

Scary Mary

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Chapter 1
Hello, Leave Me Alone

Mary's steps echoed down the locker-lined hallway. Doors whisked shut as she passed. She caught snippets as the doors closed: Welcome back for a new school year; hope everyone had a nice summer; please turn to page sixty-four. She'd been in one of those classrooms, bored out of her mind and doodling pentagrams onto the cover of her spiral notebook. She wished that she still were.

When she shoved the door to the guidance counselors' suite of offices, it bounced off the door stop and startled the attendance secretary Mrs. Higgins. Mary marched past the scowling secretary to Mr. Landa's office. She raised her hand to knock, but it opened before her fist could fall.

Mr. Landa greeted her with an already weary smile. "Welcome back, Mary."

Mary put her fist on her hip. "Who gets called to the guidance office on the first day of freaking school?"

Mr. Landa's smile didn't falter as he held the door open for her. She rolled her eyes and ducked by him.

From behind the desk, a disembodied female voice said, "I'm so sorry, Mary. I tried to stop him from summoning you. I hid his pass pad. Made all of his pens leak. I even banged his knees with the desk drawers. I can't believe he had the office secretary call you over the P.A. system. Whatever happened to student confidentiality?"

As she took a seat, she flashed a smile toward Mrs. Brown, or at least, where she thought Mrs. Brown was judging from where her voice emanated. Mary couldn't tell exactly because she couldn't see her. Mrs. Brown was a ghost. She haunted Mr. Landa's desk.

Mr. Landa didn't know his desk was haunted. He just thought it was a vexing piece of junk. Mrs. Brown had been a school nurse. The desk had been hers when she'd been alive. It wasn't unusual for schools to reuse furniture. It also meant that it wasn't unusual for schools to have ghosts.

Once, Mr. Landa turned on the white noise machine by the door and flipped his sign to 'In Session', he took his seat. "I called you down here because we need to talk. Ready for the new school year?"

She slouched down into the chair. "No, but ready or not, right?"

Mr. Landa shuffled the papers on his desk. "I hope this year is good for you. What did you do over the summer?"

"The usual. Talked to ghosts. Cavorted with demons. Worked on my tan."

Her answer made him pause. He took a moment to process it and looked at her. Her skin was pearly white. "Well...I'm glad you had a productive summer. I called you in today because I wanted to touch base with you on a few things."

She frowned at him. "And you couldn't wait until after the first day of school?"

He gave her a wry smile. "I did wait. It's second period. I thought about calling you out of first."

"He's not joking."

Mary slouched down further in her chair. Mr. Landa flipped open her file. "All right, let's not have a repeat of last year, shall we? First, no beaming boys in the head with soft balls."

She shrugged. "I can't help it that he didn't duck."

Mrs. Brown tsked. "*You broke that boy's nose.*"

"No spiking girls' milks with *Ex-Lax*."

"Did the janitors ever manage to unclog that toilet?"

"No more threatening to shrink freshmen's heads."

Mary's eyes snapped up. "Now come on! You've got to leave me something!"

Mr. Landa closed the file. "This is a warning Mary, either shape up, or you'll be expelled and that would be a terrible shame, seeing how you've made it to your junior year. Your grades are good. We know you deserve to be here. Try to work with us."

"I heard Mr. Landa talking to Principal Hoke. She wants to expel you. He had to promise to keep a very close eye on you." This was one of the problems with Mrs. Brown haunting Mr. Landa's desk. Sometimes there was justification for the guidance counselor's meddling, though Mary would have been happy not knowing it.

"I'll do my best," she said, but her voice didn't hold much promise.

Not all of Mary's transgressions were strictly her fault. Her bad deeds were not done to innocent victims. She'd broken the football player's nose with the softball because he'd been ragging on her for the past four days. He'd been asking her if she liked corpses. Did their cold bodies make her hot? Did she drink her own menstrual blood? Disgusting stuff like that. The coaches had heard a lot of it, but they didn't tell him to quit it. Fact was some of them had snickered at his comments. When she'd seen her chance to shut him up, she'd taken it. He never asked her any more questions. Ditto for the girl and freshmen. They should've listened when she told them to shut up.

"Very good. You know people would be a lot nicer to you if you let them." Mrs. Brown gasped. Even she knew that was a lie.

Mary's eyes narrowed, and her jaw tightened. "You want ME to be nicer? Nicer to the teachers who ignore everything until I do something? Or the vice principals who always assume I'm the troublemaker? Or maybe you mean my classmates who are all oh so friendly and nice as they sneer and insult me?"

"Mary..." Mrs. Brown warned.

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Have you ever tried just telling those that upset you to stop? I know it sounds too simple and couldn't possibly work, but maybe you should try it."

"Oh, just ask nicely and say please?"

He nodded. "What could it hurt?"

She straightened and dropped her jaw in fake amazement. "Wow! Why didn't I think of that? I'll just say please and thank you, and the world will be a better place!"

He peered over his glasses at her. "Tell me, has what you've been doing worked any better?"

She crossed her arms and looked away.

"Just try it once and see what happens. If it doesn't work, you'll at least know for sure."

"I have tried being nice. 'Please don't call me that. Please give me my teddy bear back. Please don't push me. Please don't kick me. Please stop throwing rocks at me.' They just laughed, and the teachers just watched."

“And how old were you when all that happened?”

She hunched over and stared at the floor. “I was six.”

“Don’t you think they’ve changed by now?”

“No, they’ve just gotten bigger rocks.”

“Now, I know children didn’t actually throw rocks at you while your teachers watched.”

Her jaw tightened. This was another reason why seeing Mr. Landa was stupid. He rarely believed her when she told him real stuff. “They did.”

“No teacher would stand by and watch a child be abused like that.”

“You’re right. Mrs. Haversham turned away when it began.”

He shook his head. He didn’t believe her.

She clenched her fists to keep herself in check. It wouldn’t do to get emotional. He would only make a note in her file. “It did happen. Just like everything else I’ve ever told you.”--Except for the cavorting with demons, the abduction by little green men, and the Elvis sighting. Mary told Mr. Landa outrageous things because he insisted she tell him something. She’d tried to tell him the truth at first, but like now, he always refused to believe her. She wished she hadn’t tried to tell him something truthful now.

He waved away the disagreement. “It’s long in the past now. We should focus on this school year. Don’t antagonize the other students. Don’t talk back to the teachers. Don’t cause trouble.”

She stared at a spot over his head and gave him a clipped nod. She just wanted to get out of there.

“Okay, we’ll talk more next week. Go and get a pass from Mrs. Higgins. I’ll see you next Wednesday during third period, okay?” He pushed himself to his feet and moved to leave his desk but tripped hard over a side drawer that had slid open. He banged his leg and had to grab the desk to stop himself from belly flopping to the floor. His face went maroon. She knew he was biting his tongue to not curse. Mrs. Brown didn’t like it either that Mr. Landa didn’t believe Mary. Mary stood up with an unrepentant cheery smile.

“*Mary, hang in there. High school isn’t forever. It won’t always be like this.*” She knew what Mrs. Brown said was right on one level, but she was wrong on another. She would always hear ghosts and that meant she would always be different.

With a vague wave to Mrs. Brown, though Mr. Landa thought it was for him and nodded goodbye while nursing his bruised shin, she exited the office. She weighed the pros and cons of skipping school next Wednesday. If she skipped, no meeting with Mr. Landa. On the con side, she would possibly get written-up for ditching, and Mr. Landa would reschedule and lecture her on skipping school. The pro side still edged out the con side.

Mrs. Higgins was busy with a student. Mary leaned against the wall to wait. She needed a pass if she didn’t want to get into trouble when she returned to second period. From her vantage point, she saw that Mrs. Higgins was showing the male student a map of the school.

Mrs. Higgins’ voice droned like an old automated message. “All even numbered rooms are on the first floor, and all odd numbered rooms are on the second floor. Stairways are here and here. Any room with a letter connected to it is in the gym wing.” Mary crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Mrs. Higgins didn’t even glance at her to acknowledge her presence. She really wished she had some forged hall passes.

As she waited, she scanned the new guy to identify his destined clique. He had on a loose pair of jeans, a pair of scruffy *Nikes*, and a faded green T-shirt. Surprisingly, the ratty baseball cap required for all teenage boys was absent. He had wavy dark blond hair. The absence of hat, nice hair, and all right looks tipped the scales to Shiny person. Shiny people were the 'in' crowd. They were always happy, got the car for their sixteenth birthday, had girlfriends or boyfriends, always got invited to the party, and were the people everyone else wanted to be or date. The exact opposite of Mary.

The guy glanced over his shoulder at Mary to give her a rueful smile. Mary was flustered by being caught staring and dropped her eyes to the floor. When Mary peeked up at the guy through her lashes, his smile had changed to a good-humored grin. Mary's mouth twitched in response, but she pressed her lips together to keep from smiling back. Mrs. Higgins snapped her fingers to get the guy's attention back on the map.

Mr. Landa came wandering out of his office with an empty coffee mug dangling from his fingers. He stopped when he saw the new guy, then he looked at Mary. She could see the wheels turning in his head. He was plotting something and that was never good for her. He moved over to stand beside her and waited for Mrs. Higgins to finish with the new guy. She tried to edge away, but he dropped his free hand onto her shoulder to keep her from leaving.

While the secretary wrote the guy a pass, Mr. Landa stepped forward and dragged her with him. "Are you a new student?" he asked. The guy nodded. Mr. Landa let go of Mary to extend his hand for a shake. He pumped the guy's hand like a used-car salesman. She began edging away again.

"Welcome to Eastern Snyder High, I'm Mr. Landa, one of the guidance counselors. I'm here if you ever need to talk."

"Hi, I'm Cy. I mean Cyrus Asher, um, new student," said the guy.

"If you think you're balanced, he'll convince you, you're not," muttered Mary. The new guy glanced at her in surprise, and then shot her a grin. Mr. Landa heard her too and grabbed her shoulder again to pull her back into the impromptu group.

"I know it's sort of hard to find your way around a new place. Mary, why don't you show Cyrus where his class is?"

"Do I have to?"

He chuckled and shook her shoulder. It was a little harder than good-naturedly. "Now Mary, I know you're eager to get back to class, but surely, you can spare five seconds to show Cyrus to his classroom."

She wanted to argue, but she had the definite suspicion that Mr. Landa would not let go of her shoulder unless she agreed. In fact, if she refused, he could very well drag her back into his office, so they could talk more.

"Sure, it's no trouble."

"Mary, what class are you going to?" asked Mrs. Higgins.

"Mr. James' chemistry class, room 36." Out of the corner of her eye, Mary saw the new guy glance over to take a better look at her. She would've told him not to bother. He wouldn't be impressed with what he saw.

Her hair was black and couldn't decide to be straight or curly so settled on being a black nimbus glob on top of her head. Nothing about her could decide to be one way or the other. Her hazel eyes

were constantly changing from green to brown, and her body fluctuated from scrawny to plump every few months.

She was dressed in her first day of school finest: a pair of ragged jeans, *Doc Martens*, and an old, torn, black T-shirt. Her wardrobe just screamed dysfunctional youth. It wasn't exactly like she tried to look dysfunctional. It was just stuff from the *Gap* or *Old Navy* gave her hives, and she couldn't afford it.

"Here, Mary." Mrs. Higgins handed her the hall pass. "Cy's going to room 18."

"Thanks." She pocketed the pass and pulled her book bag onto her shoulder. Cyrus was a strange name for a boy. He was probably named after a rich uncle. She walked out of the office with the guy trailing behind her. Once they were down the hall, she glanced back to see if he were gone. She'd figured he'd ditch her as soon as they were out of the guidance office, but he was still back there. This mildly annoyed her. Didn't he know that she only said sure to get out of there? She wasn't a tour guide. She was the most frightening girl in school--that exempted her from showing guys where their rooms were, pep rallies, school dances, and yearbook signings. At her glance, he took a few quick steps to catch up. She slanted her eyes at him. He was NOT about to speak to her. That was another thing she was exempt from: empty, stupid, hall chatter.

He evidently didn't know of all her many exemptions due to her rarefied status. "Hey," he said.

She quickened her pace.

He lengthened his steps to keep up. "What year are you?"

"A junior," she muttered. Room 18 was visible at the end of the hall. She increased her pace.

"I'm a junior too." She smirked at how breathy his voice had become from their almost jog down the hall.

"Fascinating. This is your stop." She wheeled around and jerked her thumb at the door.

"Thanks. I guess I'll see you around?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever." She was already turning away. Glad that she was rid of the guy.

"Are you this unfriendly to everybody, or is it just my lucky day?"

"Your lucky day. I'm usually scary," she said as she walked away.

Chapter 2 Classmates

Mary was putting books away in her locker when a freshman came up to her while his buddies hung back in a snickering knot. With smirking confidence, he asked her if she were a witch. He was a fourteen year old pipsqueak with pimples. It pissed her off that even lower classmen thought they could take shots at her. She slammed her locker shut, which made the pipsqueak jump. When she turned around, she gave him a slow up and down look. He began to fidget. "Yeah, you want to join the coven?"

The freshman shook his head. Mary moved closer and whispered, "Well, we meet every Saturday in the graveyard two blocks over if you want to stop by. It's BYOB though, you know-Bring Your Own Blood." Horrified, the freshman began backing away. Mary followed him.

"Cow's blood will do, but we prefer human. You know because it's stronger. Cows are just dumb beasts, chewing their cud and making milk, but humans, especially virgins, have so much more in their blood. All their thoughts and desires spice it. Virgins are the best because they have all that pent up frustration and need added in." Mary narrowed her eyes. "Yes, virgins have the best blood. Are you a virgin?" The guy's eyes about popped out of his head. He stammered a no and fled. His friends called out after him, but he kept going. A small wicked smile crossed her face as she hoisted her book bag and began shoving her way through the hall to her fifth period class. Mr. Landa should be pleased; she hadn't threatened to shrink the idiot's head.

She got to fifth period American History just as the bell rang. When she made her way to a seat in the far corner, a group of guys shivered and went "Oooohhhhh" in a fake scared manner. She rolled her eyes.

Mr. Holt came in and told everyone to settle down. He introduced himself and the class. A student got up and began collecting his things. Mary already knew why.

"What's up?" one of his buddies asked him.

"Wrong class," he mumbled.

Another boy heard him. "Wrong class!" he crowed. Everyone laughed the blushing student out of the classroom.

Once everyone settled back down, Mr. Holt took roll. When he reached the end, he asked, "Is there anyone here whom I haven't called?"

The boy, who'd made fun of the other student, raised his hand. Mr. Holt looked for his name, and then flipped to the next period's roll. "You're in here sixth period, son. I suggest you come back then." Everyone started laughing at him now. Mary closed her eyes in disgust.

These were supposed to be her peers?

When class finally started, Mr. Holt had everyone fill out note cards with their schedules on them. The teachers had them do this in every class. This was their subtle attempt to get the brain-deads to read their schedules. Too bad it was too subtle.

Mary snapped out of her dazed attentiveness with the bell. Finally, last class, and it was English. Mary liked English, but she seemed to be in an alarming minority. She knew she would have to put up with even more groaning and whining.

She had just settled into a seat in the back when the bell rang. As Mrs. Myers was closing the door, a foot jammed it. She opened the door to allow the student to slip in, and Mary found herself again staring at Cy.

"Sorry for being late. I'm new and still learning the layout," he said a little breathlessly.

"All right, you get a pass, and welcome to Eastern Snyder. Now take a seat," Mrs. Myers told him. He smiled and thanked her. He scanned the class, and his eyes lit up when he saw Mary. He started back toward her.

Vicky Nelson, otherwise known as Hicky, shot up from her seat on the other side of the room and waved to him. "Cy, come sit by me."

He smiled at Vicky but shook his head. He continued making his way back toward Mary. Mary's eyes widened. She couldn't believe that he was choosing her over the cheerleader. Vicky was the most popular girl in their grade. She threw the best parties, knew all the right people, wore the best clothes, had a brand new Mercedes, and as her nickname suggested, wasn't afraid to 'show' her love. She was the reigning queen of the Shiny people, and she was a cruel queen. All the juiciest rumors were born on her lips. She ruled the school's upper crust with an iron fist, which she wasn't afraid to sock someone with if they displeased her. Mary hated her with all of her dysfunctional being, but she also accepted the fact that Vicky was queen. No one would deny her anything, except Cy it would seem.

Mary could only stare as he sat down beside her. The entire class had fallen into a stunned silence at Cy's choice. Vicky's mouth actually gaped.

Taking advantage of the unexpected hush, Mrs. Myers began class. She handed out note cards and gave the instructions everyone had heard all day. They were to fill them out with their names, schedules, extracurricular activities, and anything else that was of interest. Cy leaned over. "Hey, do you have a pen I could borrow?"

Mary dug into her bag and pulled one out. "Thanks," he said. He sneaked a peek at her note card. Her information barely filled two lines. "Kind of bare isn't it?"

"I like being mysterious."

He chuckled and began filling out his note card. Mary tried to steal a glance at it, but couldn't read a thing. His handwriting was really small, like teeny tiny. She wondered if he used a magnifying glass to study. Some snickering from the front drew her attention. Vicky and her gaggle were whispering to each other and were glancing back at them. Mary's face became rigid.

"Seems we're drawing some attention," Cy said. He hadn't looked up from his microscopic writing. Maybe he had freakishly good eyesight?

Mary slid down in her chair to be less visible. "I wouldn't say 'we'. Normally, they don't spare me a second glance."

"You're lucky. I had the misfortune of chatting with Miss Nelson during lunch and had to vacate. I could feel my IQ dropping from osmosis." The comment earned a smile from her. He grinned back.

"Do you have a question, Cy?" Mrs. Myers asked, peering at the two of them in the back. Mary was caught off-guard by the sudden attention, and quickly tried to hide her guilt by bending down as if to pick up something.

"Um, no, Mrs. Myers," he said. He glanced down with a glare at Mary. She bit the inside of her cheeks to hold back her grinning.

As she straightened back up in her seat, he whispered out the corner of his mouth, "It's the first day of school, and you're already getting me into trouble."

"That's what you get for sitting by me," she whispered back.

"I'll remember that next time," he mock-grumbled.

When the last bell rang, Vicky came straight over to talk to Cy. She sidled up to him and slipped her arm into his. "Cy, I'm really annoyed with you for not sitting with me."

Cy smiled but smoothly slipped her arm off his by pulling his backpack up onto that shoulder. He also took a step back from her. "Don't be, Vicky. I just prefer sitting in the back. I don't like the idea

of other people behind me that I can't see. It ruins my concentration." Vicky stepped back, sensing the physical rebuff but then began to smile.

"Oh, so you were looking at me?" She began twirling her hair around her finger. Mary fled. The situation was getting way too much like Beverly Hills whatever the zip code for her taste, and she would rather destroy her television than watch that drivel. Cy looked like he wanted to leave with her, but he was trapped by Vicky. Mary felt bad for ditching him, but when Vicky was involved, it was every reject for herself.

Chapter 3 After School Activities

"So, describe this guy to me again?"

Mary groaned and flopped onto her back on the bench. Why had she mentioned Cy?

From school, Mary had come straight to the park to meet up with Rachel Pillar, her best friend. Rachel always skipped the first day of school. She said it started the year off on the right foot, but even though she disdained from going to the first day of classes, she still wanted to know what everyone had worn, how people had changed, and if anyone had gotten any interesting piercings or tattoos. Mary had made the mistake of mentioning Cy.

"He looked normal, but not overly preppie," she said. Mary knew that she should never have mentioned him to Rachel. She may have been her best friend, but Rachel could get annoyingly obsessed over the smallest little things, and her full attention was now on Cy, and Mary didn't feel right picking him apart to the atomic level.

Rachel sat planted on the ground, dissecting dandelions while Mary lounged on her back watching clouds. At the other end of the park, young mothers watched their children play on the jungle gym.

Rachel decided to give the topic a rest for a while and asked, "Did Landa call you in today?"

Mary rolled her eyes and nodded. "Uh huh, he gave me this spiel about how he was hurt that I didn't talk to him over the summer."

"Now that man seriously needs to get a life," Rachel said. She threw her ravaged flower to the ground.

Mary sighed. "Tell me about it."

"So what'd you tell him?" her friend asked with a knowing smile.

"The usual. I drank pig's blood and partied with bikers."

"I bet he was jealous."

"Yeah, but I'm getting tired of that shtick. I need to come up with some new material."

"How about you become a Bible beater? You could rave that everyone is going to burn in the fires of Hell, the four horsemen have been sighted, and Armageddon is upon us!" Rachel's voice had

slowly risen with every word until she sounded like she was raving. Several of the young mothers looked across the park at the two girls.

Mary smiled at her. "Maybe I should start sending you in for me. You're more inventive."

"Nah, you're more believable." She threw another dissected dandelion away. Her fingers had turned green from her dissecting. Mary doubted that Rachel wouldn't be any less 'believable'. She'd made dysfunctional into an art form. Her hair was a new color every week. Her ears were pierced a combined total of eleven times plus her right nostril. She was an avid shopper of the Good Will. If there were a psychedelic, mushroom-patterned, polyester dress, Rachel would be wearing it proudly the next day, but her father was a well-to-do lawyer, and no one wanted to earn his wrath by suggesting his daughter was unbalanced, which she was—but just a little. That's why Mary liked her.

"Back to Cy. Was he cute?" Rachel bounced up and down, fixated once again.

Mary squirmed. "Haven't we worn this subject out?"

"No. You said he seemed normal, and he didn't like Hicky, which means he's very smart, but you didn't really tell me anything about his looks."

"Um." Mary was getting a little embarrassed. Why did his looks matter? "He was, I guess, kind of cute..."

"Really?" Rachel said becoming more interested.

"Let's talk about something else."

"Do you think he's really cute?"

She shrugged her shoulders to mask her sudden unease. "I wouldn't go that far. He's not Quasimodo, but he's no one to pursue like the Holy Grail either. Anyway, Vicky has set her sights on him."

"Oh, Vic-ky." Rachel's head cocked sharply so that her hair bounced like a valley girl. "You give me the word, Mary, and I'll set my sights on her. I wonder what she would look like bald. If we're lucky, she'll have an ugly birthmark, like that guy—Gorbachev. She'd be known as Gorbie for the rest of the year. We have to think of a song now to make fun of her with! What rhymes with Gorbie?"

Mary shook her head. She wasn't about to encourage this plan for a second because that's all it took for Rachel to rush to the drugstore buy whatever hair removal was on sale, swap out Vicky's shampoo, write a song to ridicule her with, and for Mary to land in ISS for three days. "Why do anything to Vicky when old age will do all that for us?"

"Oh, let time do all the dirty work. The perfect slacker revenge." She began to pull apart another dandelion. "But I still think we should ask your grandma to throw a voodoo curse on the Vickster. Think of all the fun we could have with one of those voodoo dolls. We could stick pins in it, twist its limbs in ways God never intended, set it on fire, flush it down the good old commode, pour hot wax--" Mary put her hand over Rachel's mouth to cut her off. If she didn't, she may very well not get a word in until Rachel passed out from lack of oxygen and then what she had to say wouldn't matter, seeing as how Rachel would be unconscious.

In a slow, clear voice, Mary reminded her, "Gran doesn't do voodoo. She's a good witch." Remembering the time, Mary dropped her hand and looked at her watch.

"Speaking of, I've got to go. She's probably fixing dinner, and I should set the table."

Rachel jumped up and began vigorously brushing herself off with a pout on her lips. “I knew it! You won’t let me Nair bomb Vicky, you won’t show me how to make voodoo dolls, and you always remember to do your chores! You’re not really an outcast, loner, anti-establishment teenager at all. You’re really a secret agent, sent by my father to instill a good influence on me, aren’t you?”

Mary solemnly nodded. “Yes, you’ve found me out. Under this latex, I’m actually a 35 year-old man from Nova Scotia whose interests include polka music, macramé, and professional dog racing.”

Rachel tilted her head and winked. “Really, do you have a girlfriend?”

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Mary lived with her maternal grandmother. Her parents had died in a car crash when she was three. Mary’s grandmother was her only living relative. She and Gran hadn’t had an easy life. Gran was a fortuneteller by trade, but trade hadn’t always been forthcoming. Mary could remember some months being very tight. They’d never gone hungry, but theirs wasn’t a name brand lifestyle. None of this had mattered too much to Mary. She loved her grandmother and considered her the center of her world. She’d do anything for her. Plus the fact that she shuffled Tarot cards, read palms, and made charms had made her the coolest grandmother in the world.

They lived in a two story house. Gran and Grandpa had bought it in their twenties. It wasn’t glamorous, and it may have a few drafts and a touchy heater, but it was the only home Mary had ever known, and she loved it. She let herself in through the front door and called out, “Gran, I’m home!”

Nobody answered her. She set her book bag down in the living room and walked to the back of the house. The curtain to Gran’s ‘office’ was drawn. Mary stared at the length of cloth in puzzlement because she didn’t recall a client being scheduled for that hour. As she pondered the curtain, goose bumps erupted up her arms as a cold prickle ran down her spine. There was an otherworldly presence in the next room. Spirits often manifested like alien air currents like the one Mary felt now, and Gran was channeling it. Mary inched forward to listen in, but all she caught were a couple of indistinct voices before the alien air current shifted and enveloped her in its presence.

“Arf! Arf!”

“What the--?” she stumbled back and fell down with a thud. The voices behind the curtain stopped.

A hand swept the curtain back, and Mary looked up at her wild-haired grandmother. She always teased it up for the clients. She had on her Gypsy clothes as well. They weren’t Gypsies, nor were the clothes a part of Gypsy culture, but the clients preferred she wore a long, patchwork skirt and ruffled blouse rather than a floral embroidered track suit. They wanted her to look ‘authentic’. Gran was willing to wear a rubber nose and tutu if they paid her fees without grumbling.

“Mary! You’re home!” Gran’s face cracked into a huge welcoming smile. She leaned down and helped her up off the floor. Mary was about to ask Gran what she’d been channeling when she saw the client over her shoulder. Her mouth snapped shut, and her eyes widened.

A chubby woman with short, curly, brown hair and wearing small round glasses peeked out from behind the curtain. She clutched under her arm a small, stuffed, black dog, not the plush toy kind but the taxidermy kind. Mary stared with incredulous eyes. It had been a Scottish Terrier when alive, now

it was a furry paperweight with his mouth permanently open in a happy pant, and his tail raised in a frozen wag. It was beyond creepy. Mary slowly turned to Gran for an explanation.

Gran performed the introductions. "Mary, I'd like for you to meet Mrs. Polk. She's here to contact her deceased pet Chowder. Mrs. Polk, this is my granddaughter Mary."

"How do you do." Mrs. Polk hefted the dog higher under her arm to extend her hand.

Ignoring the outstretched hand, Mary turned to her grandmother. She pointed at the dog under Mrs. Polk's arm. "Chowder?"

There was another bark.

Mary jumped and looked down at her feet, though there was nothing there to see.

"He's here, isn't he?" Mrs. Polk gushed, patting the head of the little dog.

"You could say that," Mary replied. The canine ghost jumped up on one of Mary's shins with small invisible paws, wanting the teenager's attention. "Get away from me, mutt," she muttered, shaking her foot.

"Chowder? Are you here, boy?" Mrs. Polk called, staring at the ceiling. The little invisible presence stayed at Mary's feet, totally ignoring the voice of his mistress. Mary grimaced at the floor. She wasn't a fan of living dogs, let alone dead ones.

Gran could see her discomfort. She moved to Mrs. Polk's side and took her arm. "No, I believe he's gone now, Mrs. Polk."

"But he was here. I could almost feel him," she said as she squeezed the stuffed dog. Gran nodded and patted Mrs. Polk's arm. "Yes, he was here, and his spirit is strong. I'm sure that at our next session, we'll be able to contact him again."

"Oh, I can't wait. I so miss my little Chowder." Mrs. Polk kissed the dog's head. Mary had to swallow hard to keep herself from gagging at the sight. Chowder began to whine and jump at Mary's feet again.

"Heel," she whispered at the small ghost at her feet.

"What?" Mrs. Polk asked.

"Nothing," Mary quickly lied.

Gran gently pulled Mrs. Polk's arm. "Let me show you out." They disappeared behind the curtain. Gran's office had its own outside entrance. Chowder whined one last time at her feet but reluctantly followed his body out of the house.

Mary was in the kitchen chopping vegetables while a pot of water boiled on the stove when Gran came back in. She sat down in a kitchen chair with a heavy sigh.

Mary's lips twitched. "You were channeling a dog."

"I wouldn't say channeling, more like taking out for a walk," she said as she walked her fingers across the table.

Mary snickered. "Did you know she'd actually bring 'Chowder'?"

"I did tell her to bring a few of his things," Gran trailed off as she began to chuckle.

Mary's body shook as she tried to hold in the laughter. "I guess his body is a thing, and it was his."

"Oh, if you could've seen your face when Mrs. Polk came out."

"I bet, and could you feel him dancing at my feet? It was all I could do not to kick the air."

“He didn’t become a distinct presence till you arrived,” she commented.

That sobered Mary up fast. “Yeah, I guess that’s how it goes.”

Gran got up and hugged her from the back. “Oh Mary, I honestly didn’t think you’d be home before I was done with Mrs. Polk.”

“You know I don’t like you channeling. Why can’t you just do fortunes?” It was an old argument that didn’t hold any real fire anymore, but she still couldn’t help expressing her anxiety.

Gran sighed. “We’ve had this discussion. Fortunetelling isn’t as popular as it once was. I have to do this to pay the bills.”

Mary’s head drooped. No, fortunetelling didn’t pay the bills, but it was several degrees safer. “I guess I don’t have to worry too much if Chowder is the worst you get. Just be careful. I don’t want to come home and find you doing a Linda Blair.”

Gran squeezed her shoulders. “Don’t worry about your old grandma. I’ve been doing this a long time, and I have yet to run across a spirit I couldn’t handle.”

“I know.”

Changing the subject, her grandmother asked, “How was your first day of school?”

“How do you think?” Mary chopped the potatoes harder.

“Maybe this year will be different. I have a feeling,” the old woman said as she combed her hair with her fingers.

“Or maybe you need some Alka Seltzer.”

Chapter 4 New Friend?

Mary stood at her locker, sorting through her textbooks. It was TAB, ‘Take-A-Break’, a fifteen-minute break between first and second period. Students milled around the halls, not having to be anywhere. Rachel had disappeared at the beginning of TAB. She’d made Mary swear to alibi her if anyone asked. Mary prayed that her best friend wasn’t spiking Vicky’s shampoo with hair remover. Not because she didn’t want Vicky to lose all of her hair, but because Mary knew that somehow she would end up with the ISS.

“Hey there, deserter.”

Startled, Mary fumbled her book, and it clattered to the bottom of the locker.

She turned to look at Cy. He flashed a smile at her and leaned on the locker next to hers. Mary’s mind whirled as she took in the fact that he was there, talking to her, and seemed happy to see her. Her brain was having difficulty believing all of this, but she was kind of happy to see him too. Then she analyzed what he’d said. It didn’t make much sense. “What?”

He crossed his arms and stared back at her. “You know yesterday, after English, when Vicky came up and began trying to talk to me. Emphasis on the try. You left me trapped with her. Whatever happened to leave no man behind?”

Mary ducked her head. She did feel a little guilty for ditching him now. "I thought you might want to talk to her." She ran her hand over the stack of books in the locker as she tried to remember what class she had next. She'd known a moment ago.

"Really? I think if given the choice I'd rather have a root canal without the anesthesia."

She smirked at that. Cy had figured out how to get quickly into her good graces: Bash Vicky. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and saw him grin at her again. He had a nice smile. She liked that he smiled at her, but she was worried about how much she liked it. She fixed her eyes back on her locker. From the bottom, she pulled her Latin book out. She scrunched her brow. She had Latin next, right? She did take Latin, didn't she? If she didn't, what was she doing with this book? Was this what happened to her classmates?

"So how'd you get away?" she asked.

"I told her I had to fill out some paperwork because I'm a new student, and it would take like an hour before I was done, and not even she is that tenacious, so she left. I tried to find you, but you'd vanished."

"But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why'd you want to catch up with me?"

"I thought since you were like the first person I'd met here, and we have a class together, and you seemed fun that--"

This had gone on long enough. Mary shoved the Latin book into her bag, not caring if it weren't her next class. She turned and looked him in the eye. "You are so mistaken."

"About what?"

"About me being fun."

"We made each other laugh yesterday."

"I wasn't myself," she muttered.

He laughed at that.

She looked him in the eye. "You really think I'm fun?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I do. May I hang out with you? Is there a formal application process? I have excellent references."

She averted her eyes. "Thanks, but trust me, you don't want to be associated with me." She turned to go to class.

Cy caught her arm. "Hey, I don't care what Vicky and they say. Don't worry about them. Do you want to come over to my house this Saturday? We could hang out and watch movies."

"And miss the welcome back dance?" She pointed at the hot pink flier on the wall.

"You're going?" he asked in surprise.

"Well, I was in the mood for a lynching, but I guess watching movies could be cool," she said.

"Great." He gave her another grin and turned down the hall. Mary turned the opposite way and stopped. Where was her Latin class?

~ ~ ~

At lunch, Mary sat out on the front school lawn, waiting for Rachel to join her. She had her Latin book out and was trying to conjugate a few verbs. She did take Latin, only during third period. Luckily, she'd remembered that right before she went into the classroom.

Two shadows fell across her book.

"Hey Mary, look who I ran into on the way out here," Rachel said. She looked up and found that the second shadow belonged to Cy. Mary saw it in Rachel's eyes. If she couldn't pry the details out of her, Rachel would get the details from the source. She dropped to the ground beside her and started rummaging in her book bag for her lunch, leaving Mary still staring up at Cy.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Mary said back, but her 'hey' didn't sound casual and friendly like his. Hers sounded like, 'Hey, don't do that!'

"Is it all right if I sit with you?" he asked.

"You didn't ask yesterday," she said and winced. Jeez, now she sounded tetchy. "I mean it's okay. You can sit with us if you want. Please." She almost winced again. From tetchy to needy in less than five seconds, that had to be a record somewhere.

"Thanks." He smiled and sat down by her.

"So what's up?" Rachel demanded, taking a voracious bite out of her peanut butter and banana sandwich.

Still nervous about Cy's presence, Mary was startled by the question. "No-thing," she stuttered. She ducked her head and occupied herself with her lunch.

For ten minutes, they all ate silently. Rachel was busy doing her best tennis fan impression with her eyes darting back and forth between Cy and Mary. Mary made a face at her when Rachel's eyes jumped back to Mary for the fifth time. Rachel laughed and almost choked on her sandwich. Cy pounded her back and asked Rachel if she were all right. Mary made no move to help. When Rachel recovered, she said, "Okay, I'll start. How do you like Eastern Snyder High so far, Cy?"

"It's all right. This school's about the same as my old school."

"So why'd you move here?" Rachel asked in full interview mode.

"My dad's work. He got promoted, but the promotion also came with an address change."

"Must've sucked to have to get up and move," she said.

"It seemed that way at the time, but I'm beginning to see the upside." Mary saw the glance he gave her while he said that and bent her head to hide her blush. Rachel saw it too and grinned.

"So do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He nodded. "Yeah, one older brother."

"How much older?" Double dates were already dancing in Rachel's eyes.

"A year, but I wish it were ten, then maybe he'd be living somewhere else."

Her eyes fell. "Yeah well, like they say, you can't choose your family. Take me for example. Do you really think that I'd have chosen a legal eagle with a surgically implanted stick up his butt for a father? If I'd had a choice, Jerry Garcia would've been first, second would've been Bono."

"I thought you wanted to marry Bono," Mary said.

"I do, but he could adopt me for the meantime while scientists work on a youth restoring pill, and once that's discovered, he could take that, and then he could confess his undying love for me."

Mary grimaced. "Too Woody Allen."

"That's because it was Woody Allen. I mean, the man looks like a total pedophile."

"But the public would judge you and Bono differently?" he asked in a slightly confused tone.

Rachel gave him a shocked look, amazed that he wasn't on her wavelength. "Totally, everyone judges rock stars on a more liberal level."

"Ooh." Cy caught Mary's eye, and they both started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Cy said.

"Tell me," Rachel demanded and hit Mary's leg.

Mary turned her head to wipe her watering eyes. She saw something headed their way that squelched her laughter.

Rachel looked over her shoulder to see what had caught her attention. "Uh oh, cheerleader incoming. Everyone prepare for imminent impact."

"Huh?" Cy turned to look.

"Well, there you are, Cyrus," Vicky said coming to stand over the trio. She bestowed a flash bulb ready smile upon him.

"What's up, Vicky?" He asked, looking up at her, but he didn't return the smile.

"I just wanted to personally invite you to the Welcome Back Dance. I was on the decorating committee. It will be great. I know you're new, but you are very welcome to come," she told him, excluding Rachel and Mary.

"Fine." Cy returned to his lunch.

"Is that a yes?"

"No," he said, trying to eat his sandwich.

"So what is it?" she asked. She tilted her head to the side like an inquisitive bird trying to understand some strange sound or maybe a bird looking down a hole at the earthworm it wanted to yank up and gobble whole.

"Fine, you've invited me. Thanks, but I can't make it," he said.

"Oh come on, your brother said that he's coming. You two can like ride together."

"I'm glad that he's going," he muttered.

"Maybe we can talk about this later." She turned away to leave. Cy shot her a dark glare.

"Hey Vicky," Rachel called, "I'm sorry too, but I can't make it either. I gotta be in Aspen this weekend. You understand, right?"

"So what?" she said. Her voice dripped with disdain.

"Oh, I just want to be a part of the rejection. Buh-bye," she said giving her the beauty queen parade wave.

Vicky walked away grumbling about outpatients.

Rachel dropped her hand and stared daggers into Vicky's diminishing back. "Mary, are you sure your grandma doesn't do voodoo?"

"Yeah, but I got some books," she replied as she glowered at Vicky's diminishing back too.

Rachel rubbed her hands together. "I feel a study party coming on."

"Uh, voodoo?"

Mary jumped. She'd forgotten that Cy was there. He didn't know about her grandma or her for that matter. Her eyes slid to him. "Uh, my grandma's a fortuneteller, so I'm sort of into all that new age stuff, you know, because it's like a family thing."

He looked like he was absorbing this.

"Freaked out?"

"What? No, it just explains some things." He took a contemplative bite from his sandwich. She could just imagine what it explained. Who knew what he'd heard about her around school and from Vicky in particular.

~ ~ ~

Mary chewed on her nails as she sat in her usual seat in sixth period. She kept telling herself that she wasn't nervous. So a boy had asked her over to his house, no big deal. It didn't matter at all. He was just a guy from school. They would watch movies. There was nothing to get excited about. Anyway, he was probably going to uninvite her after what he'd found out at lunch.

Vicky came in and looked at Mary sitting in the back. Mary dropped her hands to her lap. In a condescendingly sweet tone, Vicky said, "Look everybody, Scary Mary is waiting for her new friend Cy. Isn't that cute?" Everyone turned to look at Mary either openly or in hidden glances. Mary did not like the attention but ground her teeth and kept her head high. She would not give Vicky the satisfaction of seeing her squirm. Vicky sat down and put her bag in the empty seat next to her to save it for someone. Mary's shoulders slumped. Vicky was going to try for Cy again.

Cy came in and made his way toward Mary. Vicky leapt up and called to him, "Cy, sit by me today. I need to talk to you."

He turned to her with a grimace. "Sorry, Vicky, but Mary and I need to talk."

"You can talk to Mary anytime. I need to talk to you now," pleaded Vicky.

"Sorry, Vicky," he said again. Vicky's face darkened in anger as she sat down in her chair with a huff. Now everyone looked at her openly or in hidden glances, except Mary. Her eyes were glued on Cy. He'd chosen her over the cheerleader again. It was beyond startling.

He sat down beside her and leaned over. "How are you?"

"Fine," she murmured. She stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. He was doing the same. They both smiled.

"So what'd you want to talk about?" she asked.

"I don't know. How about them Broncos?"

"What sport do they play?"

He smirked. "I forgot that you're a girl."

Mary's back stiffened. "I'm not sure, but I think I'm offended."

"Sorry. So what do you want to talk about?"

"Why do I have to come up with something? You're the one who had something to tell me."

"That was just to get Vicky off my back."

"So I'm just your handy excuse?"

"No, it's just that when I look at you, my brain goes blank."

She raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, right."

He decided to ham it up even more. "But Mary, the radiance of your smile completely undoes me. One little look from you sends me into fits of rapture. My entire universe hinges on your every whim."

She turned away and scanned the room.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for another place to sit."

His hand smacked his chest. "You wound me. All I want to do is worship you."

"Going to build an altar to me and sacrifice small woodland creatures in my name?"

"Uh, sure?"

"Cool. I could get into that." Cy glanced at her sharply. She grinned back. He shook his head with a chuckle.

"Cy and Mary, could you please turn your attentions to the board, or do I need to separate you two?" Mrs. Myers asked. They'd been talking in low voices while she'd begun class. They both guiltily turned their attention to the blackboard.

~ ~ ~

When the final bell rang, Mary and Cy dashed out of school and stopped on the lawn to catch their breaths. They'd had to bolt out the door to escape Vicky, who'd looked about ready to tackle Cy to speak to him. When he'd caught his breath, he let out a long sigh. "Vicky doesn't let up, does she?"

"Not on something she wants," Mary replied.

"I'm flattered, but I could do without the attention."

"So could I."

Cy looked like he wanted to ask her what she meant, but Rachel came bouncing up to them. "Hey guys, enough with the long faces. It's the weekend. Two days of freedom."

"Freedom for you. You get to flee to Aspen," Mary said.

"So you're really going to Aspen?" Cy asked.

"Yep, my dad's taking me with him to some conference. He thinks that it'll keep me out of trouble. Oh, but how little he knows. So while you two losers are kicking your heels without any clue about to what to do, I'll be speeding down the powdery slopes in Colorado."

"Rub it in why don't you?" Mary said.

"Hey, I'll think about you, maybe even bring you back a snow ball."

"Gee, thanks."

"Mary and I'll be able to make do without you for two days I think. We'll rent a few movies like maybe *Alive* and *Touching the Void*, and think of you in snowy Aspen," he said.

"Rent movies?"

"Yeah, Mary's coming over to watch movies and hang out."

Rachel turned to Mary with raised eyebrows.

Mary suddenly found her shoes very interesting.

"Yeah, why watch TV at my house when I can do it someplace else?"

“Especially since at home, you can’t share popcorn with anyone,” Rachel said with a sly grin. Cy returned the grin. Mary scowled at both of them. What did they think they were getting at?

Rachel smacked her hands together. “Well, I gotta go home and pack.”

“Have fun,” Mary said.

“Yeah, build a snowman for us,” Cy said.

Rachel waved and headed off, leaving Cy and Mary standing awkwardly together. She remembered that she didn’t have his number or his address and got both from him. He got her info as well. After a few seconds of just staring dumbly at the scrap of paper with his address and number scrawled on it, Mary said to her shoes, “Well, I’ll see you this weekend.”

“Yeah, come over Saturday anytime, and we’ll hang out,” he said.

Then they went their separate ways.

~ ~ ~

Mary was humming a happy tune as she let herself into the house. She’d started doing it on her walk home. If she’d stopped and thought about it, she would have realized that she’d never hummed on the way home. It was usually dark thoughts and imaginings of revenge. But she wasn’t thinking about humming or having foul thoughts about her classmates. She was thinking about Cy. He was so cool. He didn’t make fun of her, he didn’t act like she was a total reject of society, and he wasn’t afraid of her. It was neat. Rachel was the same way, but she was a girl. Mary smiled to herself. A boy liked her.

She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she was caught completely off-guard by the tiny cannonball of frenetic energy that hit her in the legs. She fell in a heap. She lay there for a minute blinking. What’d just happened? Her mind quickly figured it out as something began touching her cheeks. It felt disturbingly like licking. She scrambled to her feet.

“Gran!”

She came out of her office. Mrs. Polk, who was once again toting Chowder, followed her. Gran took one look at Mary and ushered Mrs. Polk back into her office. Mary could hear her telling the woman that she would only be a few moments and giving her a quartz crystal to meditate with while she waited. When she came back out, she was holding back a smile.

“Are you all right?”

“The ghost dog made me fall again. Are you sure he isn’t a malevolent spirit?”

Gran chuckled. “He seems perfectly friendly to me.”

Mary snorted.

“He seems to like you.”

She snorted again.

“He scampers off whenever you come into the house. Why don’t you try playing with him while I finish up with Mrs. Polk?”

Mary stared at her slack jawed. She wanted her to play with an invisible dog?

“Here, use this. Mrs. Polk says it was his favorite toy.” She pulled a red, squeaky ball out of a pocket. Mary took the ball reluctantly. Not believing that it would work, she tossed it across the room.

It floated back to her in a bobbing fashion and dropped at her feet. She scowled at her feet. She did not want to play with the ghost dog, but Gran had already retreated to her office. She picked up the ball. She couldn't believe she was doing this. She tossed the ball again.

Really, the dog didn't annoy her that much. As ghosts went, he seemed innocuous, but still, he was a ghost. If anyone had come upon her, they would have freaked out. There she was throwing a ball, and it was floating back to her.

She had to get used to this sort of thing from an early age. She'd had the ability to hear ghosts since she was born, but she hadn't been aware of it until she was five. It was normal for kids to have invisible friends, but not invisible dead friends. When she'd told her schoolmates about these 'friends', they'd run screaming for the teacher. She'd realized very quickly that no one else heard the rich, chuckling voice of the late elementary school principal admonishing students not to run in the halls or the requests from the little boy named Henry who wanted to play hide-and-go-seek in the park. She'd learned quickly that she had to keep mum about what she heard. The only person she could tell was her grandmother. Other people just didn't want to hear it.

She threw the ball across the room for Chowder and listened to his invisible paws click across the hardwood floor. She wondered what he did when he was home with Mrs. Polk. He probably stayed dormant or something. She wasn't sure why, but ghosts tended to perk up when she was around. Gran had theorized that her aura strengthened them or made their presences more pronounced on this plane. Meaning she was like some sort of walking amplifier. Mary didn't like that theory because it meant that she unconsciously helped ghosts talk to her when she'd rather they stayed silent.

A car starting behind the house alerted Mary of Mrs. Polk's departure. She threw the ball one last time, but it lay where it landed. Chowder was gone. If only all of her ghostly encounters were so simple.

Chapter 5 First Date Jitters

Mary stood outside Cy's house on pins and needles. She'd finally worked up the courage to ask Gran to drive her over, but now standing outside his home, she was beginning to reconsider. There were trimmed shrubs and weeded flowerbeds along the front of the house. She could see lacy curtains framing the windows. Her home had brown scrub grass and blinds. What did she have in common with him? She shook her head and told herself she was being silly. They were just going to watch movies and goof off. There was nothing to get stressed out over.

She walked across the lawn to the front door. She was about to step onto the landing when the front door swung open. She stepped back surprised. A guy with a passing resemblance to Cy stood in the doorway. He had large shoulders and a thick build like a wrestler. His hair was cut short and spiky in the classic jock fashion. His big eyebrows were drawn together due to the scowl on his face.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm Mary. Cy invited me over," she stammered. This must be Kyle, the older brother.

"Oh, I've heard about you," he said, taking a long look at her. Mary's back stiffened under his sneering gaze.

"Have you?" Her jaw tightened.

"Yeah, you're the town freak. You like to dig up dead people because you can't find any living ones to hang out with."

Her eyes narrowed. She wanted to say something nasty back that would make him blink, but she didn't want to get into a fight on Cy's doorstep. It didn't seem like something a good guest would do.

Cy appeared behind Kyle. He gave her a cheerful smile. "Mary, great you're here."

Kyle glanced back at his brother with a smirk. "So, little brother's going to hang out with the weirdo. Maybe neck on the sofa. I'd wear some garlic if I were you." Mary wondered if their parents would be very upset if she kicked their eldest between the legs, after all if she did any permanent damage, Cy could still supply them with grandchildren.

"With dating tips like that, Kyle, no wonder you're going to the dance alone."

"I'm not coming home alone," Kyle said and jerked his coat down. He brushed past Mary without another word. They watched him peel out of the driveway in a green SUV.

"Sweet boy. Wherever did your parents go wrong with you?"

Cy laughed and waved her inside. When she stepped into the house, she was in the living room. She stopped just inside to look around. Cy's home was a nice, middle-American ranch house. Little figurines of children sat on side tables along with dried flower arrangements. The walls and the mantle were lined with pictures of the family: Kyle and Cy fishing; Kyle, Cy, and their folks on a picnic; Cy in a mini-league baseball uniform; Kyle in a Superman costume. She absorbed the normality.

"Don't worry about Kyle. He won't be home for hours, if he does come home."

"So where are your parents?" She asked, looking around.

"They left for the weekend on a business trip."

"They're not here?"

"Nope, and I didn't get a chance to rent any movies, but we can watch something off the shelf. Pick one out while I make some popcorn."

"Okay." She'd been nervous about meeting his parents. She generally didn't do well with parents, except Rachel's parents, but Rachel's parents were different. They'd raised Rachel. Other parents assumed Mary was a bad influence. It had totally killed her babysitting career.

So silver lining, the parents weren't there to disapprove of her, but their absence meant she was alone with him. She was alone with a boy. Mary wanted to bite her nails.

She chose Thelma and Louise from his family collection. She was betting it was his mom's, but he hadn't groaned and begged for a different title when she told him her choice. That had earned him a few points.

They sat at either end of the sofa with the bowl of popcorn between them. She got as well situated as possible, but comfortable was impossible. Was this a date? It could be construed as such, couldn't it? They were a boy and a girl in his house with no parental supervision. He'd asked her over. They liked each other. He was cute. If it were a date, it was Mary's first date.

She wished she knew if it were a date. It was hard being nervous about something when she wasn't sure if it was happening or not. Getting tired of her constant worrying, she curled up into a ball and concentrated on the movie. It'd been a long time since she'd seen it.

~ ~ ~

Louise was yelling at Thelma about how to get to Mexico. Louise did not want to go through Texas. Mary could sympathize with Thelma's frustration with her friend. It seemed like a lot of headache not to go through a big place like Texas to avoid any chance of being caught in Texas. The simpler plan would be to just go through Texas and not get caught, but maybe Louise knew something Thelma and Mary didn't.

"Worthless women. The whole lot of them." Mary's head snapped up. She glanced at Cy. He was engrossed in the movie and seemed to be enjoying it as much as she was, but that was beside the point. Who'd said that? Cy hadn't noticed it. Mary hoped she'd imagined it. She turned back to the movie. Thelma had agreed to plot a course around Texas to get to Mexico but had told Louise that it was crazy.

"They deserve everything they get. Put'em in their place. Show'em who's boss." Mary looked around this time. This was crazy. Was there another TV on in the house? Was someone outside? Cy hadn't noticed the strange man's voice and that disturbed her more than if it had alarmed him. She didn't like the sound of it. It was faint but still pierced her ears, and it sounded angry and mean. She was about to get up on the pretense of going to the bathroom but really to check the house when someone knocked at the door. Mary about jumped out of her skin.

Cy laughed at her reaction. "Relax, it's just the door, or are you afraid the state troopers have finally chased you down?" She forced herself to smile at his joke, but her body was tense. She watched from the couch as he went to the door. She heard a voice she recognized. Vicky.

"Cy, home alone? Excellent!"

"Not really. Mary's here with me."

"She knows," said another voice. This voice she recognized too. Goody, Kyle was with the malevolent cheerleader.

Mary got up off the couch, switched off the entertainment center, and braced herself for Vicky vitriol. The cheerleader sauntered into the living room with an easy smile plastered across her face. If Vicky was all sunshine and rainbows, Kyle was looming storm clouds as he came in and leaned against a wall to glower at Mary.

"Hi, Mary. It's good to see you," Vicky said.

"Yeah, whatever," she said on guard. She had no idea what the bubble brain was up to. There was another girl with them.

Vicky introduced her. "You know Carolyn."

Mary nodded her head. Carolyn hung out with Vicky and thought the sun rose and set on the auburn-haired bimbo. Carolyn wrinkled her nose at her. Her response was customary so Mary didn't pay any attention to her. Vicky was the one who had her full attention. The cheerleader walked over to

the large coffee table in front of the sofa and began clearing off everything on it. She acted like she was in her own home.

Carolyn stood to the side holding a box under her arm. It was long and wide but not very deep. It looked like a box for a board game. Once the coffee table was clear, Vicky pulled it clear of the sofa while Kyle looked smug. Mary and Cy shared a look and both shrugged their shoulders. They had no clue what was going on. Vicky held out her hand to Carolyn. She handed her the long narrow box.

“Look what I brought everybody! A Ouija board! I thought it would be a lot of fun, especially with our expert here. Right, Mary?” Now Mary was worried. She’d never used a Ouija board before, but Gran had told her about them. They were used to talk to spirits and there was a spirit here who was talkative.

“Shouldn’t be in my home. This is my house. Even Julie knew that. She may have been a faithless whore, but even she knew not to bring unwanted people into my house.” Mary bowed her head and silently urged the spirit to shut up.

Vicky set up the Ouija board and plopped onto the floor at the head of the coffee table. “Now everyone gather round. Let’s try contacting River Phoenix’s ghost.”

“Vicky, what are you doing?” Cy asked.

“Well, the dance was getting slow, so I decided to ditch it and come over here and have some fun.” Cy turned to Mary and gave her a questioning look. It asked if she were okay with all of this. She bit her lip and glanced away, unwilling to say no and show her fear.

“Come on everybody, gather round,” Vicky commanded again. Carolyn sat down first. She was to Vicky’s right. Kyle sat down next to Vicky on the other side. Vicky got up and led Cy over by the hand. “Sit here,” she said, nudging Kyle down. Kyle was not pleased with the new seating arrangement and moved down with a jerk. Vicky retook her seat on the floor at the head of the table. Mary still stood, facing everyone.

“Come on, Mary. You do this all the time don’t you?” She looked at Vicky and almost told the truth. No, she didn’t do this regularly, and she didn’t do it willingly. She sat on the floor at the end of the coffee table opposite her with Kyle and Carolyn on either side of her.

“What we have to do is put our hands on this heart-shaped thingy here.” Vicky pointed at the planchette, the proper name for the Ouija board piece, though Vicky didn’t seem to know that, which meant she probably wasn’t the best person to instruct everyone on how the Ouija board worked. “Okay, now don’t move it. When we ask the spirits questions, they’ll answer us by moving it. Simple, huh? Mary, I don’t know why people pay your grandmother money to contact spirits when they can do it for themselves.” Mary frowned at her. They just didn’t get it because they didn’t know. There were things that went bump in the night. The monster underneath the bed was real. Fear was real, but she couldn’t tell them that. They’d think she was crazy. They wouldn’t know until they found out for themselves.

“Now everyone put your hands on the pointer thingy.” They did as Vicky instructed, and she threw her head back and closed her eyes. In her best dramatic voice, she said, “Are there any spirits nearby tonight? All famous people are welcome, especially movie stars.” The planchette shot to ‘Yes’, but Vicky seemed far too perky for it to have been spirit induced.

“Oh goody. We have someone. Okay, who are you?” she asked. Mary waited for the planchette to move to the ‘R’. It did. She settled back and got ready for it to go from ‘I’ to ‘V’ to ‘E’ and so on. It did go to ‘I’, and Vicky gave a girlish giggle, but then the planchette stopped. Mary rolled her eyes. What? Had they forgotten how to spell River? She waited for it to go to ‘V’, but it didn’t shoot to ‘V’. The hairs on the back of her neck started to rise. The planchette slowly crawled to ‘C’ as if it was fighting against a group of unwilling hands.

“What’s going on, Vicky? I thought we were going to talk to River Phoenix,” Carolyn said.

“Um, well I guess he’s giving us his real name. I mean who would really name their kid River?” Vicky said with a huff. The planchette went to ‘K’ next, then as if in an afterthought, it went to ‘Y’.

With a laugh, Kyle said, “Ricky? I see why he changed it to River.”

“Well, Ricky, when did you die?” asked Vicky, trying to get control of the show again. The planchette moved to the numbers: 1, 9, 9, 4.

“That isn’t River Phoenix, he died in 1993,” Carolyn said.

“Maybe he can’t count,” Kyle quipped. He must’ve thought he was hilarious.

Vicky shot him a glance spiked with daggers. Kyle had the presence of mind to look sheepish, but when she turned to Mary, her eyes were laced with full-fledged swords. “Mary, do you know who this is?” She stared back at her dumbfounded. She was accusing her? It wasn’t even her Ouija board. How was she supposed to have rigged this?

“No, I don’t,” she stammered.

Mary didn’t like the way the séance was going. The hairs on the back of her neck were ramrod straight now. Then she heard it.

“I want you all to leave. Don’t want you here. Julie can tell you what happens to people who don’t listen to me,” the man’s voice growled. Mary didn’t want to find out.

“Let’s ask it another question,” Carolyn said.

Vicky nodded, but she put a cruel little twist to it. “Why don’t you ask it a question, Mary?”

Her body broke out into a cold sweat at the request. She didn’t want to open her mouth. She knew that if she spoke, the ghost would answer, and she didn’t want to hear anything else he might have to say. She clenched her jaw and shook her head.

Cy spoke up, “Come on Vicky, this is freaking all of us out. Why’d you bring it?”

She looked at Mary with narrowed eyes. “The same reason Mary’s faking this whole thing. She’s the one making the thing move. She’s trying to scare us. Leave it to the freak to freak everyone out.”

Mary’s eyes snapped to Vicky in outrage. None of them were as scared as she was. All they had were the jitters. She was clenching every muscle in her body as she tried to keep from bolting. She lifted her hands off the planchette. She decided to share her fear.

“Ricky, how did Julie die?” Everyone looked at her in shock.

Ricky’s answer made the planchette whiz around the board. Carolyn shrieked and snatched her hands off it to clutch them to her chest. Kyle and Cy also jerked their hands away. Cy looked at the palms of his hands in disbelief as the planchette continued to skitter around the board. Vicky tried to hold onto it to show she still had command of the show, but soon her hands slipped off too, and the planchette was left to spell out its message alone.

“What’s going on?” Kyle demanded. His voice was an octave higher than normal.

Cy jerked open a drawer underneath the coffee table and pulled out a pad and pencil. “What’s it spelled so far?”

“I don’t want to know,” Carolyn cried.

“What’s it spelled so far?” He demanded again as he kept track of the current letters.

“She’s not dead. I kept her here close,” Mary answered, though she wasn’t looking at the Ouija board. She didn’t need to. She was staring down the table at Vicky whose eyes were huge. They looked like they could roll out at any moment.

Cy copied down the letters as the planchette indicated them. His writing was barely legible due to the shaking in his hands. Kyle looked back and forth between the planchette and his brother’s piece of paper. Carolyn had her hands over her mouth as tears dribbled out of her eyes.

Now they were afraid.

When the planchette stopped, Cy read the message aloud. His voice quavered a little bit. “She’s not dead. I kept her here close to my heart where she can never ever get away to show her just how much I love her.”

“How did you do that, freak?” Vicky said.

Mary stared back at her. If Vicky thought that was scary, she hadn’t seen anything yet. “Ricky, how did you show Julie that you loved her?”

The planchette flew off the board straight at her head. She barely ducked it, and the planchette smashed a vase across the room. Everyone looked at the planchette and the broken vase in disbelief except Mary. She was looking at her hands. They were clasped in her lap to keep them from shaking, but to everyone else, she looked calm.

“Mary, what did you do?” Cy shouted. She twisted her hands but didn’t look up at him.

Carolyn picked up the Ouija board and slammed it shut. “That’s it, Vicky. I don’t know what’s going on, but I am out of here, and I’m taking my aunt’s board with me. Kyle, drive me home.” She ran and snatched up the fallen planchette and dashed for the door. Kyle lumbered up. His face was so red; it was bordering on purple.

“I don’t want to find you here when I get back, freak,” he said to her. He followed Carolyn.

Mary looked down the table at her nemesis. Vicky didn’t look so good. Her whole body was rigid, and her eyes were locked on her. She stared back. Did the cheerleader still wonder why people paid her grandmother to do this type of stuff instead of doing it themselves? Was talking to the dead still ‘fun’? Vicky didn’t answer any of her silent questions, instead the cheerleader slowly climbed to her feet. Her legs were a little wobbly.

In a low menacing voice, Vicky told her, “You wait till I get to school. Everyone’s going to know how big a freak you really are. You just wait!” She ran to catch up with Kyle and Carolyn, but in her haste, she fell on her face at the doorway.

“Vicky, are you all right?” Cy leapt up to check on her. She brushed off his help and dashed out of the house. Seconds later, the SUV screeched out of the driveway. He closed the front door with a soft click. He looked really jangled. He stopped at the other end of the coffee table and stared down it at Mary. She tried to give him a smile but smothered it when it became apparent that he was not going to smile back. In fact, it looked like he might not ever smile at her again. The thought made her want to cry. She may have really screwed up.

“How did you do that?” She blinked as she stared up at him. She had hardly done anything. The Ouija board had done most of it. It wasn’t her fault. Right?

“Vicky told me to ask a question, so I did,” she said as she got up. “I can’t help it if you didn’t contact River ‘freaking’ Phoenix.”

“Mary, how did you do that?” he repeated.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she said more to herself than in answer to Cy.

She went for her coat. He grabbed her arm, stopping her. Their eyes locked. She searched for any glimmer that he believed her, but all she found was anger, anxiety, and something else that made her flinch. She lowered her eyes and murmured in a small voice, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

He dropped her arm. “How can you lie like that?” Her mouth fell open. “I admit I wasn’t thrilled when those three showed up, but you didn’t have to scare the bejesus out of them like that!”

She picked up her fallen coat and shrugged it on. “Like I said, I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I’m sorry.”

“What?” he snapped. She winced. “How did you do it anyway? Is it some trick your grandma taught you? Is this how you and Rachel get your kicks on a Saturday night? You go and scare people out of their wits? Huh?”

She didn’t answer. She was too angry to answer. She was mad that the evening had happened. She was mad that Vicky had appeared. She was mad about the séance. She was mad that she’d opened her big fat mouth. She was mad that he was mad at her. She was mad that he’d found out the truth about her and like everyone else hated her for it. She was mad that she was a freak.

“Mary!” he yelled. He wanted an answer.

She looked back at him. She wasn’t crying. That was a small relief.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated and slipped out the front door.

Chapter 6 Dealing

When she got home, Mary went straight to her room. Gran was asleep in front of the TV, so it was easy for her to tiptoe by and not have to explain why she had tear tracks down her face.

Gran tapped on her door the next morning. "Are you feeling all right, dear?" Mary groaned and burrowed deeper into her covers. It was late in the morning, well past when she usually got up. She'd been hiding in hope that the day would go by without having to deal with anything. Gran let herself in and stood at the end of the bed. Mary blocked her out until the old woman grabbed the comforter and jerked it off.

Mary sat up and tried to grab the comforter back. "I'm not feeling well."

Gran held onto the bedding with a vice like grip. "Maybe if you got up, you'd feel better."

"Nuhuh," she said. She gave up on the tug-of-war for the comforter and curled up tight in the bed sheet.

"Get up."

"Don't wanna."

"Get up."

Mary cracked open one eye and looked down at the end of her bed. Gran stood there with legs splayed and fists on hips. Her steel gray hair was pulled back into a sloppy bun, and she had her apron on. Sunday was not a day of rest in the Dubont/Hellick household. Gran did most of her housework on Sunday and expected Mary to help. Mary just wanted to wallow, but she wouldn't be able to do it her bed. She quickly came up with a ruse.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock."

She shot out of bed and started scrambling for clothes. "Oh man, I'm late. I've got to go."

"Go where?" Mary glanced at her. She knew Rachel was out of town. She had to think of something fast.

"I have to go to Cy's. We're partners on an English project."

"I'll drive you over." She froze with one shoe on.

"It's okay. I can walk."

"That'll just make you later. I'll drive you over." She risked another look at her grandmother to see if she knew she was lying, but Gran had turned her back to begin picking up things around her room. She finished putting her shoes on and stood up.

"Okay, thanks." She grabbed her book bag and stood.

"I'll get my keys." Mary nodded and made her way to the station wagon. This was what happened when she lied to Gran. She felt awful and got into trouble, even when she wasn't caught. The drive over was quiet. She was scrambling for a plan, but nothing was coming to her. This was going to be bad. All she could do was brace herself.

"I'll walk home," she said as she got out of the car.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded and closed the car door. She waited for her to pull away, but the car stayed there idling. She was waiting for her to go up to the house. To see her safely inside.

She walked across the yard up to the door. She felt cold, and she was sweating. This was bad. What had she been thinking? She went up to the door and knocked. What if Kyle answered the door? Mary glanced back at the station wagon still at the curb.

The door opened while her head was still turned. "What are you doing here?"

Mary turned back. "Hi." With a few jaunty beeps, the station wagon pulled away. Mary turned and waved. She was smiling, but it was another lie.

"Was that your grandma?"

"Yeah, she drove me over."

"What, to apologize?"

"No, I told her we had to work on an English project together."

"But you're here to apologize, right?"

"Not really."

"Then why are you here?"

"I wanted to get out of doing chores?" Yes, this was going well.

He shook his head. "And you thought you could just come over here and hide out like last night didn't happen?"

"No, I wasn't thinking. I didn't think she'd insist on driving me over. I wouldn't be here otherwise."

"So you lied to your grandmother. My picture of you just keeps changing."

"Look, I'm sorry for just showing up, but we do need to talk. Last night was a big mistake, but we have to deal with it."

"Deal with it? Us? No, it was your mistake. You scared everybody. You did it on purpose, and it wasn't cool."

"But I didn't do it on purpose. I mean, yeah, I asked Ricky a really bad question, which I shouldn't have, but--"

He threw up his hands to stop her. "I cannot believe you. You're still going on with the hoax? With me?"

"What? It wasn't a hoax. Your house is--"

He slammed the door in her face.

"Cy!" She banged on the door. "I can explain!"

"Go away!"

"It wasn't a prank! I swear!"

He jerked the door back open. "Shut up! This is my home. You're messing with my home--The place where my folks sleep at night, and you're trying to ruin it with your ghost talk. Go away. We don't know each other anymore." He slammed the door again.

"Cy!" she shouted, but there was no response.

She stepped off the doorstep with wobbly legs. He wasn't going to listen to her. He wasn't going to let her explain. He didn't want to hear.

Mary walked to the park and lay on a bench until the sun was low. She didn't think. She didn't cry. Those weren't tears she wiped off her face.

When she went home, Gran was busy reading Tarot cards for some giggling college girls. Mary fixed herself a bite to eat and stayed in her room. Gran called up to her and asked her if she needed anything. She called down that she didn't. She must've sounded normal because Gran didn't come up to check on her, but she didn't look normal. For some reason, her eyes were red and puffy.

Monday came, and Mary got up early and slipped out of the house before Gran was dressed. She was avoiding her. If she didn't know what had happened, then nothing was wrong. She walked slowly to school so she would arrive late. She was not going to spend a minute longer than she had to there. She slipped into class quietly, but as soon as everyone saw her, they began whispering. She murmured an apology to the teacher and took her seat. Those around her either moved or made it very clear that they didn't want her near them. She stared down at her textbook as the teacher droned about parallelograms. A piece of paper floated to rest in front of her desk. On it was written, 'What rhymes with "bitch"?' She stared down at it and wondered when the burning at the stake was scheduled.

Her day didn't improve as it progressed. Everyone gave her a wide berth in the halls, and conversations were cut short as soon as she was spotted. She walked in a bubble of silence and loneliness that entire day. Rachel was still in Aspen, the lucky dog, but without her, she didn't have a single living soul to talk to.

When the last class of the day finally came, Mary wasn't eagerly anticipating it. She was dreading it. She got to class early and sat in the far corner. Everyone took her hint and sat several seats away from her. The room filled up quickly. She watched Vicky take a seat on the other side of the room, but before she sat down, she scanned the class and found her. She gave Mary a cool once over then sat down. She put her books on the seat beside her. Mary didn't need a ghost to tell her who that seat was for.

A second before the tardy bell rang, Cy arrived. Vicky didn't even need to call to him. He walked straight over to her and took the saved seat. Mrs. Myers handed out a worksheet for the class to do. For twenty minutes, Mary worked on it diligently but distractedly. After the second time that she had to erase what she'd written, she looked up, and her eyes went to Cy. Vicky was saying something to him, and he was nodding his head. She saw him sigh and glance away. The only place his eyes could go was to her side of the room. Their eyes met for a second. He looked away without a reaction. She realized with a sickening gulp that Cy wasn't sitting with Vicky because he wanted to but because he wanted to stay as far away from her as possible. That hurt.

She scribbled some nonsense onto the worksheet and looked at the clock. Another twenty-five minutes until this torture was over. She didn't know if she could survive another twenty-five seconds.

When the last bell rang, Mary hurriedly collected her things, but Vicky wasn't going to let her escape without one last pass over the flames. "Hey, you're coming over tonight, right? I could really use a little tutoring."

"Yeah, I'm not doing anything else," he replied without any feeling. Vicky caught her gaze and smiled triumphantly. Her friends took the cue and snickered together. Mary left the classroom without a backward glance.

She arrived home in record time, too upset by Cy and Vicky to think about dawdling. Gran was waiting for her in the living room when she opened the door. She stopped short when she saw her. "Don't you have an appointment this afternoon?"

"And good afternoon to you too. Mrs. Polk cancelled. How was your day at school, dear?"

"I have homework to do," she mumbled.

"Sit."

She looked at the couch. That was the last spot she wanted to be. Staying in class and letting Vicky lord it over her some more was preferable to this. Gran pointed at the spot beside her. There was no getting out of this. Her heels dragged as she moved over to the couch. She sat down but couldn't face Gran. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to go up to her room and listen to loud, angry music. She hunched over and stared at the floor.

Gran reached out and ran her hand down her back, right over her spine. Unable to stop herself, her back uncurled, and she leaned into the sofa's back. A small puff of annoyance escaped her lips. She wished that trick didn't work on her. Gran didn't pay any mind to her irritation. Instead she began

to softly comb the back of Mary's hair with her hand. It was soothing, but Mary didn't want soothing. She wanted to be miserable.

"What's wrong? You've been down in the dumps lately. Was there a problem at school? Did you and Cy have a fight?"

"Yeah, and now he knows what a freak I am and has wisely decided that hanging out with me would be detrimental to his mental, social, and physical health."

"What in the world happened? He sounded like such a nice boy, nothing like most of the children around here."

She crumbled. He had been nice. He'd been cool and funny and he'd like her. Large tears welled up in her eyes.

"What happened?" Gran put her arm around her and plucked a few tissues from the box on the coffee table. Mary leaned into her and let the tears slip. Gran rubbed her back and murmured soothing words as she quietly hiccupped as she cried. Gran dabbed her face.

"Honey, tell Grandma," she said.

She leaned back and looked at the ceiling. She took a deep breath to collect herself. "I heard a ghost in his house." She didn't want to tell the story. It made her sick when she thought about it now, but Gran would at least understand.

Gran squeezed her shoulders to give reassurance. "Did you tell him about it? Did that upset him? I've told you that those who don't believe in the spirits wouldn't understand your gift."

She shook her head and sat up. "No, I didn't tell him that there was a ghost in his house. It was worse. We were watching a movie when Kyle, Cy's older brother, showed up with two girls from school. One of them was Vicky. They'd brought a Ouija board with them, and Vicky wanted to have a séance. I'd heard the ghost before they arrived. I knew he was trouble, but I didn't want to leave Cy alone to deal with them. They set up the Ouija board and started asking questions, and the ghost answered. He scared everyone, but Vicky thought I was tricking them. So to call me out, she told me to ask it a question, so I did. I asked him bad questions. Questions to make him angry."

"Mary, why didn't you just leave?"

"Because it was Vicky. She's always made fun of me and picked on me as if I didn't have enough problems. I'm sorry, Gran, but I had to give them a little taste of what I go through. I just wish Cy hadn't been there." She started to hiccup again. "I scared him, Gran, and now he doesn't want to be around me anymore."

Gran tried to comfort her, but she felt too guilty to be soothed. She finally sent her up to her room with a glass of warm milk and told her everything would be better the next day. Mary drank the milk and fell asleep quickly. She slept like she wished the dead would.

The next morning, Mary woke feeling somewhat better. Better being she didn't want to move to the middle of nowhere like North Dakota and raise emus. She wouldn't mind though spending the whole day curled in a ball with all of her bedding tightly wrapped around her, but she knew she had to go to school. She went down to the kitchen and found Gran puttering around making breakfast. "Sleep well, dear?"

"I slept."

Gran reached out and felt her cheek and forehead. "You look a little pale. Would you like to stay home today? I could call the school and excuse you."

She shrugged off the comforting hand. "No, I'm going. Like they say, today's the first day of the rest of my terrible life."

"Things will get better." She put a cereal bowl and the milk down in front of her.

"Yeah, after I'm dead."

"You have to be more optimistic. Things are never as bad as they appear."

"I wish you were right, Gran."

When she said good-bye, Gran told her to be brave. Mary wished she could, but she just felt numb.

~ ~ ~

She was eating alone on the school lawn when someone bopped her on the back of the head. "What's this I hear about the dead being raised at Cy's house?"

Rachel was back. She smiled weakly at her. "All you hear is true."

"What? Did you really work some mojo?"

"Yeah, but I had some help from Vicky."

Rachel sank to the ground across from her. "What happened?" She gave her an abbreviated version. She'd told Rachel years ago about her ability, and her friend had accepted it. Rachel had even said she thought Mary was cooler for her ability. She hadn't thought so, but she had sealed her place as her best friend with the statement.

Rachel let out a deep breath. "Man, I leave for a long weekend and look what happens."

"Yeah, you should've been there. It was a blast."

"So he's avoiding you?" she asked still digesting what she had been told.

"Yep. Can't blame him, really. Weirdness seems to follow me around."

Rachel shook her head. "Weirdness didn't follow you to Cy's house. Weirdness was already there."

"Nice of me to point it out though."

"So he's totally avoiding you?" she said, making a sweeping motion with her hand.

"Avoiding me so much, he's tutoring Vicky."

"That sucks."

She laughed hollowly. "That's my life."

"It sounds to me like you need an ego boost."

"What I need is a lobotomy."

"We'll deal with Vicky later," Rachel joked. Mary tried to smile back, but she was running out of smiles. Rachel looked at her in concern. "Mary, don't beat yourself up about this. If Cy is really a good guy, he'll come back to you. This isn't your fault."

"I don't know, Rach. I mean, if I hadn't spoken up during that stupid séance, he would be here now, eating lunch with us."

"You can't think like that. Like my mom says, 'If's don't make a bit of difference.'"

“If you say so.”

“What do you think about this ghost?”

“He’s mean, angry, and violent.”

“Have you told Cy that?”

“I tried. He doesn’t believe that there is a ghost, and he doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“We could find proof to convince him. This guy’s a ghost AKA a dead guy, which means he was once a live guy. In 1994. It shouldn’t be hard to find his obituary, right?”

She tilted her head back. Did she really want to get involved any further with Cy and his haunted house? He’d been so nice to her at first. He’d wanted to be her friend. That was until she showed him there was a ghost in his house. She didn’t really blame him for freaking. She’d freaked a little herself. But he hadn’t even given her a chance to explain. She still kind of liked him. What if by trying to help him, she made him hate her more? That question made her pause. She wanted him to like her again, but he didn’t believe in ghosts, and if she got rid of the ghost in his house, that wouldn’t mean anything to him. Right?

She was getting a headache from her internal debating. She remembered the motto of her favorite middle school math teacher, ‘Keep it simple, stupid.’ Helping people was right. She should help Cy, even if he didn’t want it or thought he needed help. Glad that she finally had it figured out, she said, “Okay, we’ll go to the public library after school. You’re right. Ricky’s obituary shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

Chapter 7

Scary Mary, Investigations

“I know this was my idea, but I take it back. This was a stupid idea,” Rachel said. She unloaded her fifth roll of microfilm and jammed it back into its box. Mary was sitting at the other microfilm reader. She was on her sixth roll.

“No, it was a good idea. You’re just tired.”

They were in the basement of the Snyder Public Library in the microfilm section. The Snyder Daily was only on microfilm. They hadn’t gotten around to digitizing it yet, much to the two girls’ dismay. After the reference librarian had shown them how to work the readers, Rachel and Mary had gotten to work. So far, it had been a long and boring process.

“I am tired, which means it’s time for a break,” Rachel said. “Want to get something to eat?”

“No, I want to keep working.”

“Come on, we’ve been at this for two hours. Your eyes are going to shrivel up like prunes if you don’t take a break.”

“Now I’m hungry.” Mary shook her head. “No, I want to stay here. You go and take a break. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“OK. Do you want me to bring you back anything?”

“No, go on.”

“Mary-” She tried again.

Mary waved her off. “Go. The sooner you leave, the sooner you’ll get back.” Rachel nodded and went towards the stairs.

Mary turned back to the microfilm machine and began scrolling through the pages. In the March 23, 1994 issue, she found a brief obituary for Richard ‘Ricky’ Moore. She looked through the rest of the paper and found the news story on the second page of the local section of the paper. “Hello, Mr. Psychopath AKA Ricky,” she whispered to herself as she began to read the article.

‘Tragedy struck a small home on Berkmore Street last night around nine o’clock. Neighbors called police when they heard a series of gunshots from the white ranch house. When police arrived on the scene, they found the bodies of Richard and Julie Moore. Detectives say that it appears Richard Moore shot Julie, his wife of four years, twice in the chest and once in the head before turning the gun on himself. Neighbors said the shooting horrified them but that it did not necessarily surprise them. Police had been called to the home several times before that night due to noise complaints caused by violent arguments between the couple. Investigators speculated that the couple wasn’t happy and that the husband may have been abusive, but no charges had ever been filed. Police were not offering any conclusions as to why Moore may have killed his wife and himself. No suicide note was found.’

The article wasn’t that encouraging. It only gave her the basic story of what had happened, but it was proof for Cy, to show him that she wasn’t making this up. He did have a ghost in his house. She searched through later issues for a follow up on the murder/suicide but didn’t find anything. The newspaper must have thought the story was done.

She began putting away the boxes of microfilm. As she was shutting the drawer, a box of microfilm popped out and dropped to the floor. She bent to pick up the box. When she had the box in her hand, a soft voice whispered, “*May 5th, 1995, section B, page 2.*”

“Thanks, Mr. Fletcher, but I found what I needed.” She put the box back, but it popped out again as she tried to close the drawer.

“Did you hear me, Mr. Fletcher? I said I found what I needed.” Mary picked up the box again, but as she moved to put the box back for the third time, the drawer slammed shut.

“Mr. Fletcher!”

“*Shhhhhhhhh!*”

The reference librarian stuck her head around the corner to check on her. Mary waved her hand as if she’d caught it in the drawer. “Sorry,” she mouthed. The reference librarian nodded and went back to her desk.

Mary sat back down at the microfilm machine and loaded the roll that Mr. Fletcher seemed so keen on. “Fine. Show me what you want me to see.”

The roll began unwinding, and the pages whirled across the view screen. She gulped as she got a twinge of motion sickness.

Mr. Fletcher was the original librarian for the Snyder Public Library. He had worked for the library until he died; at least that was what everyone thought. He still corrected shelving, put needed materials in people's paths, and helped discourage bad behavior. People, trying to 'borrow' books without checking them out, inevitably tripped before even reaching the security gates, and the books would mysteriously fall out, even out of sealed bags. He'd helped her a few times find books for school projects, so she knew he wasn't a bad spirit, though today he was being irritatingly helpful.

The microfilm stopped abruptly. On the view screen was a picture of Cy's house. She skimmed the article, and her jaw dropped.

A gas explosion had occurred two years ago in the home, causing a small fire that partially destroyed the building. A single woman had been living there at the time. The incident severely burned her. Mary got a sick feeling in her stomach. She could just bet that Ricky had sparked the incident, literally. She printed out that article too.

"Thank you, Mr. Fletcher," she whispered. In response, the drawer for the microfilm quietly slid open.

She had just closed the drawer when Rachel returned. "Back to the coal mines," her friend announced.

"You can put your canary away. We don't need to dig anymore."

"You found something?"

"Yeah." She handed over the freshly printed sheets. Rachel skimmed them.

She gave a low whistle. "Welcome to psycho-city."

"Yep."

She gave the articles back. "So Ms. Exorcist, you got a plan?"

Mary shook her head. "I don't know. I think it might be a good idea to talk to this woman, who lived in the house before. She had to have seen or felt something while living there. After that, I guess I'll talk to Cy."

"What if Cy doesn't believe you?"

Mary looked down, not liking the idea. "Then I'll have to do something on my own."

"Well that's all hunky-dory, except for one thing," Rachel said.

"What's that?"

"There's not enough 'we' action. You're not doing this alone."

"Rach, you don't need to be involved."

She shook her head. "If you're involved, then I'm involved."

"But I don't even know what I'm doing. If you're involved, it just means two of us are in trouble instead of one."

"I don't mind being in trouble if it takes some of it off you."

"This won't work."

She looked at her in disbelief. "And your plan will? Come on, even Batman had a sidekick."

"Superman didn't."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "And he died, remember?"

~ ~ ~

Before leaving the library, Mary found Terri Kuwalchek's address, the previous owner of Cy's home, simply enough in the phone book. It was a real stroke of luck that she still lived in town. Mary knew that a face-to-face meeting with the woman would be better than something over the phone or through email, after all calls could be blocked, and emails deleted. A person at the door was a little trickier to avoid. Rachel borrowed her dad's car to drive them to Ms. Kuwalchek's current address.

Terri Kuwalchek lived in a quiet apartment complex on the outskirts of town. Mary got out of the car with a touch of nervousness. She hadn't come up with a script yet of what to say. It'd been only an hour since finding the newspaper articles.

"Rach, are you sure we shouldn't wait a day before doing this?"

Rachel beeped the automatic locks. "Mary, the sooner we have all the facts, the sooner we can go and tell Cy. Delaying is not of the good. Delaying is synonymous with Ricky."

"But what am I supposed to say? Hi, Ms. Kuwalchek, do you remember that house you lived in that exploded? Yeah, did you know it was haunted? Oh, you did? Do you happen to remember anything specifically about the haunting? We're going to do an exorcism. It's a school project for extra credit."

"Sounds good to me."

"She'll slam the door on us!"

"Fine, leave out the bit about extra credit."

Mary rolled her eyes and stomped up the stairs.

Ms. Kuwalchek lived in a corner apartment on the second floor. When they arrived, Mary took in the absence of a doormat and any door decorations. It was starkly naked compared to all the doors around it. It looked like no one lived there. She pushed the doorbell and let out a sigh of relief when she heard movement on the other side. The door opened a crack with the chain still drawn. A suspicious eye looked out at the two girls.

"What do you want?"

"Are you Terri Kuwalchek?"

The sliver of face bobbed up and down.

"My friend and I would like to talk to you, Ms. Kuwalchek. My name's Mary, and hers is Rachel. We're friends of someone who lives in your previous house 1118 Berkmore Drive."

"Tell your friend to move out now. Don't stay there another moment." The door began to close.

"Why? What's wrong with the house?" She asked, but the door closed.

Mary looked at Rachel, and her friend shrugged her shoulders. If Ms. Kuwalchek refused to talk to them, they couldn't do anything. They turned to go but stopped. They heard the chain to the door being drawn off. They turned back.

The door opened fully.

"I don't know what's wrong with that house, but it did this to me." They saw the half of her face that the door had hidden. It looked like melted wax.

“Did anything lead up to the explosion?” Mary asked. Her eyes searched desperately for something safe to focus on. She noted Ms. Kuwalchek’s limp brown ponytail, her faded blue sweatshirt, and the tiny silver cross hanging at her neck, but Mary’s eyes kept sliding back to the scarred half of her face. By some luck, the woman had been able to keep her left eye. It looked at Mary with a clear brown intensity.

Terri Kuwalchek stepped back and held the door open. “Come in. I’ll tell you what I know.”

Her living room was sparse to the point of having an unfinished feeling to it, like half the stuff that should be there wasn’t. Mary shuddered at the thought. She and Rachel sat down on the couch. Ms. Kuwalchek sat down in a recliner across from them.

“Before I begin, tell me what you know.”

Mary nodded. “We know that the house was once the home of Ricky Moore, who killed his wife and committed suicide, and when you moved into the house about three years later, a gas explosion occurred that burned you badly.”

Ms. Kuwalchek laughed. She covered the damaged side of her face with her hand. “Yeah, that’s obvious.”

“And since then, no one has stayed in the house for more than a few months. Everyone moves out quickly without giving a good reason why.” She’d picked up that piece of information from Gran, who kept an eye on the neighborhood. The fortuneteller was always on the lookout for possible new clients.

Ms. Kuwalchek nodded her head. It was her turn to speak. “That figures. You don’t want to stay there longer or else he gets you. I found that out the hard way.”

“Ricky,” Rachel breathed.

Ms. Kuwalchek turned to her and nodded her head again. “That’s right. Ricky. I don’t believe in any of that hocus pocus nonsense, but there’s something in that house. It was like it fed off me. I didn’t notice anything at first, but as time went by, I started not to feel right. I felt in danger in my own home. It was really bad in the basement. There’s something down there with eyes that stalks you. That’s where the murder/suicide took place. That’s where the explosion was. I’ll only tell you this one more time. Your friend needs to get out of there. You stay there too long, and Ricky gets you.”

“Thank you, ma’am. You’ve been a big help. We won’t take anymore of your time.” Mary got up. Ms. Kuwalchek showed them to the door.

As the girls were going down the stairs, Ms. Kuwalchek called after them. “Leave while you still can before he traps you. Like he trapped me. I haven’t left my home since what happened, and he’s probably laughing at me, the bastard.” Mary looked up at her, staring her full in the face, until the scars burned into her retinas. Ms. Kuwalchek retreated into her house and locked the door behind her. She wondered how long it would be before the poor woman had another visitor.

When they got back into the car, Rachel asked the question that Mary had been mulling over. “How are we going to tell this to Cy?”

She leaned her head against the car door window. Terri Kuwalchek’s face slowly morphed into Cy’s with the scars transposing onto him. “I don’t know.”

“Mary, how does someone get rid of a ghost?”

She rolled her head over to look at her. She'd never gone into real detail about her 'condition'. Rachel had asked her about it, but she'd always fobbed her off with only vague details. The fact was she thought Rachel might reject her if she knew how real ghosts were.

"I only know how I get rid of them."

"And how's that?" she persisted.

Mary straightened in her seat and stared out the windshield as she thought how to answer. She'd never explained how it worked to someone before. "Every ghost I've come across is always tied to something. I think of them as anchors. If the anchor is destroyed, the ghost disappears. Anchors are usually something that was close to the deceased. Something treasured like a doll."

"A doll?"

She nodded. The doll had been real porcelain and a Christmas gift from Gran. She was the prettiest doll Mary had ever seen. Becca had thought so too, and Becca had never learned how to share. She'd told Gran that the scratches and bruises were from clumsy accidents, but she couldn't think up lies for the bite marks.

"Yeah, Gran never got me secondhand toys after that."

"Oh, Mary."

She shrugged. "Gran burned the doll, and the ghost left."

"Did she go to Heaven?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know where ghosts go when they leave. I just know they don't come back."

"So we need to find Ricky's anchor and destroy it," Rachel said getting back to the matter at hand.

"Yeah, and we know that it's in the basement."

Chapter 8 Ghost Hunting

It was TAB, and Rachel and Mary were hunkered down at a table in the cafeteria. This was an unusual locale for them. They didn't go near the caf, unless it was absolutely necessary. It was the hub for all the cliques and wannabes. Girls preened and strutted while guys leaned against the walls and tried to look cool. Being there gave Mary a headache, but the two girls were on a mission. They were going to find Cy. Well, Rachel was determined to find him. Mary was pretending to look. She still wasn't sure about telling him what they'd found out.

She really did want him to like her again, but telling him his house was haunted wasn't the way to do it. It was funny how saving a boy from danger didn't guarantee him liking the girl. It always worked for the guy in the fairytales. The damsel always married the hero, and they lived happily ever after. Fairytales were sexist, and the real world was unfair.

Rachel grabbed Mary's arm, jerking her out of her gloomy thoughts. "There's Cy," she whispered and pointed. Mary followed her finger.

She groaned when she spotted him. "He's with Vicky."

"So? Go talk to him."

"But Vicky's with him."

"Are you a coward?"

She slouched down further and crossed her arms. "No, but I'm not a glutton for punishment either."

"Fine, I'll handle it," Rachel said and got up. Mary tried to pull her back, but Rachel shook her hand off and marched across the lunchroom. The din in the cafeteria drowned out any chance of hearing what was said, but Mary could read the body language loud and clear. Vicky tried to block Cy from Rachel, but Rachel was persistent. She reached around Vicky and tugged his shirt. He stepped away from Vicky reluctantly to let her speak to him. He wasn't happy to see her, but he listened. His eyes flicked once to Mary. He was scowling. Mary turned away in alarm. When she looked again, Rachel was coming back.

"He'll see us at lunch."

~ ~ ~

The girls sat in their usual spot outside and waited. And waited. "Maybe he didn't mean today," Rachel said. It was a quarter to one, and lunch was almost over.

Mary shrugged. "Vicky's probably keeping him away." She'd been nervous right before lunch. She'd been nervous since Rachel told her that he would meet with them, but as the time ticked by, and Cy didn't show, she grew eerily calm. It felt like a reprieve. She began to hope the bell would ring early for fourth period.

Rachel sighed in relief and nodded toward the school. "Finally, here he comes."

Mary turned to watch his approach. Her calmness fell away, and her anxiety returned. He walked toward them with his head down. To anyone watching, it didn't look like he was coming to them but just going in their direction. He didn't look at them, even when he was standing over them.

"So Rachel said you had something to tell me."

"Yeah, you should probably sit down," she said.

"What? You going to say something that'll make me keel over? Like apologize?" He finally lifted his head and looked at her. Mary gulped.

"I am sorry about what happened."

"It's not her fault. It's Vicky's," Rachel said.

"No, it's partly my fault," she said. "But I didn't actually do that stuff with the Ouija board or the vase."

"Oh, come on."

"Let her explain, Cy."

He grimaced but finally sat down.

She took a deep breath. This was the going to be the tough part: Explaining what she was to him. "I hear stuff that you can't hear. Do you know what a clairaudient is?"

"No."

"Well, clairaudients can hear ghosts and talk to them. I'm a clairaudient." She'd never just come out and said it to anyone. Sure, she knew the word, but to come out and just tell someone that she was a clairaudient had never happened. She'd never even used the word with Rachel. All her life, she'd been trying to deny it, but she couldn't change who she was. She heard ghosts. No amount of humming and sticking her fingers in her ears was going to stop it. She had to accept what she was. She waited for his reaction.

"You hear dead people," he said in a flat voice.

She twisted her hands in her lap. "Yeah."

"As opposed to seeing dead people?"

"Yeah."

"How about smelling dead people? Are there people who can do that?"

She winced and stared at her hands.

"You're really starting to piss me off," Rachel said to him.

He ignored her. "So you hear dead people, what about the Ouija board?"

"It worked. I mean those things are meant to talk to ghosts. Well, congratulations."

"So my house is haunted?"

"Yeah."

He got up. "Where are you going?" she asked in alarm.

"I'm going to get ready for class."

"What? Don't you want to know the rest of it?" Rachel demanded.

He choked on a laugh. "There's more?"

"Your house is haunted and not in Casper, the Friendly Ghost kind of way," Rachel said.

"Of course." He turned to go.

Mary decided it was time to lay it all out. "Cy, this ghost will hurt you if it can. It has hurt others who've lived there."

He stopped and turned back. "Now I get why they call you Scary Mary."

Her eyes widened.

Rachel jumped up. "Hey, if you don't want to believe this, that's your prerogative. It's a stupid prerogative, but you're welcome to it. Mary told you this to help you. She doesn't get her laughs from stuff like this. She's a good person, and she felt she had to tell you. Now she has, it'll be your fault if something happens."

He threw his hands up. "Will you two listen to yourselves? My house is not haunted. I don't know why you're trying to make me think it is, but you're both sick. I can't believe I liked either of you. Vicky was right. You're both psycho." He turned and stormed away.

Mary felt two inches tall. She wrapped her arms around her knees and tucked her head behind them. He was right. She was sick. Who told people that their homes were haunted?

"Are you sure you like him, Mary? Because I'm ready to toilet paper his house and leave flaming bags of dog poop at his front door."

A watery laugh burst from her. “No, no pranking.”

She sat back down beside her. “Then what should we do?”

Mary didn’t answer. She had her eyes closed so she wouldn’t cry.

“Mary?” Rachel touched her shoulder.

“He’s never going to like me again.”

“So what?”

She jerked her head up to look at her friend. “What do you mean so what? I really like him.”

“What, you can’t like him if he doesn’t like you?”

“It hurts if he doesn’t like me.”

She put her arm around Mary’s shoulders and gave her a hug. “I know, but just because he doesn’t like you, doesn’t change who you are. You’re still the most awesome girl in this school.”

She wiped the corners of her eyes. “Thanks, but I’m not the most awesome girl. She’s sitting next to me.”

Rachel pushed her over. “Where? I wanna meet her.”

Mary’s laughter surprised her. She looked up at Rachel and gave her a big smile. “Are we done with the mush?”

“Oh man, I hope so, ‘cause I don’t know if I can do much more of it.”

Mary sat back up and reconsidered the situation with Cy. She was determined to help him. She just had to figure out how.

The plan came to her like a cartoon bulb lighting up over her head. It was a crazy idea. Certifiably insane. Rachel would love it. She turned her head to peek at Rachel. “What do you think of a little B&E?”

Mary had the pleasure of watching Rachel’s jaw drop. “You want to sneak into his house?” she squawked.

“Don’t announce it.”

“Are you serious?” she whispered.

“Still want to play Robin to my Batman?”

Rachel stared at her as she thought about the idea. Her face broke into a grin. “Just call me the Girl Wonder. Uh but, do you know how to break into a house?”

“Breaking into houses is easy. Not getting caught is the tricky part.”

“Well, if we do get caught, my dad will represent you.”

Mary quirked an eyebrow. “What about you?”

She shook her head. “Uh, no. Remember the protest thing?”

“The animal rights thing?”

“Yeah, having to bail your daughter out for throwing rancid hamburger meat on upscale business men, who happen to be clients of your firm, didn’t sit well with him. He said if I ever wound up in jail again, he’d leave me there.”

“Um, that’s kind of harsh. I’m sure he didn’t mean it.”

Rachel shook her head. “You didn’t see the purple vein throbbing in his forehead. If I do wind up in jail, I’d demand to stay rather than be released into his custody.”

Mary shook her head. She knew Rachel's dad. He was a man people instinctively called sir and minded their manners around. He was not a man anyone wanted to make angry, but he wasn't hard on his daughter. He didn't demand she be a certain way and would not let anyone else tell her to be a certain way either. Mary remembered the hoopla that Rachel's Grateful Dead t-shirt had stirred in the school their freshman year. Some uptight teacher thought she was endorsing drug use by wearing the shirt, though it didn't have a marijuana symbol on it, just the Grateful Dead logo. The administration had tried to make Rachel change her shirt. She wouldn't, so they sent her home. She called her dad and told him what had happened. He stormed into school, gathered the administration in one room, and in no uncertain terms, told them that if they did not let his daughter wear her T-shirt at school, they would see him in court. Rachel got to wear her T-shirt at school.

"Your dad's cooler than you give him credit for."

She shrugged. "So how are we going to break in?"

"We'll have to skip school."

"Not a problem."

"Stake out the house, wait for everyone to leave, hope they left something unlocked, if not, we'll have to break a window, go to the basement, find Ricky's anchor, destroy it, and leave."

"Let's do it tomorrow."

"But tomorrow I have my next appointment with Mr. Landa."

They shared a grin. No, neither of them would have a problem skipping school tomorrow.

~ ~ ~

They watched Cy's house from Rachel's mom's car. It was a tan station wagon. She'd asked her parents if she could borrow it to drive Mary to school. She'd told them that Mary had twisted her ankle, and her grandma's car was in the shop. Mary would have to remember to limp if she saw them.

A half-empty box of glazed doughnuts sat between them, only one of which Mary had eaten. Rachel sat in the driver's seat with a pair of binoculars trained on the house. They'd watched Kyle and Cy leave five minutes ago. The parents had already gone before they arrived. No one else was in the house.

"I think it's safe," Mary said and opened her door.

"Let's wait another minute," Rachel said. She trained her binoculars down the street and grabbed another doughnut. She kept the binoculars up to her face as she ate.

Mary rolled her eyes and climbed out of the car. She wanted to get the exorcism done and over with. The waiting was killing her nerves. Rachel's consumption of six doughnuts wasn't easing her worries either. Rachel on a sugar high could be dangerous. Rachel scrambled out of the car to follow.

"What's the plan?" Rachel hissed as they crossed the street. She kept turning her head to look around, acting far too suspiciously. she wished that she'd chill.

"Knock on the front door."

"What?" Rachel stopped short on the sidewalk.

"We have to make sure no one's home."

"But we already did that."

“No, we assume both parents left for work already. If nobody answers, we’ll know for sure and then see if the front door is unlocked.”

“What if the front door is locked?”

“We go around back to see if the back door is unlocked.”

“And then?”

“Then we bust a window.”

“You’ve never broken into a house before have you?”

“Does that matter?”

“Well, I brought chewing gum, and I think I know how to do this nifty trick to disarm the security system and--”

“They don’t have a security system, and Beverly Hills Cop 2 is like a century old. That trick won’t work now.”

“I’d still like to try it,” Rachel grumbled.

She knocked on the front door loudly. When no one answered, she reached out and tried the doorknob. It was locked. She led the way to the back of the house. They climbed up the stairs to the back porch and tried the back door. It was locked as well.

“Which window should we break?” Rachel asked.

She scanned the back of the house. She didn’t have many options to choose from. Most of the windows were out of reach. Within her reach was a window over the kitchen sink, and she could possibly climb through a high small round window that was in the bathroom if Rachel helped her. She scanned the bottom of the house and landed on her choice. “That one,” she said pointing to a basement window that looked wide enough to wiggle through.

She climbed down off the porch and walked over to the window peaking out of the ground. “I just need something heavy to break it with.”

Rachel handed her a large brick. “Will this work?”

She quirked her eyebrow and turned back to her. “Did you bring this?”

She nodded. Mary shook her head. A brick was probably the most innocuous thing Rachel had in her bag.

She swung her arm back to smash the window when a thought occurred to her. She reached down with her free hand and pushed on the window. It swung inward. She handed the brick back to Rachel.

“Shame, didn’t need it,” she said. Rachel shrugged and slipped the brick back into her bag. Mary got on her hands and knees facing away from the window. She started to slide her body feet first down into the basement.

“Don’t come down here. You’re not welcome. If you come down here, I’ll make you sorry.”

“Oh jeez,” Mary muttered.

“What?” Rachel asked. Mary clenched her jaw and continued to wiggle backwards through the window. She was halfway inside.

Something crashed in the basement, and glass shattered. *“I said don’t come in here.”*

“Mary, is this safe?” Rachel asked as Mary continued cautiously to wiggle into the basement.

Mary wasn't sure. Ricky sounded threatening, and she knew he could follow through with his threats. Something flew across the basement and hit the wall near her dangling legs. It made her jump, and she banged her back painfully against the top of the window frame.

"No, it's not safe." She began to climb back out of the window.

"Wait, I changed my mind. Get in here."

"Oh no." Something grabbed her legs. They weren't hands, but their grasp was just as tight. Ricky started to pull her into the basement.

"Rach, grab my hands!"

Chapter 9 Unwanted Chats

Rachel lunged and grabbed her hands. Mary's boots scraped along the wall, but she couldn't boost herself back out. Ricky's hold was too strong.

"Pull me out, Rach!"

"Where you going, girlie? I said you could come in." He pulled her further into the basement. Most of her legs were in the room. If he pulled much more of her in, she'd fall inside. She didn't want to think about what would happen then.

"What's happening? What's wrong?"

Mary shook her head and continued to struggle to get out of the window. As she became the rope in a tug of war between Rachel and Ricky, she realized how stupid this whole plan was. What did she know about exorcisms? She may live with this stuff, but she wasn't a duck. She wasn't born knowing how to swim through mystical waters. In fact, she was about to drown.

She kicked at the wall and tried to gain purchase or shake Ricky off possibly, but he had her tight by the knees. She was going to have finger shaped bruises there tomorrow. Rachel pulled her arms, but all she was doing was keeping Mary from slipping further into the basement.

"Don't let go," Mary pleaded.

"I think I can do better than that," Rachel grunted. She took a deep breath, and she threw all of her weight back in one monumental heave and pulled her out. Mary winced as her stomach scraped across the windowsill, but Ricky's grasp slipped, and she was able to wiggle the rest of her body out. She curled herself into a ball and looked at the open window. Rachel crouched down beside her.

Ricky's voice boomed out. *"You think you can get away from me? You'll be back. Then it'll be 'til death do we part!"* Then he began to laugh, and his laughter doubled over upon itself with every roll until it was one long inhuman howl that was devoid of emotion and sanity. Mary stared at the open window.

"What's he saying?"

"Nothing now. He's just screaming," she answered before she could reconsider. She looked up and met Rachel's eyes. There was something dark in her friend's eyes. She looked haunted.

From the front of the house, the sound of tires squealing into the driveway reached them. They looked at each other in alarm. That sounded like someone had just come back home.

“What should we do?” Rachel whispered. Mary stood up and peeked into the kitchen window. She had a clear view to the front door, which swung open to reveal Kyle. He stomped into the house with a scowl. Mary knew that she couldn’t risk letting Kyle find them. She had to think of something to distract him so they make their escape.

She crouched down by the basement window. “Hey Ricky, you’re a foul-mouthed, stupid, weak, little man who didn’t deserve a thing in life and got exactly what you deserved in death: A dank basement full of junk that nobody wants, you included.”

A box crashed into the wall. “*Why don’t you say that to my face?*” From inside the house, the two girls heard Kyle exclaim in surprise and rush to the basement. Mary slammed the window shut.

“Run!”

They dashed from the back of the house to Rachel’s car. They jumped in and were quickly rolling down the street. “Shouldn’t we be worried about Kyle?” Rachel asked.

She was still trying to catch her breath and settle her heartbeat. That had been intense. “I don’t think so. Ricky should’ve gotten weaker once I left.”

“But Ricky’s really dangerous on his own, right? I mean he hurt Terri Kuwalchek. He could hurt Cy or his family at any moment.”

Mary nodded. “Yeah, but my presence makes Ricky a lot stronger and angrier. Now that I’m gone, he can’t hurl stuff.”

“So what’s our next move?”

“I don’t know.” She rested her head against the car window as she mulled it over.

“Maybe we could try talking Cy into letting us come over?” Rachel offered. The school bell rang as she parked.

Ignoring the question because she didn’t think Cy would ever invite her over again and that depressed her, she looked at her watch. “I’m just in time to meet with Mr. Landa.”

“Do you want to skip?”

“No, I’ll go.” What Mary really wanted was to get away from Rachel. She seemed to think Mary had all the answers when she didn’t. Ricky had just proven that. She was lucky that she hadn’t gotten seriously hurt.

She mulled over the situation more as she made her way to Mr. Landa’s office. Rachel and Cy just didn’t get it. Cy thought the whole thing was a hoax, and Rachel thought it was a grand adventure, but Mary knew better. She knew Ricky was dangerous, and she had to do something soon. If she didn’t, someone was going to get hurt, maybe killed. She had to do whatever she could to make sure nothing like that happened. She just wished she knew what to do.

She realized then why responsibility was such a heavy burden. It was because responsibility was stuff that she didn’t want to do but had to. So did that mean going to see Mr. Landa was a responsible thing? Mary frowned at the thought as she dragged her feet into school.

Mr. Landa looked up from his desk when Mary tapped on his door and stuck her head in. He waved his hand for her to come in, but Mary stayed at the door. She was staring at his desk. It was a new desk.

"Where's your desk?"

"I sent it to surplus, though it should probably be trashed. The thing was a safety hazard."

"Yeah, I really liked it."

Mr. Landa's eyebrows quirked at her statement.

She slipped into the office and sat down. She didn't know what to do. Mrs. Brown was gone. Who was she going to talk to?

"How's your first full week back at school going?"

"Not that great," she replied.

He nodded sympathetically. "Some students are giving you trouble?"

"Yeah." She slumped in her seat. She folded her hands and looked down at them. What would Mrs. Brown say right now? *Don't let them get to you. You're better than them.* Which were nice things to say, but they weren't going to help her with her problem, and she needed help. She was going to have to try something unprecedented. She was going to actually talk to Mr. Landa. They were going to have an actual conversation.

"How are they bothering you?"

"They're saying stuff about me. You know the usual that I'm a freak."

"And what do you want to say to them?"

"Shut up."

Mr. Landa blinked at her. With a jolt, she realized how that had sounded. "That's what I'd like to say to them," she clarified sheepishly.

Mr. Landa's eyes softened as he caught on. "You know that their words don't mean anything, right?"

She shrugged. "I still don't like being called a freak."

He nodded. "No one likes being called names, but the secret to stopping the sting is to realize that the people calling you names are beneath you. What they say doesn't matter."

"Yeah, I get that, but people I like are starting to call me a freak too."

Mr. Landa actually looked upset on her behalf. "If that's true, then you need to reevaluate why you like them and if you should continue."

She chewed on this. Why did she still like Cy? She still thought he was a good person. He'd been nice to her for a while, and even though he didn't like her anymore, he hadn't been mean to her. He hadn't tried to hurt her. She couldn't blame him for freaking about the séance and the paranormal explanation. It hurt that he wouldn't give her a second chance or the benefit of the doubt. Should she just stop liking him? Could she do that? No, she didn't think that she could just turn off her feelings like that. She didn't want to turn off her feelings like that, and there was still the matter of Ricky.

She sighed. "It's more complicated than that. I'm worried about this person. I think he's in trouble, but he won't listen to me about it. I don't know how to reach him."

Mr. Landa bent his head as he thought about it. Mary found herself actually waiting for his answer. She'd never really tried talking to him before. This was the first honest conversation they'd ever had. It surprised her how well it was going.

"Can you tell me what type of trouble this person is in?"

She shook her head.

“Is it drugs?”

She shook her head again.

“Family?”

She shook her head again and dropped her head. It looked like Mr. Landa wouldn't be able to help her.

“Mary, if this person is in trouble then you should help him if you can: Be there for him, give him support and understanding, and don't judge him.”

“But he doesn't want me around him. He doesn't think he's in trouble.”

He gave her a wry grin. “Sometimes the help you don't want is the help you need.”

“Is there irony in that statement?”

He chuckled. “Maybe a smidge.”

“So what should I do?”

“Be available, but don't smother him. Don't avoid him, but don't follow him around. If you see him in trouble, offer him help or get someone to help him. It's all you can do.”

Over the next two days, Mary took Mr. Landa's words to heart. She kept out of Cy's way, but she didn't avoid him. Rachel, she observed, did not have the same philosophy. Mary saw her best friend dogging him in the hallways. Cy's face looked tense each time she saw them. Mary dearly wished to know what Rachel thought she was doing, but when she tried to confront her friend about it, Rachel dashed away saying she couldn't chat--She had to keep the target in sight. Mary decided not to ask again.

Mary didn't talk to Rachel outside of school either. When she'd call, Rachel's father always said his daughter was 'out'. She hoped Rachel wasn't parked out in front of Cy's house with binoculars, doughnuts, and a large cup of coffee. She didn't want the police to arrest her friend as a stalker.

On the third day, she decided to eat in the school library because it was too hot outside. She hadn't seen Rachel all day, but she thought that it might be because she hadn't seen Cy either. She wondered how Vicky felt about his new shadow.

She was quietly reading her history textbook, trying to ignore the fact that she was lonely when a heavy book bag dropped onto her table. She jerked her head up to find Cy scowling down at her.

“Call Rachel off, I can't take any more of her harassment.”

Rachel came up behind him and joined them at the table.

“Mary didn't tell me to follow you around. This was my idea.”

“Really? You have your own ideas?” he said.

“Hey!” Mary and Rachel both protested. The school librarian gave them a stern look in response to their outburst. She might let the students eat in the library, but she would not allow loud noise.

“My house is not haunted,” Cy said through clenched teeth.

“Oh yeah? Mary, tell him what happened to Terri. She lived in the house before you.”

“No, Rach. If he doesn't want to know, it'd be wrong to tell him,” she said, remembering Mr. Landa's advice. She wouldn't force her help on Cy.

He looked at Rachel triumphantly. Rachel's eyes narrowed in return. “Mary may feel that way, but I don't.”

“Rach...” Mary said uneasily.

He threw his hands into the air. “Fine. What’s happened at my house before?”

She looked down at her hands trying to think of how to answer. She knew that he didn’t want to hear what she had to say. She felt a flash of anger at Rachel. She might be right, and it might be good that she stuck to him and made him talk to Mary, but it put her in a bad situation and caused him to resent both of them.

“Mary, just tell me,” he said. She looked up at him. He’d calmed down some and was waiting for her to answer.

“A previous owner was burned terribly in a furnace explosion. That’s where I think the ghost is. He killed himself in the basement, along with his wife. He was a sick man. The man died; the sickness stuck around.”

“And what am I supposed to do about it?” he asked. She could tell that he didn’t give any credit to her news. He was humoring her.

“Let Mary and me come over and check it out. We can get rid of him for you,” said Rachel. Mary jumped at the surprise offer. She turned to her friend.

“Rach, that’s not a good idea.”

“What? Are you scared, Mary?” he asked.

“It’s hard not to be afraid when you believe in ghosts, and it’s hard not to believe in ghosts when they tell you that they’re there,” she said. Cy rolled his eyes and looked away.

“We’ll come over tonight,” Rachel said.

Mary stood and put her hands up to stop this rash plan. “Wait, that’s too soon. We have to plan or something.”

Rachel gave her a look that said not to ruin this. She glared back that this was NOT a good idea.

“We’ll be there tonight,” Rachel repeated.

“Whatever. I’ll see you after school,” he said. He shrugged on his book bag and left with his hands shoved in his pockets. Mary could tell by his hunched shoulders that he was not happy about the upcoming evening.

As soon as he was out of the library, she grabbed Rachel. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Her best friend shrugged. “Putting the ball in motion?”

“Why, so we can get squashed by it?”

“What do you need?”

“A plane ticket to Bermuda would be nice.”

Rachel grinned. “That could be our fee.”

She scowled at her. “We are not the Ghostbusters.”

“I know. We’re way cuter than Dan Ackroyd and Bill Murray.” Mary wanted to shake Rachel and yell at her, but the bell rang.

Chapter 10

Denial

She stood outside Cy's home experiencing a different sort of nervousness this time: the gut wrenching, heart palpitating, skin crawling type. Actually, it didn't feel that different from the first date jitters. What did she think she was doing? Ricky had nearly got her last time. Going back into the basement seemed an extremely bad idea, but she was the only one who had a chance of helping Cy. He might not want her help, but he needed it. She was relieved when Rachel arrived. She didn't want to go in alone, but then reconsidered when she saw that Rachel had brought stakes and garlic.

"Uh Rach, you're referencing the wrong horror movies for this."

"Be prepared for anything, I say." Mary shook her head but didn't argue. If they made her feel safe, then she wouldn't rag on her about them; maybe they were her occult equivalent of teddy bears. If she held them close, the monster would go away, but then the monster could always view garlic as nice seasoning for human and the stakes as handy toothpicks. Mary put a stop to these thoughts. They were beginning to freak her out.

"Let's just get this over with."

Rachel saluted with a stake. "After you, Dr. Van Helsing."

Mary grimaced. The idea that she was the professor for their little group of monster hunters was not encouraging. The professor was supposed to be the smart, collected one. The way her brain kept taking little turns on the mental merry-go-round did not instill confidence. Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door.

The door opened as she raised her hand to give it a second rap. Cy looked out at them for a moment as if he'd forgotten that he'd invited them over. She wanted to say hi but waited for him to do it first. He didn't say hi. He just stepped back to give them room to come in. Her stomach did a little twist as she silently went by him. Rachel looked around the house. She took in all the pictures and stuff and said, "Hard to believe this place is haunted."

Cy snorted.

"How do I get to the basement?" Mary asked.

"Through the kitchen," he said, leading them back. A low counter divided the kitchen and living room. The door to the basement stairs was off to the side. He opened it for her.

She went to the top of the stairs. "You guys should stay up here," she told them. Cy shrugged and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Don't you need back-up?" Rachel asked.

She shook her head. "It's better if I go down alone." She glanced one more time at Cy to check on him. He was flipping through a magazine. She wondered if he would still ignore her when she came back up. Would he ask about Ricky? Would he care?

She took the first step down and stopped. It was awfully dark down there. "Where's the light switch?"

"At the bottom of the stairs."

“Perfect,” she muttered. She crept down the steps slowly. The last one made a loud creak that made her jump and almost fall. She gritted her teeth and told herself to calm down. Ricky hadn’t even done anything yet. No reason to panic. Yet.

The basement floor was cold cement. The chill crept up through her *Doc Martens* and made her feet tingle. She searched for the light switch. The wall was rough cinder block. It was making the tips of her fingers tender as she brushed over it. She was about to call to Cy again to ask where the light switch was when she touched it. She flipped it and blinked at the sudden illumination. The basement was stacked with boxes five high. The light hung from a cord in the center of the ceiling. Her arrival disturbed a couple of moths. They fluttered up to dance around the light.

She scanned the room, but all her eyes could register was junk, dust, and cobwebs. The space was depressing. Two people had died down here. One of them still haunted it. Why’d Ricky stick around? It was just a plain old basement. Nothing special. It shouldn’t be spooky, but ghosts never seemed to care. They took up residence wherever they liked. Well, time this one got evicted.

She moved gingerly around the boxes, attentive for any vibes that might indicate spookiness. She knew how silly that seemed, but it was all she could do. Nothing was coming to her. She looked around the room with a little worry. She didn’t want to call Ricky out, but he wasn’t responding to her presence.

“Ricky?” she whispered. No response. The furnace sat off in a corner. Boxes blocked her way. She began clearing a path.

“Where are you, Ricky?” she asked in a quiet voice. She didn’t want to reach the furnace as Terri Kuwalchek’s face flashed through her mind, but maybe his anchor was near it. Ricky still did not respond.

“Have you found anything?” Rachel called. Mary jumped and knocked over a box. She blew out a breath in frustration and put the box back in its place.

“Nothing yet,” she called back. She was a little over a yard away from the furnace.

“Come on Ricky, talk to me. I’ll listen,” she said. The front door slammed upstairs. Footsteps went into the kitchen. Mary could hear talking but could not make it out. She knew that she didn’t have much longer. If Ricky didn’t show up soon, she’d have to go. She pushed the remaining boxes out of her way and stood in front of the furnace.

“Ricky!” she hissed. She reached out to the furnace, but the heat, coming off of it, made her stop short of touching it. She got on her hands and knees and crawled around the furnace. There had to be something, but all she found were some petrified bugs.

The new person was at the top of the stairs with Rachel. “She’s not doing anything,” Mary heard her tell the unknown person.

“Yeah right, she’s not,” Kyle said. He came stomping down the stairs.

“Ricky, you stupid, unloved, piece of feces, where are you?” Mary said, but the homicidal maniac didn’t answer. She blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. What was it, her breath?

“What do you think you’re doing down here?”

Mary straightened and brushed off her hands. “Hi, Kyle.”

He stood at the bottom of the stairs with his arms crossed. It looked like Mary was about to be evicted. “What are you doing here, freak?”

She shrugged. "I thought I left something."

"In the basement?" he asked. He tugged at his shirt collar, and his eyes darted around the basement.

She was already speaking before she thought that maybe it was bad idea to antagonize him. "Don't worry, I didn't disturb your dirty magazines."

Kyle's face twisted in anger. "Get out of my house."

"I was just leaving," she said. She approached the steps, but he was blocking the way. She paused for him to move. He didn't budge.

"If you want me to go, you need to move." He continued to stare at her. His whole body was tense. She didn't want to touch him. She had the feeling that if she did, he'd lash out. Rachel stepped onto the stairs.

"Hey, what's up?" she asked.

"We're going," she replied. Rachel blinked and looked at Kyle.

In a low harsh voice, he said, "Don't ever come to my house again."

She let out a slow breath as she tried to remain calm. "Fine, Kyle. Will you move?"

"I mean it. This is my house, and I won't have you in it."

Her eyebrows rose. "Is the deed in your name or something?"

He didn't reply. He stepped to the side, forcing her to brush by him to go up the stairs. "I will make you regret the day you ever met me," he whispered.

She stopped dead on the stairs. She turned back to him in surprise. "What did you just say?"

"I said get OUT," he said through clenched teeth.

Cy appeared beside Rachel. "What's going on?"

Mary's mouth twisted into a grimace. She decided that she definitely didn't want to be there anymore. She took the rest of the stairs two at a time and brushed past Rachel and Cy.

He ran after her and caught her by the arm. "Mary, what's up?"

She flung his arm off. "I'm leaving. That should make you and your brother happy."

"Did Kyle threaten you or something?" he asked. His tone caught her attention. He hadn't asked lightly. He sounded concerned, and the concern was aimed at her.

"He told me to leave."

"What else?"

His persistence was making her nervous. He sounded worried for her, but that couldn't be right. He didn't want her in his house either. Why was he insisting on questioning her about Kyle? "He told me to never come over again."

"And?"

"And nothing! I have to go. Rach, come on." Rachel grabbed her garlic and stakes from the kitchen and followed her out.

They were halfway to Mary's house before Rachel spoke. "So how's Ricky?"

"No clue."

Rachel pulled the car over abruptly. She undid her seat belt and turned fully to face Mary. "What happened in the basement?" she demanded.

She shrugged. "Nothing happened."

“Don’t shut me out on this. We’re a team.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Rachel glared at her. She hunched her shoulders and put her hands up. “I didn’t hear anything. Believe me, I tried to find him. Ricky didn’t want to talk.”

“He talked to you plenty when we sneaked over. He practically hauled you into the basement to ‘talk’ to you.”

“He didn’t make a peep this time, even after I called him a piece of feces.”

"A piece of feces?"

"I like the way it sounds, so?"

“Where’s the anchor?”

“I have no clue. If it’s down there, it’s hidden.”

“So why’d you tear out of there?”

Mary scowled. “Because Kyle is a jerk.”

“We knew that already.”

“Yeah, well, he really, really is.”

“So what’d Ricky say?”

“He didn’t say anything!”

Rachel gave her a hard look. “You’re not going to go over there without me, are you?”

She didn’t have an immediate answer. The truth was that she hadn’t thought about going over again, or what her next move would be if she had a next move. “No, of course not,” she finally stammered.

Rachel hadn’t liked her pause. “Whatever you say, Mary,” she said in a flat tone. She turned back toward the steering wheel and pulled back onto the street. Mary could see her jaw was clenched. What was with people not believing her today? He didn’t believe his house was haunted, and now Rachel didn’t believe her when she told her that the spook hadn’t spoken to her or that she wouldn’t do anything without her.

When they pulled up to her house, Mary opened her door, but she couldn’t get out without trying to convince Rachel one more time that she was telling the truth. “I really didn’t hear Ricky. I don’t know why. Maybe he knew I was up to something. I’ll have to come up with a new plan to get rid of him.”

“Look, if you don’t want to tell me, fine, but don’t think you’re going to shut me out on this,” Rachel said.

She raised her hands again. “I’m not shutting you out. I swear.” Rachel looked at her for a long moment and then nodded her head once. “Are we cool?”

It hurt a little that Rachel had to think about it before answering. They were usually always in sync. “Yeah. So what’s our next move?”

She shrugged. “I’ll talk to Gran. See if we can make up some charms or something to put in the house.”

“Okay,” she said. Mary could tell that Rachel still thought she was holding back on what had happened, but nothing had happened, except Kyle had majorly pissed her off, and she could admit, at least to herself, that he’d freaked her out a little too. If she never saw him again, she wouldn’t miss

him. She shook her head. She got out and went into the house. She needed to discuss the situation with Gran. She hoped she'd believe her.

Chapter 11

Help

Gran was in her office or 'nexus of spirituality' as she told some of her more gullible clients. Mary pushed the beads aside and stuck her head in. Gran was between clients and using her time by polishing her crystals.

She looked up and smiled. "Mary, I didn't hear you come in. Where were you this afternoon?"

She hung back at the doorway. She knew Gran wouldn't like her answer. "Over at Cy's."

Gran frowned. "What were you doing there?"

"I was trying to find Ricky's anchor."

"You know that's dangerous."

"Yeah, but I'm trying to help Cy."

Gran shook her head. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she replied and shifted her weight back and forth.

"Nothing?" Gran set down the amethyst that she'd been polishing to give her full attention.

She looked down at her shoes. She really wasn't going to like this. "He played dumb when I tried drawing him out."

Gran looked over her glasses at her. "You goaded him? Mary, that was very foolish. I know I taught you better than that. There's no telling what an angry spirit would do to you or anyone else."

Mary nodded. "I know, but he didn't respond to me at all. It was so weird, but I'm still worried he'll bother Cy and his family. I thought maybe that you could make up something to protect them. You know with some of your hocus pocus."

Gran sighed and picked up the amethyst again. "One day, you will respect your grandmother and her meager abilities."

She moved to Gran's side and knelt on the floor. She set the amethyst aside and took both her hands in hers. "I do respect you, Gran, and your abilities aren't meager. You're the most awesome fortuneteller this side of the Mississippi, and you should put that on your business cards. Could you help me make some charms for their house? Please?"

She could tell by her smile that Gran wasn't really upset with her. "I have to go to the store to get supplies, but it's too late to go now. It'll have to be tomorrow."

"All right." She was relieved that Gran was on board with this. "Rachel might come over to help out."

Gran pushed her glasses back onto her nose. "I doubt this is what Mr. Landa meant when he advised extracurricular activities."

Mary smirked. "It keeps me off the streets."

Gran chuckled a moment, but then she looked down at her and a soft smile spread across her face. “Fiona would be so proud of you if she could see you right now.”

Mary froze at the mention of her mother. “Proud of what?”

Gran smoothed back Mary’s hair. “She’d be proud of how you’re dealing with your gift and using it to help others.”

“But Mom didn’t have the gift.” Her throat was getting tight. It always did on the subject of her parents.

“No, but that didn’t mean that she didn’t know how the gift made others pull away and hide.”

“What?” She’d never heard anything about this.

“There are those with the gift that consider it a curse. I know that you’ve resented your gift, but you’ve never seen yourself as evil for having it.”

“Of course not,” she said, a little affronted by the idea.

“Of course not,” Gran repeated softly. “But your mother knew people who did feel that way, and it upset her greatly. She tried to convince them that they were not evil, but she couldn’t reach them. She knew that you could have the gift. It’s prevalent in our family, but she hoped that you would not end up like those sad souls who punished themselves simply for being the way they were.”

“Gran, who was it that Mom was trying to help?” Mary was curious because she’d only ever known of Gran and herself as having the gift.

Gran shook her head. “They’re distant cousins. I doubt you’ll ever meet them.”

“But if Mom knew them--”

“Your mother sought them out, and they made their desire not to be contacted ever again very clear. They’re melancholy souls who are content with their unhappiness.”

Car tires crunched on the gravel drive. Gran looked out the window. “That’s Mrs. Polk. She made an urgent appointment about Chowder.”

“How urgent can a dead dog be?”

She shrugged her shoulders and began putting her crystals away. “We’ll just have to see.”

Mary slipped out of Gran’s office and went up to her room to do homework. Half an hour later, She was lying on the floor doing Latin homework when a familiar red bouncy ball fell onto her textbook.

“Huh?” She picked up the ball.

“Arf!”

She sat up with a jerk. “Chowder?”

“Arf!”

Her bedroom door opened, and Gran came in. Tucked under her arm was Chowder. “What are you doing with him?”

Gran gave her a guilty smile and stroked the stuffed dog’s head. “We seem to have a new addition to the family.”

“WHAT?”

“Chowder and Mrs. Polk’s new Dachshund Topsy aren’t getting along. Topsy barks at Chowder’s body day and night. Mrs. Polk thought that we would be a better home for him.”

“She couldn’t do the sensible thing—like bury him?”

Chowder whined. Mary looked in his general direction with a frown. “Do you want to put him to rest?” Gran asked. She didn’t sound happy.

“You’re suggesting we keep a dead dog as a pet.”

“He’s sweet.”

“He’s dead.”

Gran held the Scottish Terrier up to her face and looked into its glass eyes. “I suppose you’re right. We should let him go.”

She stared at her grandmother’s unhappy face. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She couldn’t believe what she was about to say. “Well...he would be easier to keep than a live dog. I mean he doesn’t eat, poop, or shed.”

“That’s true,” Gran replied. The corners of her mouth tilted up a fraction.

“I guess we could keep him around for a while and see how it goes.”

“As a trial run.”

She nodded. “Yeah, but as soon as he chews up any of my shoes, he’s getting a funeral.”

Gran nodded and tucked Chowder back under her arm. Mary picked up the ball and tossed it into the hall. The scrabbling of tiny paws followed it. Gran grinned.

“You are such a softy,” she groaned and flopped onto her back.

“It runs in the family,” Gran replied with a smirk. Mary frowned in response.

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She tapped her pencil impatiently on her desk. The clock had to be messed up. It’d been a quarter till twelve for the past five minutes, and she really had to go to the bathroom. She tapped her pencil faster.

“Hey Mary, do you fly around on a broomstick, or have you upgraded to a Hoover?” a guy two seats from her whispered.

“Neither. How about you? Do you still fantasize about Ariel, or have you graduated to Pamela Lee Anderson yet?” The guy scowled as his face turned red, and all of his friends snickered. Mr. Jacobs, their Latin teacher yelled at them to pay attention. She looked at the clock again, and her eyes bulged. It was now eighteen minutes until twelve. That was it. She was going. She pushed herself out of her chair and went to the front. The reason she’d hoped to wait for the bell sat beside the door. Mr. Jacobs insisted that his students carry a large wooden paddle as their bathroom pass. She suspected that it was a vestige of his fraternity days. She picked up the paddle and stalked out of the room. Some teachers were just sadistic.

She ducked into the girls’ bathroom with a sigh. She did her business and went to the mirror to touch up her make-up. She’d been laying it on thick since the séance at Cy’s house. The palest foundation, thick black eye-liner, heavy mascara, and black lipstick put her face in such sharp contrasts that the makeup muted her emotions. Mary doubted *Cover Girl* intended for their foundation to hide emotional blemishes like sadness and hurt, but if applied thick enough, it could even hide anguish, and she’d need all the shielding she could get because just then Vicky came in.

“Uh oh, the town freak’s adjusting her mask,” Vicky said.

Mary's eyes slid to Vicky's reflection in the mirror. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fakest of them all? Oh never mind, I see her." She drew a large circle around Vicky's reflection with her black lipstick. Vicky's mouth thinned as she glowered at her. Mary smiled brightly back through the mirror.

"Why do they let freaks like you into this school?"

"Because they're EOS-Equal Opportunity Suckage. Can't let anyone miss out on the misery."

Vicky shook her head and stepped up to the sink. She unzipped her purse and pulled out a tube of concealer. Mary began touching up her lipstick. She wasn't about to leave. She was there first. She wasn't going to scurry away because of Vicky.

Vicky glanced over and tsiked. "I will never understand the reject beauty regime. Why bother to make yourself look uglier?"

"Not everyone thinks it's ugly."

Vicky laughed. "Um, yeah, they do."

Mary ignored her and pulled out her mascara.

"Give up, Mary. You'll never get him back."

"How do you know?"

"Because he told me that desperate story you made up to get invited back to his house. Haunted? Please. He told me that you wussed out anyway. What? Couldn't find any chains to rattle?"

"That's your kink not mine. Afraid the boys might run away?"

Vicky rolled her eyes and shoved her tube of concealer back in her purse. "You are so full of crap. Don't expect to be invited back over. Ever."

"That's what really eats you up, isn't it? He's invited me over, but you have to show up uninvited to get through the door. He must not like you so much."

Vicky's eyes narrowed and pink spots appeared on her cheeks. "Listen you psycho-freak, Cy is too good for you. He's nice, thoughtful, and smart. Totally out of your league."

"You know, psychologists have discovered this thing called projecting. You might want to look it up."

"I know what projecting is. You might want to look up schizophrenia."

"Ooh, someone's been to therapy."

"I wouldn't talk, little Miss Landa's pet. Is he writing a book on you or something?"

"I go because I have this nasty habit of bucking the system by righting injustices and punishing those who richly deserve it. The hegemony doesn't like it, and what they don't like must be wrong."

"Do you even know what hegemony means?"

"Do you?"

Vicky's eyes darted away, and she shook her head. "You are so screwed up. That is why Cy dumped you. Oh wait, you two never went out. My mistake."

Her hand curled around her tube of mascara. She told herself that she wasn't going to take a swing at Vicky. It would land her into more trouble than she wanted. But it was tempting. Very tempting.

"Anyway, I have to go. Nice chatting with you. I hope you find some nice dead things to keep you company. Everyone deserves someone, and I'm sure there are some lovely losers for you at the

cemetery. Why don't you spare yourself any future humiliation and stick with your own kind? He may have hung with you for a second, but he knows better now."

She stared at Vicky and kept her eyes trained on her. She had to keep from blinking or tears might spill. She wished she didn't let her words cut her like they did, but the cuts were bleeding. Vicky took one last look in the mirror and fluffed her hair. When Vicky finally left, Mary turned back to the mirror, and from her new angle, the black circle was around her reflection, and her reflection stared at her, and she stared back at it. There wasn't anything more to say.

She trudged back to class. The paddle hung at her side. She wasn't watching where she was going so when she turned a corner, she ran face first into someone. She stumbled back. When she saw that the someone was Kyle, she raised the paddle up defensively. He was the last person she'd wanted to see.

"Watch where you're going, freak."

She rolled her eyes and moved to step around him. Kyle mirrored her move and blocked her. Mary let out a huff. "Sorry, Kyle."

"Yeah, you should be." She rolled her eyes again. She didn't need this. Not right after her encounter with Vicky. "Don't roll your eyes at me."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll make you sorry."

Mary's eyes narrowed, and she purposefully rolled her eyes again. Kyle lashed out and grabbed the paddle, shocking her. She hadn't expected him to get physical. She held on tight to the paddle. She had a feeling that letting him have it would be a very bad idea. "Let it go, Kyle," she said through clenched teeth.

He sneered. "Or what?"

"Look, I don't want any trouble, but if you don't let go, I'll give you some." It was big talk, but she wasn't going to back down.

He smirked and pulled the paddle and subsequently her closer. They were nose-to-nose or rather nose-to-neck since Kyle was taller. She could read the inscription on the gold locket peeking out of Kyle's button collar: "Together Forever" She briefly wondered who would've given that to him and hoped that the girl had reneged on the offer.

Kyle leaned over her and said into her ear, "Let me tell you something, Mary. I can do whatever I want to whomever I want. I can do anything that I want."

"Boy, do you need a reality check."

He looked her up and down contemptuously. "And who's going to give it to me?"

"Well, if you're looking for volunteers." She shoved him with the paddle, but he'd anticipated the move. He took a step back and swung her around, so that her back hit the wall and pinned her. She was trapped between a wall and a jerkface. Not what she'd planned.

"Face it Mary, I'm better than you. You might not accept it, but you'll always be nothing," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. In a low voice, she spat out, "Listen you egotistical, testosterone deluded, wanna-be big man: I am NOT nothing. I don't care what you think or what anyone else thinks and that's what makes me special. You, on the other hand, pander to anyone or anything if you think that

will make you more accepted. It's so pathetic and stupid. They should make people like you ride the short bus."

Kyle's face twisted in anger. He opened his mouth to say something back, but voices coming down the hall stopped him. She saw her chance. She jerked the paddle from his grasp and slipped a couple of safe steps away. Two guys walked by them. They gave Kyle and her curious glances but kept going. She fell into step behind them, leaving Kyle behind. The paddle shook in her hands.

The lunch bell rang as she reentered class. She collected her books to go outside and meet up with Rachel. She slung her bag onto her shoulder and lowered her head for her usual foray into the halls, but for once, all of the stares and whispers were comforting because if they were watching her then maniacal, fat-headed bullies, otherwise known as Kyle, couldn't trap her alone and make nasty threats.

Rachel was sitting in their usual spot outside. She was already eating and had a textbook open in front of her. She flopped down across from her. "Hey," she greeted. Rachel gave her a flick of the eyes and returned to her book. She didn't notice Rachel's silence. She was still off center after her run-ins with Vicky and Kyle. Vicky said Cy didn't believe her at all. No, he didn't just not believe her, he was laughing at her. Well, she hadn't expected him to call a priest for an exorcism just on her claims, but his total rejection of her abilities rattled her. He'd seen the Ouija board. She'd shown him the newspaper articles. What more could she do to prove his house was haunted? Then there was Kyle...She didn't know what his problem was. She was used to people antagonizing her, but Kyle seemed to want to do more than antagonize her. Frankly, he was starting to scare her, and Mary didn't scare easily.

She pulled out her lunch and munched contemplatively. Ricky was the reason she was in this mess, but she didn't know how to deal with him. Maybe he wasn't such a big threat anymore. He certainly hadn't paid any attention to her when she'd called to him during her third visit.

"Gran said she'd make some stuff up to help against Ricky. But how am I going to give the stuff to Cy? He thinks I'm nuts as it is. Trying to make him take a juju bag or a charm is going to be impossible. Maybe we could slip it into his backpack?" Mary turned to Rachel to see what she thought.

"Why the sudden interest in helping Cy?"

Her eyebrows scrunched together. "What do you mean sudden? Isn't this what we've been doing for a week now?"

"Yeah, but before I had to pull you kicking and whining to do anything. Has something new happened?"

Mary thought about her run-in with Kyle, but she didn't really feel like telling Rach about that less than stellar moment, and it really didn't have any bearing on the Ricky problem. "No, but I figure a few charms couldn't hurt."

"Humph." Rachel turned back to her book.

Mary was getting tired of the passive-aggressive treatment. "What's wrong with you?"

Rachel snapped her book shut. "I don't know. Why don't you tell me? Because obviously there must be something wrong with me."

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

“Well, that makes two of us.”

Mary laughed, which was the wrong response. Rachel began shoving her stuff into her book bag. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Rachel said.

Mary was even more confused. “Nothing’s going on.”

“Like nothing happened at Cy’s house?”

That again? She took a deep breath. “Nothing happened at his house. Ricky didn’t say anything. I swear.”

“You’re not telling me everything.”

“What am I not telling you?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Then how do you know I’m not telling you everything?”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not going to spill are you?”

“Spill WHAT!”

Rachel jerked her book bag on and stood up. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore until you’re ready to tell me.”

“Tell you what?” But Rachel turned and strode to the school entrance.

“Rach!” She entered the school without a glance back. Mary sat there in bewilderment. Jeez, she didn’t need this today. What was Rach so sure Mary wasn’t telling her? She grabbed her stuff and tried to catch up with her, but she’d disappeared. She scowled at how crappy her day was turning out and headed for her locker.

As she approached, she saw a folded piece of paper sticking out of a vent. She plucked the paper out and opened it. She was expecting a rude poem or maybe a drawing, but instead it was a note.

Mary,

Ditch school and meet me at my house. I found something you have to see.

--Cy

She didn’t think twice about ditching school. Whatever Cy had found had to be important. It could be Ricky’s anchor. If it were, she really didn’t want him messing with it. A ghost was very protective of its anchor, it being the ghost’s only tie to the physical plane. If someone destroyed the anchor, the ghost would have to move on, and Ricky hadn’t shown any inclination of heading toward the light.

She wished she could tell Rachel about the new development, but she couldn’t waste time looking for her. Cy could be in trouble if he had found Ricky’s anchor. Mary wondered what it was. As she’d told Rachel the other day, anchors could be anything.

Chapter 12

Showdown

She speed walked to Cy's house. She'd dumped all of her things in her locker and walked straight out of school. She was a mess of nerves. She wasn't worried about missing school. She couldn't care less. She was worried about what she'd find. She wished he'd come and gotten her instead of leaving her that note to meet him.

When she got there, she saw that there weren't any cars in the driveway. His parents were still at work, and Kyle was still at school. The thought of Kyle made her shudder. That guy had serious anger management issues. When she went up to the door, she noticed it was open a crack. She knocked on it anyway, but no one appeared. She pushed the door open.

"Cy?"

There was no answer. Frowning, she entered the house.

"Hello?" she called. There was still no answer. There was only one place she could think of that Cy could be and not answer her--The basement. She went through the living room to the basement door.

She stopped at the door with her hand on the knob. She was beginning to get a sinking feeling. If Cy were all right and waiting for her, he would've popped up by now. The thought that Ricky might have done something to him made her stomach twist, and now, the homicidal ghost was down there waiting for the next unsuspecting victim to show up, but Mary was not a victim.

She moved to the kitchen cabinets and looked through them. She found a heavy cast iron skillet. She wouldn't be able to hurt Ricky directly with it, but it might be able to destroy his anchor. She went back to the basement door and opened it slowly. The basement light was already on. Someone had been down there or still was.

She considered calling out to Cy again but bit her tongue instead. She was afraid of who might answer. She crept down the stairs with her ears perked for any noises. She froze when she heard something scrape against the floor. She didn't hear anything else as she tensely waited. She continued down the stairs one step at a time. She finally reached the basement floor and peered around. There was no sign of him.

"Cy?" she whispered. When no answer came, she took a few tentative steps from the stairs and slowly scanned the room. Where was he? Her hand tightened on the skillet.

"Ricky, what have you done?" she whispered.

From under the stairs, a pair of beefy arms clamped down around her and picked her up. She gasped in shock. She hadn't expected an earthly attack.

"Well, if isn't the witch," a nasty voice said. "Were you going to fix me some eggs? Sorry, but I'm not hungry."

She struggled to get free, but all she managed to do was drop the frying pan. It thumped to the ground below her dangling feet.

"Let me go, Kyle!"

“Why? I like you just where you are.” He chuckled and squeezed her tighter. She kicked back, and her heels hit his shins.

“Stop that!”

“And what are you going to do with me?”

Kyle chuckled and bounced her a little in his arms. “Oh, I don’t know. Play house maybe.”

“Not interested.” She threw her head back and hit him square on the nose.

He let out a yowl and dropped her. His hand went to his bleeding nose. She scrambled away. Kyle blocked the stairs. She knew she couldn’t get by him. Her eyes locked on the frying pan sitting on the floor. “I’ll get you for that!” he yelled.

He lunged at her with blood still streaming down his face. He wasn’t just acting like a homicidal maniac anymore, he now looked like one. She dodged his lunge and scooped up the fallen frying pan. She turned back to face him with it in a two handed grip.

“Not so big and bad now, are you, Kyle?” she taunted.

He snarled and rushed her again. She didn’t flinch. She twisted her body and pulled back her arms like a baseball hitter. She struck his shoulder with the flat side of the frying pan. He crashed into the cinder block wall and slid to the floor.

“Kill her. She isn’t any good, just like the other one. Always whining that I didn’t love her and that I should be nicer to her. I’ll show her nice.”

She looked around the room in astonishment. “So you decide to speak up now? What’s with you?”

Kyle hadn’t moved from where he’d fallen. She cautiously kicked his leg. He didn’t respond. “All right Ricky, where are you?” she asked the basement walls. She tossed boxes aside as she searched for the anchor. She was done being careful with the searching. She was going to turn the basement upside down if that was what it took to find Ricky’s stupid anchor.

Ricky didn’t respond to her question. Mary was getting really tired of being ignored. “Ricky, where are you?” she demanded again.

“Guess,” Kyle said as he swept her legs out from under her.

“What?” Her left side hit the cement floor. A nasty bruise guaranteed for her elbow. The frying pan once again left her hands.

Kyle rolled on top of her, pinning her to the floor with his body. He grabbed her wrists and pulled them above her head. She struggled to get him off of her, but he was too heavy.

“Are we starting to get the picture?”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get it,” she replied and kneed him in the groin, hard.

He let out a wheezy groan and rolled off her to cradle his crotch. She picked herself up and took a step back. She stared down at him with incredulous eyes. This was so much worse than she’d imagined.

“How’d it happen?” she asked.

He chuckled from the floor. He rolled to his knees. “No, no, no. I’ve got to keep some of my secrets.”

“Come on you can tell me.” She poked him with her foot.

“And I said no.” He leapt up, but she hustled back to stay out of reach.

“It has to be something. Ghosts need an anchor to keep them on this plane. How does a ghost possess a person through an anchor?” she wondered aloud.

“You won’t figure it out, until I let you,” he said and rushed her again. She tried to lunge out of the way, but one of his outstretched hands grabbed her and dragged her back to the floor. He pinned her down again.

“Get off me!” She kicked and shoved at him, but her strength was beginning to wane.

“Getting tired?”

“Yeah, of you.” To her right, she saw a lamp that had tumbled out of a box. It was round and hard. In a last ditch effort, she threw her hip and rolled them over to it. Kyle’s head cracked against the cement floor, and he groaned as he reached back to massage his skull. She sat up and grabbed the lamp. She hit him over the head with it. The lamp didn’t break, but he fell back limply. Blood started to trickle from a nasty cut to his temple.

She began rummaging through his pockets. He had to have the anchor on him. Ricky couldn’t possess him by remote control at least that was what she hoped. She searched frantically, patting down all of his pockets, raising his shirt and pant legs to see if anything was strapped or stuck to them.

She was perched on top of him, but she was focused too much on finding the anchor to realize he was coming around. He easily caught one of her wrists as she tried to lift his shirt. “Now, aren’t we fresh?” She pulled to free herself, but his fingers were like iron bands on her wrist. He lumbered to his feet, dragging her with him. She couldn’t twist her arm out of his grasp. She switched tactics and stomped on his feet to make him let go. He retaliated by backhanding her.

Her free hand flew to her face. Her eyes narrowed in anger, and her lips drew back in a snarl. Nobody slapped her, ever. She raised her foot and thrust kicked him in the stomach with all of her strength. He let go of her arm as he stumbled back. The locket slipped out of his shirt and glinted at his throat. She yanked it off him. He hissed in pain and turned to attack her but stopped mid-motion.

“Wait...what?” he asked in a dazed voice as he fell to his knees. He lifted his hands to his bleeding face. He stared at his fingertips perplexed when they came away bloody. “What the hell?”

“*Kill HER!*” Ricky shouted in stereo in her head. She gasped and dropped the necklace. Ricky’s anchor. The fool had been wearing the anchor.

“Kyle?” she asked.

“What’s happening?” He kept dabbing at his face and pulling his hands away to look at the blood smeared on them. He couldn’t seem to understand what it was.

“Do you remember anything?” She got down on one knee to look him in the eye. He stared at her wildly.

“I wanted to kill you,” he whispered.

“But now you don’t. It’s okay, but you gotta get out of here.”

Still in a bit of a daze, he got up off the floor and stumbled up the stairs. She picked up the locket and to follow him.

“*You won’t get away from me that easily.*”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said to the empty room. She wrapped the chain of the locket around her fingers to keep from dropping it.

“*We’ll be together forever. Just like it’s inscribed on that stupid locket.*”

"If you hate it so much, why'd you anchor to it, idiot?" She moved to the stairs.

"I didn't say you could go!"

She was almost to the first step when a stack of heavy boxes fell onto her. She covered her head to protect herself, but a heavy box knocked her down and twisted her ankle painfully.

"Like I said, you're not leaving." She dug herself out from under the boxes and scrambled out of the junk. She winced when she put weight on her left foot. She prayed that it was only sprained. She limped to the stairs.

She began hopping up them. Halfway up, Ricky grabbed her bad foot and jerked her back down. She toppled to the bottom and hit her hurt ankle. She curled into a ball as she tried to deal with the sharp pain.

"Keep trying to get away. I haven't had this much fun in years."

She couldn't take much more abuse. She had to end this, and the only way to do that was by destroying the locket. The frying pan. Where was the frying pan? Ricky must've been thinking the same thing. The frying pan came zooming across the room toward her head. She barely jerked out of the way. It hit the cinder block wall with a loud crack. The force of the impact bent it and made a hole in the wall. She stared at the bent frying pan for a second in horror. What if it had hit her head? Don't ask stupid questions, she scolded herself and turned back to the stairs. She began to limp her way up again. She kept a double-handed grasp on the banister this time. The chain of the locket bit into her fingers. She was determined to make it to the top. Once she was out of the basement, she'd find some other way to destroy the locket.

"You women are all the same. Whining about when we're here, and whining when we're gone. Why don't you make up your mind!"

"I'd be happy if you were gone," Mary muttered.

He tugged on her legs as she climbed the stairs, but he couldn't jerk her down them again. She grimaced each time he grabbed her bad leg but didn't stop her ascent. She was getting out of that basement.

She reached the top with relief. She was almost out. The light from the kitchen bathed her face. She grabbed the door frame with one hand to pull herself through. The door slammed shut on her. She cried out in pain and would've taken another header down the stairs if she hadn't been still clutching the banister with her other hand. It stung where the door had torn the skin on her knuckles, and a series of bruises was guaranteed across her fingers.

Ricky laughed. *"You're not going anywhere."*

"Kyle!" she screamed and beat on the door. Boxes flew across the basement. Some of them hit the stairs and made them shudder. Kyle threw the door open in bewilderment.

"What's going on? Why are you tearing up my basement?"

"It's not me, idiot." She pushed past him. What should she do now?

"Oh goody, the kitchen." She stopped and looked around the kitchen in terror.

A drawer on the far side slid open, and an assortment of knives popped up.

"Kyle, duck and cover!" Kyle dropped to the floor and covered his head. The knives flew by him and like sharp little missiles flew toward her. She knocked the kitchen table over and ducked behind

it. The knives plunged into it. Some poked out of the other side at her. Ricky had quite an arm. Kyle cowered in a corner and stared at the table and her.

“What’s going on?” he yelled.

“Badness,” she replied. She slowly got up from the floor. How could she destroy the locket? Unfortunately, Ricky wouldn’t wait for her to think up a solution.

The front door burst open. Mary turned to it in terror, afraid to see what Ricky could have pulled in from the outside.

Chapter 13

Tag Team

“Did somebody order a cavalry?” Rachel shouted, charging into the room. She brandished a large wooden cross. Gran was right behind her. The old woman still had on her kitchen apron, and she had Chowder tucked under her arm. Mary came into the living room and stared at them in disbelief.

“What are you guys--?” she stammered.

“No time for explanations,” Gran said. “Have you found the anchor?”

Mary held up her hand with the locket.

Gran approached her with her hand outstretched. “Okay, now we have to destroy it.”

“*You won’t get rid of me!*” Ricky snarled.

“Wanna bet?” Mary asked the thin air.

“*Yeah.*” A force shoved her against the wall. Her head cracked against the wood paneling. Mary wondered if her brain was becoming black and blue from all these bangs she kept taking. Her arms fell listlessly to her sides, and the chain unraveled from her fingers. The necklace pooled to the floor.

“The anchor...” Her voice slurred in pain. It slithered across the floor and under the couch. Rachel jumped after it.

“We’ve got to find a way to destroy it,” Mary said as she slid down the wall. Gran rushed to her side and bent toward her.

“Take my hand.” She reached to take her outstretched hand, but as their fingers grazed, Ricky threw Gran away from her and flung the old woman into a chair. Mary watched in alarm as an electrical cord snaked out and wrapped around her, tying her to the chair.

“Somebody, tell me what’s going on!” Kyle screamed again from his corner.

Mary ignored him and staggered up unsure of her balance. “Rachel, have you got the locket yet?”

“Almost,” Rachel grunted. She was stretched out full length on the floor with her arm under the couch.

She lurched over to Gran and tried to tear off the loops of cord binding her, but they wouldn’t budge

“Don’t worry about me. Take one of the pouches from my pocket. Stuff the locket into it. It should weaken him.”

Mary nodded and took one of the pouches.

"I don't understand. Why do you women keep defying me? She defied me too. I gave her everything she ever needed. Who got her this house? Who paid the bills? Who put food on the table? It sure wasn't her."

Mary made her way to Rachel, talking to the air, "And Julie should've just sat there while you beat her night after night without even a whimper."

"That's right."

"It's official. You don't get any smarter with death. You're still as stupid as when you were alive." She knelt and tapped Rachel on the shoulder to give her the pouch. Rachel took it in her free hand while she still reached under the couch for the locket.

"Mary, you shouldn't provoke an angry spirit anymore than he already is," Gran warned.

"You're mad she went on, aren't you, Ricky? You're mad that she left you here all alone. When she saw her chance to leave you, she did."

"She didn't leave me. I kept her here. Close to my heart."

"Stop denying the obvious, Ricky. She's gone. She left you. I don't hear any voice but yours."

"Mine's the only one you need to hear."

Mary looked around nervously. Ricky was getting angrier. She didn't want to know what he might do next. "Rach, hurry up with that locket."

"Got it!" Rachel popped up from beside the sofa. She fumbled with the pouch to stuff the locket inside.

"No, you don't!"

The sofa lurched into Rachel and knocked her down. The locket flew out of her hands.

"No fair," Rachel wheezed. Mary dove for the locket but missed it and landed on her stomach. The locket slithered into the hallway toward the bedrooms.

"This is my house! I make the rules!"

"No!" Mary cried. She needed to destroy the locket now before more than just property damage and bruises happened.

"Arf! Arf!"

"Chowder, go get the locket! The locket! Go! Fetch!" She didn't know if Chowder understood what she was asking, but she had to try. Chowder barked again from the direction of the hallway.

"Mary, did you just ask the dead dog to get the locket?" Rachel asked. She tumbled over the back of the sofa and landed on the cushions with an oomph.

She got up and went toward the hallway. "Well, why else did you bring him?"

The locket came streaking out toward her at about six inches above the floor. She squatted down, and Chowder ran straight to her. She took the locket. "Good boy," she murmured.

"Rach, throw me the bag!"

She threw the small pouch of herbs to her, but in midair, it did a right angle and flew into the kitchen.

"Interception!" Kyle giggled from his corner.

Mary gave him a ruthless glare, and he shut up. She was running out of patience and stamina. She looked down at the locket in her hand. 'He'd kept her here. Close to his heart.'

She pried the locket open with her fingernails. When she opened it, a cold blast of air hit her in the face. Inside was a lock of blond hair.

"You've imprisoned me long enough, Ricky," said a new voice. It was female and not happy.

The room started to fill with kinetic energy. A windstorm began that knocked over vases and tore pictures off the walls. From the overturned wastebasket, bits of paper swirled in the brewing maelstrom.

"Mary, what's happening?" Rachel yelled.

"She's unleashed another spirit," Gran answered from her chair.

"Another one?"

"I put up with your abuse for three years, Ricky."

"Everybody meet Julie, Ricky's former wife."

"Baby, I only wanted you to love me."

"Does that mean she's on our side?" Rachel asked.

"And in my foolishness, I did but not anymore. Time for payback."

"You could say that," Mary said.

The chaos in the room escalated. The floor began to shake, and the furniture began to slide around the room. As much as Mary wanted to give Julie a chance to get her due at Ricky, she really didn't want the ghosts to destroy the house in the process.

"Mary, watch out!" Gran shouted as her chair came barreling toward her. Mary jumped out of the way and the chair hit the wall with a resounding thud.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, the chair took the brunt of it."

"Do you have any ideas?" she yelled over the howling wind.

"Remember how I told you to never put tinfoil or silverware in the microwave?" Gran called.

"Yeah," she answered in confusion.

"Well, this once you can."

"You mean?" she said, comprehension dawning in her.

"Do it, before this gets anymore out of hand."

"I don't see how that's possible," Rachel yelled. She was crouched beside the sofa shielding herself from the winds with a cushion.

"Do you really want to find out?"

"Good point. Let's nuke 'em."

She struggled to her feet and began to hobble toward the kitchen. Rachel got up and put her arm around her waist to help her walk. They fought their way to the kitchen. 'Oh goody, the kitchen,' Mary thought with a grimace. Taking one step was a mini-battle. The winds felt like they'd gotten to class four hurricane status. It was amazing that the windows hadn't shattered yet. Kyle huddled in a small ball, staring wide-eyed at the chaos around him. Mary didn't spare him more than a glance as she and Rachel made their way into the kitchen.

"I just want to know one thing, Ricky. Why did you kill me? Why did you decide to come home that day and put a bullet in my head?"

“Like you don’t know. Did you think you could get away with cheating on me? I knew, and I decided to put a stop to it.”

“Cheated? Who would I cheat on you with? One of your buddies? They were worse than you, and their wives had the restraining orders to prove it.”

“Not one of my friends. That Paul that kept calling here all the time and one time came to the Police Department to pick you up. You spent the night with him, and don’t you deny it!”

“Yes, I spent the night with Paul, and God, I wish I had slept with him, but I didn’t. Paul was helping me. He was my psychiatrist, you bastard.”

“Do you think this will work?” Rachel yelled. They were almost to the microwave.

“No, but it’s our only option!”

“Then now or never.” Rachel staggered to the counter. She wrenched open the microwave door and got out of her way. Mary hurled the locket inside and slammed the door shut.

“How long?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Right. Time to go, Ricky,” Mary called. “You too, Julie,” she said to herself as she punched in 9999.

The cook light came on, and sparks began to go off inside the microwave,

“Mary, get—” Gran shouted.

“Nooooo!” Ricky screamed.

Julie let out a long sigh. *“Free at last...”*

The protective glass exploded outward. The two girls dropped to the floor. Small slivers of glass fell onto their backs.

“—out of the way,” she finished. The wind suddenly stopped, and everything in mid-air hung motionless a half second and then dropped. Gran untangled herself from the electrical cord as it fell limp.

“Is that it? Did we kill them? Again?” Rachel asked in disbelief as she helped Mary to her feet. Mary was having a hard time standing up. She couldn’t put any weight on her bad ankle. It appeared to be already swelling.

She looked at the wreckage in the kitchen. Sometime during the battle, the fridge had been flung open, and food and drink hurled to the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. All the cabinets were open and a few of the doors still swung slowly back and forth. But it was silent. Gloriously silent.

Until the smoke detector went off.

She jumped back and hit the counter awkwardly, banging her elbow and shifting to her bad ankle.

“Kill it!” Rachel screamed and grabbed a rolling pin.

“Oh God.” Mary laughed and collapsed back to the floor. A happy invisible dog instantly besieged her.

Gran calmly came into the room, reached up to the smoke detector, and wrenched out the battery. The incessant beeping stopped.

Kyle staggered to his feet and looked at the wreckage in horror. “What am I going to tell my parents?”

This sent Mary into another fit of giggles.

Rachel stepped over to him and grabbed his shoulder. "You could tell them the truth. A homicidal ghost tried to kill a girl from school, she saved your life, and in the process, destroyed your house."

"We'll help you clean up," Gran said, bending over and looking under the sink for cleaning supplies.

"I am not doing the microwave," Rachel declared.

"Could we go to the hospital first?" Mary pleaded from the floor.

"Why?" Rachel asked.

"So I can get my whole body X-rayed."

Chapter 14 Conclusions

"So how did you guys know to come here?" Mary asked as Rachel helped her out to the station wagon to go to the hospital.

"I saw the note on your locker. I was really pissed that you didn't tell me about it as soon as you came out to lunch."

"I hadn't seen it yet."

"Oh."

She gave Rachel a sideways glance. "I did want to tell you when I saw it after lunch, but you'd stormed off."

Rachel sighed. "Oh jeez, I'm such a bad friend." She opened the door and helped her get into the station wagon.

"No, you're not. You were awesome today. So you saw the note and called Gran?"

She nodded. "I was mad, but I knew you needed help. You can't do everything yourself."

Mary stretched out on the backseat and nodded. "I know, and I will tell you everything. I'll bore you to tears with everything."

Rachel grinned. "If I start snoring, just poke me." She smiled back.

"I expect to be told things too. Next time, you will call me before facing something like this again," Gran said as she got into the driver's seat. Mary nodded again. She was beginning to feel like a bobble head, but she deserved it. She hadn't been thinking when she'd rushed over.

Kyle got in the front passenger seat.

Mary gave her grandmother a questioning look through the rear view mirror. Her grandmother just shook her head minutely.

Gran started the car and turned to Rachel. "I'll be back shortly to help with the rest of the cleanup."

"You better. I might mix cleaning chemicals or something. There are many reasons my family has a housekeeper."

She grinned and waved to Rachel as they drove away. The grin slipped away when she turned and stared at the back of Kyle's head. Why was he coming with them? He should be helping with clean up most of all.

~ ~ ~

She sat in an uncomfortable silence beside Kyle in the emergency room. At the house, Gran had looked at Kyle's head and cleaned the cut made by the lamp. It wasn't bad enough for stitches. Gran had interrogated him thoroughly about how he felt. She'd looked closely at his pupils and declared that he didn't have a concussion. He didn't need to see a doctor, but he'd come with them to the hospital anyway.

He hadn't said anything on the ride to the hospital. After helping Mary fill out the insurance forms, Gran had left to go back and finish helping Rachel clean-up. She didn't know why Kyle stayed with her. Gran hadn't said anything about him staying. She just left them sitting together with the promise to be back in a couple of hours.

Well, if she was stuck with him, she took a deep breath. "Could you tell me why you were wearing Ricky's locket?"

Kyle sat hunched over with his hands clasped together. He shrugged his shoulders in response to her question. "Just a dumb idea I guess."

"But how'd you end up with it in the first place?"

He tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. "I found it when I went down to the basement after I heard all this stuff crash down there. All these boxes had fallen over, and when I started putting them back up, the locket sort of fell on my shoulder. It scared the crap out of me. I thought it was a freaking snake. When I reached down to pick it up, I thought I would show it to Mom, but when I picked it up, I changed my mind. I decided to wear it, and I got meaner everyday that passed until I couldn't hold in the hatred anymore."

She sat there in shock. She knew exactly which day he was talking about. She'd lured him into the basement by riling Ricky up. "Ricky decided for you to wear the locket. You didn't have a chance from the get go." She wasn't sure if her words were to reassure him or herself.

"Then I was possessed or something?"

Her eyes slid to him. "That's what I think. Or did you really want to go twelve rounds with me?"

"Oh God," Kyle said, putting his head in his hands. "I can't believe I did all that. I mean I really wanted to hurt you."

"Hey," she said, grabbing his shoulder. "You didn't want to hurt me. It was Ricky. I don't blame you."

"Still, you're not supposed to hit girls. Hitting on them is fine, but..."

Mary smiled. Even if it had been Kyle's body that had terrorized her for the past couple of days, it hadn't been Kyle, the person. She was beginning to like Kyle, the person, or at least, she didn't want him to suffer bodily harm.

"I should've been stronger," he murmured.

"It wasn't your fault."

Kyle shook his head. It would take him a little while to get over it, but she was positive he would. A nurse came over to them, pushing a wheelchair. “Miss Hellick, we’re ready to see you now.”

“Thanks,” she said. With Kyle’s and the nurse’s help, she got into the wheelchair. Her ankle had swollen to the size of a grapefruit, and the tiniest weight on it hurt like a thousand bee stings. As the nurse prepared to take her to an examination room, she turned back to Kyle. “Go home and help with the clean-up. Tell your parents you accidentally destroyed the microwave. They’ll believe you. Don’t worry about it. It’s all over.” He nodded.

“Mary?” he called.

She turned back again.

“Thanks, you know, for saving me and stuff,” he said, suddenly self-conscious. She smiled.

“No problem.”

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She sat silently in the front seat of the station wagon on her way to school. The doctors had said she shouldn’t do a lot of walking for the next month. Yep, she had sprained her ankle and was using crutches in the meantime.

How Kyle had ended up with the locket still troubled her. She felt culpable, and she didn’t like that. She’d been trying to help, but maybe she’d made things worse.

“Gran, I went to Cy’s house one time that you don’t know about.”

Gran turned and looked at her inquisitively. Mary squirmed in her seat. “I went over when no one was home to get rid of Ricky, but I couldn’t get into the basement safely. Kyle showed up while I was trying and instead of just running, I riled up Ricky to cause a distraction and make Kyle go to the basement.”

“Why did you send Kyle to the basement?”

“I wanted him in there so he wouldn’t see me leave that’s when Ricky put the locket on Kyle.”

“Oh.” Gran took a deep breath through her nose and looked out the windshield in thought.

“It’s my fault Kyle got possessed. Isn’t it?” Mary scrunched down in her seat unhappily.

Gran didn’t answer immediately. When she did, it wasn’t with denial. “It was wrong of you to knowingly send a person into a place with a malevolent spirit. You put him at risk. You couldn’t have known Ricky would give Kyle his anchor, but he could have hurt him. You have a very special gift that you must be responsible with. You know that there is more than just the living plane, and while others may not know or believe, you have to be conscientious of their safety.”

Mary nodded. She must have looked miserable because Gran reached across and stroked her head. “I’m glad you told me about this and proud that you could discern that you may have done something bad, but in the end, you also did a great deal of good. You not only expelled Ricky but also released the spirit of his wife. You gave the Ashers a house that they can now truly make their home. Learn from this experience, and you’ll be able to do more good the next time you help someone.”

Mary gave her grandma a startled look and said nervously, “I don’t want to make this a regular thing. I want to live as close to a normal life as I can.”

“I know, but someone may come across your path like Cy did, that you’ll want to help.” She nodded and gave her grandmother an easy smile. Once again, the fortuneteller had cemented her claim to coolest Grandmother ever.

She waved goodbye with a crutch as Gran pulled away from the school. She was struggling with a side door into the school to avoid most of the early morning crowds when a nice person pushed the door open and held it for her.

“Thanks,” she said. She was too preoccupied with her crutches to look up at the person.

“Mary, what happened to you?” She raised her head in surprise. Cy stood holding the door for her.

“Um, I sprained my ankle. It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal? Anything involving crutches is a big deal. Are you okay? How’d you sprain it?”

She stared at him in surprise at his interest. She briefly thought about telling him the truth. ‘Well, it happened while I was saving your house from a homicidal ghost. Sorry about the microwave,’ but she decided against it. It would be her little secret, along with Kyle’s and Rachel’s and Gran’s. Okay, maybe it wasn’t such a little secret, but none of them would tell what happened. It was too weird, and Cy had already proven that he couldn’t handle weird.

Mary wished that she didn’t have to lie to him, but this would have to be like her secret identity. She’d be regular old Scary Mary at school, and Super Scary Mary, at other times, able to vanquish ghosts with common household appliances, but she was not going to run around in a cape and change clothes in phone booths. Some things were just silly. Rachel would probably do it.

Seeing that Cy was still waiting for an answer, she ruefully grinned and said, “I tripped down the stairs yesterday. I know it’s really stupid. Would you mind not telling anyone? I’d rather they think it was due to a motorcycle accident or something.”

He smiled. “Your secret’s safe with me. Do you need help with your books?”

She blinked for a moment. She couldn’t believe he was being so nice to her. What had changed? “Aren’t you still mad at me or something?”

He looked down for a second. He squared his shoulders and looked back up at her. “I know that I’ve been a jerk, and I hate being a jerk. Let’s just let bygones be bygones and be okay. Okay?”

Mary didn’t know how to answer. She heard what he didn’t say. He didn’t say let’s be friends again. It made her feel empty. She had to swallow painfully before she could answer. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he repeated with a grin. He took her backpack and walked with her to her locker. She was quiet on the trip. She feared that the only reason he was walking with her was because of the crutches. As soon as they were gone, he’d be gone. He was just being nice, but he didn’t have to help her. Did this mean there was hope? Could they become friends again eventually? She stole a look at him. He was looking down the hall. He didn’t seem tense or nervous to be with her. He looked relaxed and maybe even a little happy if the upward turns at the corners of his mouth were any indication.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. He caught her looking. He turned and gave her a full grin. She tilted her head down. How did he always catch her looking? She knew that she was probably blushing a little, but she was smiling too.

“Mary, did something happen between you and Kyle since you came by my house that second time?”

She quickly glanced at him. “Why?” Kyle should’ve returned to normal now that Ricky’s influence had been removed.

“He’s been acting weird.”

“How?”

“Like nicer and stuff. It’s really weird.”

She smiled to herself. “I wouldn’t worry about him. I’m sure he’ll grow out of it.” He grinned and escorted her to her first period class.

She sat at her desk in contentment as the room filled with her classmates. Her life was going really well. She’d patched things up with Cy, she’d taken care of a nasty ghost, and she wouldn’t have to participate in gym for the next three weeks. Yes, life was looking good.

The intercom system clicked on. “Mary Hellick, please report to the guidance office.” Her smile turned into a scowl. Scratch that. Life had been looking good.

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“It hasn’t been two full weeks of school, yet you’ve already run afoul.”

Mary leaned her crutches against the wall and hopped over to the chair. She shot Mr. Landa a frown. If only he knew what could happen in two weeks.

“Eastern Snyder frowns heavily on skipping classes.”

“I’m sorry. I would have gone to class if I hadn’t been in the ER.”

His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at her bandaged ankle. “Yes, and how exactly did you sprain it?”

She smiled. “Well, you see there were these ninjas...”

The End

How to Contact the Author:

I have a blog at www.sahunter.net, which you’re more than welcome to check out. You can find other works by me listed there. Scary Mary is posted at <http://scarymary.sahunter.net>
