled, then spots the confused look on her mother’s face and grows concerned. “What’s going on?”

“Um.” I start to explain but Annie raises her left hand and stops me.

“Merrill, sweetie, we need to talk.”

Now, Merrill's face pales. "Did something happen? What's going on?"

"Why don't we all sit down?" Annie suggests and she motions for us to take seats in the comfy chairs by the store's bay window, making sure the front door is locked on her way over. Annie gets comfortable and takes Merrill's hand in hers and places both in her lap. "Remember that letter your grandfather wrote to that girl named Annabelle? The one you borrowed to show this nice young lady?"

Merrill glances at me briefly, then back at her mom. "Yeah."

"Well, it got me to thinking. When you mentioned the name of Caballero, well I was sure I had seen that name somewhere in your grandfather's things."

I'll bet you have, I think to myself, but keep quiet.

"There were some letters from Ohio to a James Caballero but they were written in Italian so I never gave them much thought, assumed they were a constituent of my dad's when he was mayor — or something like it. Still, it got my curiosity up so I kept looking."

"Did you find out who he was?" Merrill asks, looking over at me and no doubt remembering what I had told her about James.

Annie places both hands over Merrill's, like she did mine at our greeting. "I'm afraid, my dear, that Caballero was my real father. I'm adopted, you see."

Merrill exhales the tension she's been holding since we first sat down and leans back in her chair. "Oh Mom, I don't think you understand."

Annie continues as if she hadn't heard what Merrill has said. "Caballero and his wife must have been immigrants fresh off the boat and not able to care for me, possible a friend or family member of your grandfather's. Or perhaps it was something worse. Neither of my parents said a word about this my whole life. I never for a moment thought I wasn't theirs."

Merrill and I both know who James Caballero really is, and what he did, but Merrill doesn't want to rush her mother into the truth. She sighs again, gazing over at me for support. "Why do you think this Caballero guy is your dad?"

Annie releases her daughter's hand and crosses her arms about her as if chilled. "I found a birth certificate hidden deep inside my grandfather's desk that had me born to different parents. It had all the same information listed — my

birthdate, etc. — but was from an out-of-state hospital and of course different names for parents.”

“But that’s crazy,” Merrill says. “How could you possibly have two birth certificates?”

She shrugs. “I suppose your grandfather adopted me and somehow got the local hospital to issue another — a fake — birth certificate with his and my mom’s name on it so I would never find out the truth.”

“People don’t do that,” Merrill insists.

“You’d be surprised,” I insert and both women look at me. I shrug. “I’m from Louisiana. That kind of thing happens all the time.”

At this point, Annie turns to me and studies me hard. “The real question, Merrill, is why your friend here knew I was adopted when I haven’t told a soul.”

Only minutes before I felt confident and eager to solve this mystery. Gazing into the face of a woman raised in secrecy and deceit who suddenly discovered her life was a lie, my courage fails me. “It’s that ghost-seeing thing I told you about,” is all I can manage.

I sense Merrill catching up. “Does this have to do with those girls who went missing?”

I shake my head, but truth is, I suspect Gene Tanner had something to do with Lori’s murder. I’m determined to find out but first I need to bring Annie to Lori’s room where hopefully my ghostly roommate of the past week will be satisfied and move on to heaven or wherever trapped spirits go when they are finally released. I swallow hard, knowing I must ask Annie the inevitable. “What was your birth mother’s name?”

After a week in hell the heavens indeed part and I can almost hear angels singing. Three words and my heart soars.

“Her name was Lauralei Annabelle Thorne.”

AFTER MORE QUESTIONS flying across our cozy space by the bay window, I hold up my hand and insist we take a trip. We all climb inside Merrill’s Prius and the three of us head up Spring Street to the Crescent Hotel and a lonely young

woman who never got a chance to see her baby grow up. I'm praying my instincts are correct and Annie is indeed Lori's child.

I explain everything that had occurred the past week to both Merrill and Annie: Lori visiting me in my room, the pained look on her face as she held her arms like cradling a child; my visions that involved James Leatherwood; and how I'm fairly positive Lori's baby was his. I haven't connected the dots yet and I look in the rear-view mirror to Merrill for support.

"You need to tell her," she answers softly.

"Tell me what?" Annie asks.

We park outside the Crescent and I turn in my seat to face her. "I believe that James Leatherwood, your father, was James Caballero, the son of an Italian immigrant from Ohio."

Poor Annie, what a morning of revelations, and coming from a ghost-whispering Louisiana survivor of Katrina, no doubt suffering from PTSD. Her face pales once more and this time, I take *her* hand. "He lied and changed his name because he wanted to work here as a teacher and he didn't have the credentials — or the right name for that matter."

"But how do you know this?" Annie asks.

I can't help but laugh. How indeed? "The same way I knew those girls had been assaulted and murdered. I see these ghosts, have visions through their eyes. I can't explain it. I didn't have this gift until that bitch Katrina came to town. Oh, sorry ma'am, pardon my French."

"It's not French," Annie adds, which makes me smile. I do so love people who appreciate language.

"I also think that Lori left school when she found out she was pregnant. Perhaps her parents were urging her to give the baby up for adoption and she came back here hoping James would do the right thing and she could keep her child." Honestly, I don't know why I think this but I'm rolling with my intuition — or perhaps someone on the other side is feeding it and I'm listening, like the good girl my aunt told me to be. "Why she was murdered, I don't know."

All three of us shiver at the same time and Annie covers her mouth to stifle a gasp.

“James didn’t kill her,” I quickly add.

Annie closes her eyes tightly. “No,” she says, “but he had something to do with it.”

I don’t argue, have always thought the same thing, and we exit the car and walk silently through the lobby and up to the fourth floor, back to my home of the past few days. We stand outside my room and Merrill and Annie look to me as if I know what to do next. I shrug, then knock on the door. First things first, I think, find out if anyone’s in there. A maid opens the door and looks at us questioningly and it’s then I remember what I’m wearing.

“I’m showing these two ladies around,” I tell the maid as if I work there. “They have a wedding coming up and wanted to see some room examples.”

“Oh sure,” the maid says, and grabs her cart and heads out the door.

“We just need a few minutes,” I tell her back.

She waves me off. “No worries. I have several open rooms on this floor so take your time.”

I immediately close the door and lock it, amazed at my good fortune, then look around for my familiar friend. She’s nowhere to be found and my heart sinks. What if she doesn’t show?

“Now what?” Merrill asks.

“I don’t know. There’s no guidebook to this stuff.”

Minutes go by and nothing so Merrill and I make ourselves comfortable on the bed. Annie walks around the room nervously, wiping her palms on her jeans and looking inside the closet, the bathroom, behind the TV credenza as if Lori is playing hide and seek. After another five minutes, I can’t stand it anymore. “Lori,” I shout out. “Where are you?”

Again, nothing and suddenly my confidence evaporates, replaced by my old friend, neurosis. I stole my brother’s trip to Hawaii and flew up here on a whim when I should have been home salvaging my career, if I still have one. I need to look for another newspaper job before I run out of money and I need to make amends with my ex-husband who’s been supportive through this ghostly nightmare. Eventually, I have to apologize to my mom. What the hell am I doing here? I think. I lean forward and hang my head in my hands, trying to still the

anxiety. I'm the biggest fool, trying to solve a mystery from the nineteen twenties, of a ghost no less!

"Vi." Merrill's voice brings me back and I straighten, watch as a mist appears at Annie's back morphing into the face and stature of a young hopeful woman. I rise and call out her name, but Lori only has eyes for her missing baby girl.

Annie turns and the delight that spreads over both their faces takes my breath away. The resemblance is uncanny. They gaze upon each other as if old friends finally reunited, as if the fact that neither has seen each other since the day Annie was born is irrelevant, and I see a tear escape down Annie's cheek while Merrill cries softly to my right.

"Lauralei Annabelle Thorn," I say, trying to quell the lump in my throat, "meet your daughter, Melinda Annabelle Leatherwood."

The four of us remain like this for what seems like an eternity — Lori gazing upon her grown daughter with love and pride, no doubt aching to touch her; Annie absorbing every inch of the mother she never knew; Merrill sniffing as she watches from the bed; and me standing there amazed that I got it right. I think about that again. I did this. I solved this mystery.

"I have so many questions." Annie pleadingly looks my way.

"She's never talked to me."

We both gaze back at Lori who shakes her head. I can't help but wonder why the mysterious Michael, if he was a ghost, could walk, talk and knead me like bread but this poor murdered soul stands mute. One of a million questions I have for Carmine, when I catch up with him next.

Suddenly, Lori starts to fade, although the smile never leaves her lips, and we all gasp at the thought of her moving on. I wonder if she will disappear into the light like Sam Wheat in *Ghost*, crying out to us that the love we have in life goes with us in the end because one thing's for sure, the hairs on my arms are tingling with the love radiating through this room.

Panic seizes me thinking that the ghost tours at the Crescent will continue naming her Annabelle the suicidal coed, relating repeatedly that she jumped off the balcony like those overdramatic ghost shows on A&E. I don't want this

precious young woman who suffered in life to be reduced to a sappy Hollywood story.

“Lori, before you go,” I call out, “how were you murdered?”

She looks my way and blinks slowly as a soft white halo appears behind her head. I get the message, and I know I have very little time. I close my eyes and feel myself drifting away, like I did the first evening spent in this room. This time, however, I kneel to avoid a fall and in an instant I’m back in the nineteen twenties watching the crime unfold.

At first, Lori’s standing in James’ office, dressed in dirty clothes, her hair mussed and shoes covered in mud; outside it’s pouring like the night I left Eureka Springs. Lori’s no longer pregnant but her belly betrays her last few months. James jumps from his desk and grabs her by the shoulders, taking her in from head to toe. “What on earth? Why are you here? What happened?”

“I had your child,” Lori pleads, “and my parents won’t let me keep her. You have to help me.”

James’ eyes widen in shock, making me convinced men are the most clueless species on earth. He makes love to a student and she leaves school a few weeks later and it never occurs to him why? His next words prove me wrong, however, and now I see him for the cad he truly is. “I’m engaged. Judith Tavers, the home economics teacher and I are going to be married in another week.”

Lori jerks back, stunned. I think she’s going to unravel on the spot, her mouth agape as if to scream or cry. James wraps an arm about her to steady her while placing a hand over her mouth. “Please don’t cry. I never meant for this to happen. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

Lori pushes him away, this time more in control, angry. “I don’t care anymore about you. If you want to marry someone else, then so be it. But you have to help me keep my baby. You owe me this much.”

A bell rings and doors open in the hallway outside his office. James quickly closes the door as a mass of students are heard walking the hallway. The wheels are turning inside his head. He’s trapped and he’s trying to figure a way out. Finally, after a few moments and the noise outside disappears, he takes Lori by the shoulders once more. “Elizabeth Hawkins has mono and went home



yesterday. She's living in Blair's old room and I have the key." He swallows and we all know why that key is in his possession. "Go there, take a bath and get some clean clothes on."

"And then what?" Lori is all business now, stern and unyielding. Amazing how in addition to a child, motherhood brings steel to fuse with a woman's spine.

James is surprised at her transformation. This is not a teenage girl who will do as she's told. "I have play rehearsal right now," he stutters. "As soon as it's done, I'll come up to the room."

Lori pulls out the birth certificate from her purse and displays it in front of his face. "I want my baby, James. Do you understand me? Either you help me, James Caballero, or I'll tell everyone who the father is and what he is."

He sees his name on the birth certificate, but he's not playing. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That night in Tanner's office downstairs. I heard it all. I know who you really are."

James retaliates like a trapped animal. "And how am I supposed to know that I'm really the father?"

Lori slaps James so hard the sound reverberates in my head and I can almost feel his pain. A red welt appears on James' cheek and I want to cheer, "Go Lori!" except that this is all so tragically sad.

Silently, James heads to his desk and removes a key from the back of a drawer and hands it to Lori. "I'll wrap up rehearsals early and come to you as soon as I can. We'll work this out. I promise."

I'm now in Lori's room, or Elizabeth's, and the décor reflects another girl's personality, more frou-frou and lace, less books and papers. Lori's soaking naked in the tub, softly crying, when Gene Tanner enters. It's the first time I've seen the murderer up close and whole, and he scares me more in full flesh than he ever did. Tanner's dressed in a trench coat poked with stains that I fear are blood. His hair's slicked back with some oily substance with several dirty strands hanging over his beady eyes which show no semblance of kindness or love. He's on a mission, heading straight to the bathroom.

I scream out but of course no one can hear me and within seconds in this vision the deed is done, Lori drowned in her tub by Tanner merely holding her forehead and torso down by force. He stands and uses a towel to dry the water Lori splashed around the tub in an effort to save herself. My heart breaks seeing my dear friend lifeless in the bath, one hand draped over the tub's edge, palm up, as if waiting to hold her baby one last time. "No," I scream out again, but nothing emerges from my throat, like those awful dreams where you can't speak no matter how hard you try.

Just before Tanner leaves, James enters the room, and the two nearly bump into each other. "What are you doing here?" James asks, deeply shocked for the second time that day.

Tanner throws the towel at James, who catches it and looks at it questioningly. "You reneged on your promise, Professor. You told the police where I was. I came back to return the favor."

Tanner shoves James out of the way and heads out the door. James rushes to the bathroom and cries out when he sees what Tanner has done. He grabs Lori, pulling her into his chest and rocks her while he sobs and apologizes over and over again. I almost feel sorry for the man. Maybe he would have done the right thing. Maybe not. No one will ever know.

I can only imagine that James feared a scandal because once he calmed down and starting thinking, he removed the birth certificate from her purse and stuffed it in his coat pocket. Then he dressed Lori in Elizabeth's clothes and, when no one was looking, pushed her dead body over the balcony edge.

I wake up with a start, still kneeling on the hotel room floor. I'm too stunned, too horrified by what I just saw to say anything, having difficulty breathing. I simply gaze up at Lori as she fades into this light that replaces the horror with something warm and loving. Just before she disappears into the heavenly mist, she sends me a smile that seems to say "Thank you." I smile back, happy that at least one mother in this world saw her daughter one last time.

Once we're all back to the living plane and Lori has moved on, Annie begins to cry. Merrill jumps up to comfort her mother and I rise from the floor to perch on the side of the bed, commanding myself to breathe. My head's spinning but

that buzzing now retreats to a distant hum and I am able to calm my rapid heartbeat. After a while we regain command over our emotions and I hear the maid's cartwheels squeaking in our direction.

"I think we all could use a drink," Merrill suggests. We exit the room as the maid turns the corner, wondering, no doubt, why a look inside a hotel room took twenty minutes.

The Baker Bar is buzzing with people so Annie, Merrill and I find a table in a back corner, ignoring the suggestion of the waitress that we fight the crowds and enjoy the spring weather on the balcony.

"But it's so beautiful outside," she insists, when we take our seats in admittedly the worst spot in the bar.

"This is perfect," I say, and I mean every word. Think I'll avoid balconies for a very long time.

Annie and Merrill are anxious to know what happened to me on the floor of that room, but I'm not sure how much to divulge. I explain that my visions confirmed what I had feared, that after Lori had given birth to Annie she traveled to the school in an effort to get James on board. Tanner had fled Eureka Springs after Blair's disappearance and I relayed what Maddox had told me, that there were two months of his whereabouts unaccounted for after he left Pennsylvania.

"Why, though," Merrill asks me. "Why would he kill my grandmother?"

I turn my napkin around and around with the tip of my index finger, wondering how to spin this tale. "He was an evil man. And I don't think he liked James very much. I believe he killed Lori to get back at James."

"Why did he dislike my father?" Annie asks me.

I shrug my shoulders and the two Seligmans send me a puzzled look. I know they doubt every word but they don't inquire and I say no more.

"It all makes sense now," Annie says. "After my father married my mother, they must have adopted me. But I doubt my mother was happy about it. She must have known why."

Annie studies the ice in her drink, turning solemn. "I always thought my mother didn't love me, but dad insisted she favored Brad over me because mothers have a special relationship with their sons. And since my dad always

doted on me I dealt with it.”

“Brad is Letitia’s father,” Merrill adds.

I had forgotten about the mayor. “What’s Letitia going to think about her grandfather being a fake?” I ask. “She’ll hunt me down and murder me for sure.”

The drinks arrive and we pause in our conversation until the waitress leaves, then Annie leans forward so only our ears will hear. “No one’s going to know about this. It’s our little secret. Okay, girls?”

I want so badly to argue that poor Lori is the nightly subject of ghost tours with tourists watching the hotel’s balcony at ten-thirty every evening in hopes of seeing a frickin’ mist. After witnessing what really happened, I’m appalled that a young girl’s murder has become entertainment. I vow never to watch another TV ghost show again. But Annie’s right. It’s too difficult to explain and it tarnishes the reputation of one of the town’s leading citizens, not to mention his granddaughter running for office.

On second thought....

“She pulled out of the race,” Merrill says, as if she reads my mind. “The newspaper finally looked into that utility company wanting to come in and a lot of unpleasant things were uncovered, starting with a nice payoff to a couple members of the city council.”

“No wonder Letitia could afford that new Lexus,” Annie says.

“Not to mention that the newspaper got wind of this right before the election,” I add.

Merrill grins slyly. “I’m not saying anything.”

The two of them urge me to stick around and spend the night at their place. I consider it for a moment, but when they start suggesting ghost workshops in the store, I know it’s time to leave.

“I missed an attraction when I was here with the group and my editor specifically wanted me to write about it,” I tell them. “I’m going to stop by there and do a quick interview, then head home.”

We down our drinks, toast our mothers — even though mine is probably devising an evil gris gris for me back home — and we hug tightly outside Merrill’s shop.

“One more thing,” Annie asks. “How did you know about me if Lori couldn’t tell you? How did you know she had a child?”

A week ago I would have made something up, anything to prevent me from discussing Lillye. Today, I’m open to talking about my pain. “I lost a child,” I tell them. “She was five when she died. I recognized that pain in Lori’s eyes.”

No one says a word but Annie grabs me and hugs me tightly. After a few moments, Merrill drapes her arms over us both. We laugh through our tears and I suddenly realize how sharing pain does help, that empathy and a hug can ease one’s suffering.

We say our farewells again and I watch Merrill and Annie walk arm in arm down the alley to the Hanging Man door, then disappear inside, two beautiful women I will miss deeply. I get back in my car and say goodbye for good to Eureka Springs.

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## Chapter 21

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I was flying pretty high considering I solved several decades-old mysteries and reunited a mother with her child using my newfound SCANCy ability. Hot damn, I thought driving back to Bentonville, I can talk to ghosts and help them move on.

Once I get in the air, however, it's like someone has shot a hole in my fuel tank. All the courage, confidence and optimism leaks out of me slowly until the pilot announces our descent into New Orleans and I crash. Suddenly, I'm so incredibly tired. And just what am I coming home to?

It's late once again, our plane one of the last to arrive, and the New Orleans airport lacks the usual hum of tourists. I'm heading out the gate along with the other travelers, all of us moving like sleepy cows to slaughter, when I spot my Opera Singer looking lost around darkened gate number four. Even though I'm surrounded by people, all of whom cannot see or hear her sing, I pause at the Opera Singer's side.

"What do you want?" I ask her.

The businessman to my left looks over at me apparently speaking to air but says nothing, keeps walking. It's late, everyone's tired and frankly I don't care anymore. The Opera Singer stares at me, surprised that someone is talking to her. "I'm waiting for my kids to come get me," she tells me.

"What's your name?" I ask and she complies.

I have no trouble finding my car this time and speed back to Lafayette while

gulping coffee to keep me awake. I can't wait to return to my miniature sanctuary, even with its nasty bathroom and lack of furniture. It's early morning when I arrive and both potting shed and big house are deep dark and I stumble getting the key in my front door.

When I finally get inside and flip on the light, my new home greets me for what it is, a tiny efficiency lacking everything from curtains and bedspread to artwork on the walls. The bare concrete floor appears so barren in the light of the early morning, with no baseboards and rugs to offer a homey touch. I think of how I will awaken to a brown-water shower and sandpaper towels gleaned from the sales bin at Bed, Bath & Beyond. The starkness of my post-Katrina life reopens the hole in my heart, the one I left home with one week before. I feel the malaise spreading over me again and I haven't the strength to fight so I fall into bed and don't even bother removing my clothes. Within seconds I am sound asleep.

An insistent pounding wakes me and I squint to see my landlord knocking on my front door. I dread greeting him knowing how awful I must look — or how I must smell; it's now day three in the Crescent Hotel Polo. I open the door slightly. "Hey Reece."

"Hey Vi." It's obvious Reece is working on the main house for atop his clean purple and gold LSU Polo and khaki pants a tool belt graces his hips. He's country cute, as my mom used to say, although it usually wasn't a compliment coming from her. He's rugged and a bit thick around the middle, as if he enjoys barbecue and beer on the weekends, but solid like a bulldozer. He could be butt ugly and I still would appreciate those dimples, his kind smile and that sexy Cajun accent. But he's not ugly. He's just married.

"I wanted to check on you," Reece tells me. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

He cocks his head and one dimple appears. "You've been sleeping a long time, *chèr*, so it had me worried."

I look outside and the sun's warmed in the sky. "I got in late last night."

Reece hooks his thumbs in his tool belt. Now there are two dimples. "You got in late the night before last."

“What?” I grab my purse lying on the front table and pull out my phone. Sure enough, I’ve been sleeping for more than thirty hours. “Holy shit.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

I smile and shake my head. “That’s a loaded question. You have no idea the week I’ve had.”

“Want some coffee?”

I gaze at my sad little kitchen and wonder if there’s any milk, sugar or even coffee in the house. Reece takes the opportunity to open the door wider and come inside. “I was here this week doing some improvements to your bathroom and I hope you don’t mind but I took the liberty of making myself a pot of coffee one day.”

He’s in the kitchen now, pulling out my French press and pouring water into my teapot like he owns the place — which he does — but my mind is focused elsewhere. “What did you do to my bathroom?”

Reece puts the pot on to boil and begins scooping dark roast Community Coffee out of a pound bag — that I certainly didn’t buy — into my French press. “Oh it’s nothing, really, had some leftover tile and marble so I decided to update your bath. I feel horrible that you’ve been using that old bath all this time. When I get to the kitchen in the big house, I’ll update your kitchen as well.”

I gingerly peer around the corner to my tiny bath the size of a seventies closet and sure enough, it’s glistening with a beautiful tile floor, pedestal sink and a brand-new marble shower. I’m so excited at this spa-ready bathroom but at the same time remember my job situation.

“Reece, I can’t pay for this.”

He doesn’t turn around. “I’m not asking you to.”

“You don’t understand,” I say, my throat catching because I so very much want to take a shower this morning in this lovely new room if only I had the money. “I have a story to write on this trip I just took but I doubt there will be any more. I screwed up and my career’s dead in the water and I have no idea where my next meal is coming from.” I pause because if I continue I will be bawling for sure.

Reece finally turns around, arms folded across his chest, eyes stern like a



father's. "I'm not asking you to, Vi. It's what needed to be done. Besides, it's all leftover from the main house."

I shake my head because I know he's lying. "No more Katrina pity. You've been more than generous."

"And you're doing me a favor by looking after this place while I renovate."

I bite the inside of my mouth to keep the tears away and stare at my bare feet. "That's not the equivalent of rent and you know it."

"It is to me." He says it so confidently that I look up and notice the darkness in his baby blue eyes. "My wife and I are splitting up and I need to pause on the renovations for a while, need to spend every moment with my kids right now. So you looking after this place is more important than ever."

"I'm sorry," I mutter but my brain is considering the possibilities now that he's a free man. "Stop it," I tell myself.

"What?"

Oh my god, did I say that out loud? "I said of course. I'm here to help in any way possible."

"Just keep an eye on things until I'm able to work on the house again."

That house is his baby, his dream, and I know what he's going through. Dreams are hard to give up.

Reece smiles sadly and heads for the door, pausing at the threshold. "I know things have been rough, Vi. But sometimes when you least expect it, life has a way of turning bright again."

It just did, I think, and this time I *silently* admonish my brain. I should feel bad that his marriage is on the rocks but I just can't. Something's telling me I have a future with this man.

"Come up to the house later," Reece adds. "The LSU game is on at two and I'm making a big pot of gumbo."

"Sure, thanks." The malaise has lifted, replaced by football, gumbo and an adorable Cajun who gives me hope.

Reece smiles and leaves and suddenly things don't seem so bleak. I throw off my smelly clothes and jump in my new shower, making love to that marble while I turn into a new woman. Coffee is ready and I savor my Louisiana blend,

lounging about in my Goodwill robe that's seen better days but is pretty darn comfy this cool spring morning.

About the second cup I know it's time for reality so I pull out my laptop and rest it in my lap for several minutes before I find the nerve to turn it on. Time to look for another job, go back to the newspaper, maybe find something in public relations. First, who is Agatha Fowler and why haven't her children found her after Katrina. After a few searches on Google and coming up empty, I make a mental note to call the New Orleans morgue and find out if she died at the airport.

I start to check a few more sites when the mail clicks with new entries and I get distracted. Yes, life does have a way of surprising you, I think, as I spot an email from Henry among the spam, freelance writing lists and demands from family.

He's writing to know if I'm interested in a summer press trip to the Smokies. I lean back in my chair and smile. Am I ever.

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## Author Notes

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When Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, my heart shattered into a million pieces. I knew I had to do something to help my hometown, so I quit my newspaper job and became a volunteer coordinator for a Unitarian Universalist recovery program and started freelance writing on the side. There *are* blessings from Katrina, as Viola says in the beginning, for my travel writing took off, a job I had wanted my entire career although being a newspaper editor provided a steady income and benefits.

Both experiences inspired me to write this book, the first in a series.

Most of the places spotlighted in the book are real, gleaned from actual press trips I took to Eureka Springs, plus time spent at the city's Writer's Colony at Dairy Hollow, which offers subsidized housing and meals for struggling writers in need of peace, quiet and a place to write and be inspired.

However, many aspects of the novel were born from my the dark insides of my brain.

The historic Monteleone Hotel in the heart of the French Quarter is one of New Orleans's true gems, with its gorgeous lobby, Carousel Bar and unique literary heritage. There are many spirits refusing to check out of the Monteleone, including former employees, jilted lovers and children. Viola hears children running up and down the halls and enjoys a visit from a red-headed man in the café. There are tales of children who have died at the Monteleone, and guests have related invisible kids playing in the hallway on the fourteenth floor. "Red,"

a former hotel engineer who worked in the boiler room below the restaurant, has been known to show up as well, although offering guests coffee may be an exaggeration.

All spirits at the Hotel Monteleone are friendly, claim owners, more mischievous than scary.

There are so many ghosts haunting the [1886 Crescent Hotel & Spa](#) that it's known as "America's Most Haunted Hotel." Its origins in 1886 were as a retreat for the upper class, but during the colder months of the year The Crescent College & Conservatory for Young Women occupied the five-story building from 1908 to 1934.

The cloud of mist that people sometime see around ten-thirty at night is believed to be a Conservatory student who somehow fell to her death from the east side upper terrace. Ghost tour guides claim it may not have been an accident, but her name and details of her death are never given, much to my frustration. Imagination fills in the gaps where facts are lacking, so I invented Lauralia Annabelle Thorne and the reason how she died and when. All people related to this fictional ghost are imaginary, including James Cabellero Leatherwood, Gene Tanner and the murdered orphans.

Other ghosts that appear to linger within the Crescent Hotel are a nurse roaming the halls, pushing a gurney (you can hear the wheels turning) who is left over from the Baker Hospital days and Theodora in Room 419, who doesn't appreciate rude visitors in her room. Michael remains my favorite, an Irish stonemason who apparently fell to his death while building the hotel. He prefers Room 218, but I gave him a job as masseuse in the spa.

When the journalists are spooked in the book while visiting the hotel's "morgue," I based that scene on one of *my* press trips. My group of journalists were in high spirits — pun intended — as we made our way throughout the hotel and learned of the many ghosts lingering about. We even enjoyed the creepy stories in the dark, dank morgue until something spooked us all at the same time. We asked to leave at that point and didn't breathe easier until we hit the stairs.

Ghosts refuse to check out of the Basin Park Hotel as well. The cowboy Carmine refers to the book is one of them.

Sycamore Cave does not exist but War Eagle Cavern does, the largest cave in northwest Arkansas, and as far as I know, it's not haunted by murdered school girls. War Eagle hugs Beaver Lake and includes signs of past visitors such as Civil War soldiers in addition to its fascinating rock outcrops. It's perfectly safe for visitors.

DeSoto Caverns near Birmingham, Alabama, where Vi first hears the voices of the dead, *does* exist but as far as I know it's not haunted.

Since the book is set in 2006, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville was in its construction phase. The museum sits on 120 wooded acres and contains American paintings and sculptures from the colonial period to the modern era, culled by Alice Walton of the Walmart clan. The buildings and extensive grounds are as gorgeous as the artwork and because it received a grant from the Walton Family Foundation, entrance fees are waived to the main exhibit space.

Another person culled from my brain is Cassiopeia aka Merrill Seligman, the owner of Rainbow Waters. I based, in part, Seligman's store on the actual Crystal Waters of Eureka Springs, a delightful shop that sells beautiful rocks and other treasures from nature, in addition to New Age items.

I spent two trips in Eureka Springs gathering research for this book, thanks to the Writer's Colony at Dairy Hollow. Thanks also to the friendly cat down the street who always said hello on my way to and from the heart of town. You'll see more of her in future books of the series.

## About the Author

Cherie Claire is a native of New Orleans who like so many other Gulf Coast residents was heartbroken after Hurricane Katrina. She works as a travel and food writer and extensively covers the Deep South, including its colorful ghost stories. To learn more about her novels and her non-fiction books, upcoming events and to sign up for her newsletter, visit her website [www.CherieClaire.net](http://www.CherieClaire.net). Write to Cherie at [CajunRomances@Yahoo.com](mailto:CajunRomances@Yahoo.com).

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