

# ***POWDER HOUSE***

**Judd Vowell**

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Proposal and Full Manuscript

Represented by Sandra O'Donnell, O'Donnell Literary

Julie Danner has been running away from home for nine years. The daughter of a retired cop and a mother who's been teetering on the edge of insanity for as long as she can remember, Julie hoped leaving and starting a career in journalism would silence the voices in her head causing her to question her own sanity. But when Chuck, her wheelchair-bound dad, calls asking for help with her mother, she's forced to go back home and confront a woman she hoped never to see again.

Elizabeth Danner resents her daughter's return, which she fears may expose the horrific secrets she's fought for decades to keep hidden. Secrets, that if uncovered, could shatter the fragile life she built to maintain her last remaining threads of sanity.

If going home wasn't bad enough, the house Julie moves into when she returns to Hopes Ridge may be haunted. The reporter in her tries to ignore the signs. But as the spectral visits become more intense, Julie realizes the other side is desperately trying to send her a message. To decipher the meaning, Julie reluctantly teams up with Madam Angeline LaChappelle, a medium, who's spent her life avoiding the black spirits among us that feed on fear and our baser instincts. Soon after the two meet, a dark spirit overtakes Madam Angeline before she can warn Julie that the answers she seeks are deep within her DNA.

The clues to the murder of Julie's ghost lie in the links to cold-cases her father uncovers. As the bodies pile up, the killer who started down a twisted, murderous path long ago is closer than anyone realizes. With each revelation, Julie moves from skeptic to believer. She must discover the terrible thing that happened in Powder House long ago, and set the ghost of GranBelle Jenny free.

Lurking at the center of the novel is a fetid secret that carries the stink of betrayal, lust, and a love twisted beyond anything natural. *Powder House* is an exciting crossover thriller that will appeal to fans of mystery and suspense, thriller, and stories about things that go bump in the night. Beneath the character-driven plot that takes readers through the twists and turns of discovering a killer are unspoken questions – "Am I crazy? Is this house haunted? What if I *am* just like my mother?"

*Powder House* reminds us that every house tells a story  
and every family has a history.



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## About Judd



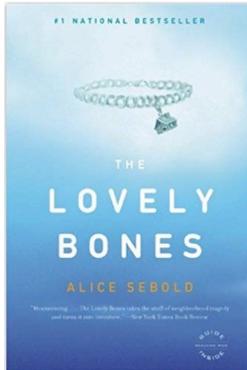
When Judd Vowell dove into the research for his new book *Powder House*, he got more than he bargained for, including a visit from the long-dead grandfather he never met. Through it all – from befriending a real-life medium to following the breadcrumbs fate dropped for him along the way – Judd discovered writing is a process that offers many gifts. Even ghost stories.

Judd’s writing journey started four years ago when he wrote and published the first book in the *Overthrown* trilogy, what he now likes to call his three “practice books.” The experience began as a challenge for the former musician, to see if he could write a novel. While those early efforts garnered a small following, Judd

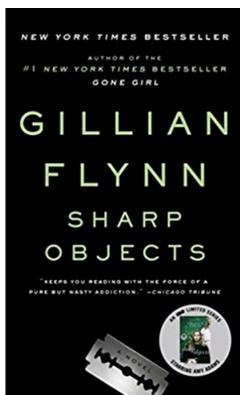
recognized that he needed help to grow as a writer. He found it in the guidance of a dedicated book coach who leads a weekly writing group, where he learned the conventions, expectations, and craft for writing a commercially viable book. To this day, he’s thankful for the early readers of the *Overthrown* series, who gave him the confidence to keep writing, and for the members of his writing group, who encouraged him through the many drafts it took to make this novel the best book it could be. His next goal? Publishing *Powder House* with a traditional publisher and making it a commercial success.

Judd lives with his eight-year-old son Charlie. He counts himself lucky in one regard, neither of them scares easy. Otherwise, those bumps in the night in a house where more than one person has died might have them seeing ghosts.

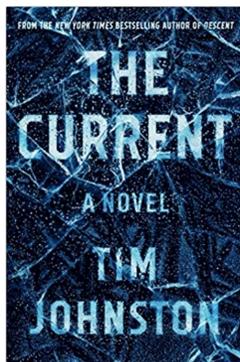
## Comparative Titles



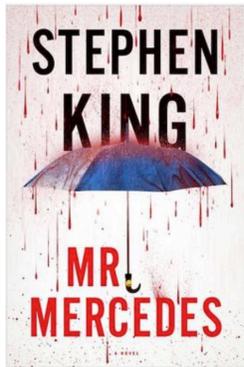
The similarities between *The Lovely Bones* and *Powder House* are difficult to miss. Both stories have murder victims who cannot depart the earth until they receive justice. Like Susie in *The Lovely Bones*, GranBelle Jenny is caught in the gray space between death and the afterlife. When Julie moves into the house she was killed in, GranBelle Jenny knows her time for retribution is at hand, and it is the only way she will be able to move on. Both end with surprising acts of revenge by the spirits that guide the novels.



Although Judd was a big fan of *Gone Girl*, he didn't discover Gillian Flynn's first novel, *Sharp Objects*, until the HBO series based on the book debuted. And the similarities between his and Flynn's novels weren't lost on him – the protagonists are both journalists with disturbed mothers who return to their hometowns. Both novels benefit from strong writing and interesting twists – but that is where the stories diverge. Fans of Flynn are sure to be drawn to *Powder House*, a tale of murder at the hands of a brother and sister so demented they make Flynn's Adora almost seem sane.



A small town, two young women drowned near a river, unsolved murders, and secrets lurking below the surface. Both *The Current* and *Powder House* rely on past events to inform the characters' present and sinister elements to compel readers to turn the page. Like Johnston, Judd allows the characters to tell the story. While Julie, the novel's protagonist, is the driving force in *Powder House*, the supporting characters come together to create a web of regrets, secrets, and revelations that pull readers toward the novel's stunning conclusion.



The villain of *Powder House* is a cross between Stephen King's character Brady Hartfield in *Mr. Mercedes* and the charming Mr. Brooks in the film of the same name played by Kevin Costner. Theo, the antagonist of *Powder House*, is a charming, attractive psychopath who kills to prove to his sister how much he loves her. *Powder House* has all the elements of a good King novel – an innocent, unaware protagonist, a twisted, dark antagonist, the presence of evil, and a supernatural connection to the other side.

## Comparatives in Film



Every year, Hollywood releases a spate of paranormal thrillers. And while some of the more salacious films do well, most are gone from the must-see lists before the popcorn is swept from the floor. A few, however, with “I see dead people” themes, have staying power, topping the box-office charts year after year. Released in 1999, *The Sixth Sense* has grossed nearly \$300 million dollars to date. 1990's *Ghost*, with Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore, has grossed over \$200 million dollars. *The Sixth Sense* remains on the “Top Grossing 100 Films of All Time” list year after year.

Why are these movies still popular long after their release? Because readers and moviegoers love a good mystery, a good scare, and a good ghost story. *Powder House* offers all three. A tantalizing mystery, an unexplained evil presence, and a ghost determined to punish the people responsible for her murder.

Could this be the next *Sixth Sense*? We think so.



**Fun fact:** 57% of Americans believe in ghosts.  
And 35% claim to have had a ghostly encounter.

## Genre and Themes

*Powder House* is a paranormal thriller with elements of mediumship and glimpses of the other side.

It's also a cold-case mystery. Julie and her retired cop father, Chuck Danner, team up to solve the murder of two local women who were killed decades ago not far from the small town of Hopes Ridge.

It is a story that explores the depths of mental illness, obsession, psychosis, family, and the gifts we are given to overcome the trials we must face.

## *Powder House* Details

Word Count — 93,000 words, complete.

Chapters — 41



## Potential Book Club Discussion Questions:

1. How you ever encountered a ghost?
2. Did the ghost present itself with smells or bumps in the night?
3. Have you ever been to a medium or a psychic?
4. Do you believe evil exists?
5. If you moved into a house and found out it was haunted would you leave?
6. Did the character of Leo throw you off track?
7. What did you like most about Julie Danner's character?
8. At the end of the story, we see Elizabeth Danner and GranBelle Jenny's spirits evolve and move on, but not Theo's. What do you think happens to Theo's spirit?
9. Who was your favorite character and why?
10. Would you follow Julie, Madame Angeline, Chuck, and Allison through a series?



# POWDER HOUSE

By

Judd Vowell

## Chapter 1

Jerry the MouseDog was barking in the kitchen again. A persistent and distinct series of doggie Morse code: three sharp yaps, five loud barks, followed by a long pause, making Julie think he was finished. Only he wasn't. Another series began as a rumbling growl formed, quickly turning into a one-two barking punch.

Julie rolled over, focusing her sleepy eyes on her phone, even though she already knew what the screen would show. Sure enough, it was 2:54 in the morning. This was the fifth night in a row Jerry, her normally docile dachshund, had woken her up at precisely 2:54. At first, she'd chalked it up to the move and new surroundings. In the six years they'd been together, Jerry had been a timid non-barker. Until five nights ago when the barking wake-up calls began. Which, just so happened to be the first night in Julie's new house on Grayson Lane. What was he trying to tell her?

The last four nights of Jerry's strange and persistent reveille, Julie had gotten up and searched him out. Each night, she had followed his yaps to the center of the house's cozy kitchen, where she found him sitting on his haunches, barking with unusual focus at some invisible spot on the ceiling.

"Come on, MouseDog," she had pleaded. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

By us, she meant her. He would look at her intently, his little brown head cocked to one side, before following her back to the bedroom, where she struggled to get a few more hours of sleep while he went back to snoring without worry at her feet.

But tonight, the fifth night of Jerry's nocturnal wandering, Julie refused to get up. She was determined to wait Jerry out. It would be a test of animal wills, canine versus human. Plus, she was curious – how long could a dog sit and bark at something that didn't exist?

Frustrated, Julie clicked on the bedside lamp and fell back on her pillow. She studied the ceiling of her new bedroom while she waited. As her eyes adjusted, she could vaguely see the texture of the ceiling's popcorn covering. *That looks awful*, she thought. *You could scrape that off no problem*. She stared a little longer, inadvertently finding a pattern, a complex map of some other world in the mountains and valleys of plaster. Her logical side kicked in. *Not so fast, Jules. You're pretty handy but you're gonna need to hire that job out*.

She laughed, the sounds of her chuckle echoing eerily around the quiet room. *Not even a week in a house, Jules, and you're heading to Home Depot? Sleep deprivation must really be getting to you*. She thought back to the apartment she'd left in Atlanta a week ago – she loved that apartment and the freedom from home repairs that came with it. *My, how fast things can change*.

She looked at her phone again: 2:56. Jerry was still going strong. She moved her eyes to the bedroom window, covered in a sheer drape left over from the previous owners. It reminded her of all the things the young family who had lived there before her had left behind – the drapes, the appliances, and the dishes Julie had found in the cabinets. Their move had been quick and careless. Not that she minded – single and temporarily unemployed, Julie would take all the free housewares she could get. But the sheers seemed old-lady dated and didn't offer much privacy. *Add blinds to the Home Depot list*, she thought.

Silence settled over the house, followed by the barely audible clicking of Jerry's nails as he trotted back to the bedroom. She looked at the phone one last time: 2:58. *Well, that didn't take long. Mental note: stay in bed when dog barks.* Jerry jumped up on the bed and circled a small area next to her twice before he collapsed.

"You satisfied?" she asked, ruffling his head.

He grunted a reply, squeezing his eyes shut.

"I suppose that's a yes."

It had only been four minutes, maybe five, and yet Julie was past the point of drifting back to sleep. It was always the same – once her mind was moving, she couldn't slow it down. It scurried along one path, jumped to another, and fell down a rabbit-hole of drowsy restlessness. Before she knew it, day would be breaking and her running shoes would be calling. If she did happen to fall asleep, it would be fitful, guaranteed. *But that almost makes it a self-fulfilling prophecy, now doesn't it?* And just like that, her busy brain was off to the races.

Her thoughts returned to the new house. Its emptiness. Its distinct lack of furniture. The century-old bungalow was not big by any stretch. The front door opened to a simple den, which led to a middle area that was a dining room back when people ate in dining rooms. Past that, the small but airy kitchen led out to a narrow backyard. It was all flanked by two evenly square bedrooms, separated by a single bath. Compared to her previous apartment, the house was practically palatial.

*Palatial and empty, Jules.* Her mind drifted to the sound of the hardwood floors, how they echoed with every footstep. By contrast, Julie's two-room apartment in downtown Atlanta had come fully furnished – for her, an opening salvo in the battle of becoming an adult. But the abbreviated moments of time she spent there between news assignments meant that she didn't have to invest in much of the grown-up furniture that people typically accumulate after college. She didn't own a couch, a coffee table, or the build-it-yourself-bedroom-set from Ikea that so many of her friends had proudly

put together. Her big-girl possessions consisted of a twenty-four-inch TV, an antique oak writing desk she had lugged around since college, and her prized possession: the vintage RCA turntable she had found in a Chicago pawnshop during graduate school.

When she'd first contemplated moving back home a month earlier, she assumed she would live with her parents until everything was settled. "*Assume nothing...*" she remembered one of her journalism professors teaching her, "*...verify everything.*"

Jerry jerked his head up and looked toward the bedroom door, startling Julie from her thoughts. A muted growl rose from deep in his throat.

"What now?"

Even though the MouseDog's peculiar behavior was concerning, Julie wasn't frightened – growing up a cop's daughter had squashed most of her innate fears by the time she was a teenager. And living by herself for so long had taught her not to let her imagination get the best of her. When it came to bump-in-the-night horror scenarios – break-ins, rapes, murders – the reporter in her knew that while they happened, it wasn't nearly with the regularity that her profession liked to purport. Especially in little old Hopes Ridge, where violent crime was practically non-existent.

Jerry relaxed and closed his eyes. Her mind eased for a moment before it took off again.

Her dad had thrown her a curveball when he presented her with the house on Grayson Lane, making the move seem so much more...permanent. *So what are you supposed to do now, buy a sofa? A dining room table? A frickin patio set?* He had assured her that the house was as much an investment for him as it was a place for her to live during her return. "You're not committed to anything, Julie-bean," he had told her. "Other than helping me with your mother." She supposed that was true. Unfortunately, the help her mother needed wasn't as clear-cut as Julie had hoped it would be. *But nothing about Elizabeth Danner's life has ever been clear-cut, has it?*

"Why can't I have a normal mother?" Julie moaned into the recess of her pillow.

Jerry wriggled against her leg, as if to say, *“Be quiet up there!”*

“Yeah, yeah, I know. There’s no such thing as normal, right?”

But the question had been a part of her for as long as she could remember. No matter how much Julie tried to find the answer, it had always eluded her. Why couldn't *her* mother be like the other moms? Julie’s childhood would have been vastly different if Elizabeth Danner hadn’t been an absentee mother – like a ghost almost, there physically but forever somewhere else in her head.

Julie’s go-to mantra popped into her brain, the same one she had repeated as a child from the darkest corner of her bedroom closet when she needed to calm herself: *“We’re all mad here...we’re all mad here...we’re all mad here...”* It was a quote from her favorite book growing up, one she had read over and over again as a little girl. In so many ways, she was just like Alice, and she was still on her own mind-bending journey through a very real Wonderland.

“You don't define my life, Mother,” Julie shouted defiantly. But now that she was back in Hopes Ridge, with her budding journalism career on hold, a thought formed she couldn’t push away: Elizabeth Danner had been determining Julie’s path for twenty-seven years...

*And she still is.*

Elizabeth Danner, née Dempsey, had always been a bit off – Julie’s dad described it as “a tiny screw loose up somewhere in the old noggin.” But Chuck Danner had fallen for her anyway, marrying her after a whirlwind courtship. Unfortunately, the screw continued to loosen as the years ticked by.

After Julie was born, her mother’s dark episodes increased. Terms like “bi-polar” and “manic depressive” were whispered around town, and yet nothing was confirmed, despite Chuck’s pleading. Elizabeth refused to see a doctor and get an official diagnosis,

although her symptoms grew uglier. Chuck persevered through it all. The repeated rescues of a forgotten Julie from the school pickup line. The week not knowing if Elizabeth was alive or dead, until authorities found her holed up in a Pensacola hotel room. And even after Elizabeth's long affair with a local ne'er-do-well lawyer became public knowledge. Yep, if there was one thing Chuck Danner had, it was perseverance. And as much as Julie loved her father, a piece of her hated him for sticking by a woman who had caused them both so much pain and embarrassment.

When her dad had called her a month earlier, out of the blue, Julie hesitated. "Your mother's had an accident, Julie-bean. I can't do this alone anymore." The details of the accident were fuzzy, but what was known was this: at four o'clock on the previous Tuesday morning, an Alabama state trooper had discovered Elizabeth Danner unconscious in the driver seat of her idling Ford Escape, sitting sideways in the median of Interstate 65 on the outskirts of Birmingham, nearly thirty miles north of Hopes Ridge. Julie's mother had no recollection of how she had gotten there or why she had left her house in the first place. The Escape's front bumper and grille were damaged, and Elizabeth had a deep gash across her forehead. Per standard protocol, the trooper had ordered a blood test at the hospital, and while it came back negative for alcohol, there was a significant amount of barbiturates in her system. "She can't control herself," her dad had said on the phone that night. "And Lord knows I can't stop her."

After a guilty conscience went to work on her, Julie knew what she had to do, even though her dad never came out and asked. He was right, he'd never been able to contain her mother's episodes, no matter how much he wanted to – a man confined to a wheelchair could only do so much.

"I've decided to come home, Dad," Julie told him the next day. "We'll figure something out when I get there."

It took her three weeks to wrap up her Atlanta life. Her boss at CNN was incredulous at first. After all, she was an up-and-comer, a real standout in the investigative reporting department.

"I know leaving is a risk." She could be committing career suicide, and she knew it. "And I'm wasting an opportunity. But I have to go. Would you consider hiring me back when I've gotten everything under control?"

"There are no guarantees in this life, Miss Danner," her boss replied coldly. "Come see me when you're ready to work again."

Grateful she'd gone with a month-to-month lease on her apartment, she rented a small U-Haul for the trip back home, bribing a cameraman who'd been asking her out for months to help her load it. "Dinner when I move back, Ben – I promise." The following morning, she climbed into her nine-year-old Honda Accord with Jerry in the passenger-side floorboard. The car, a high-school graduation gift from her dad, was the most reliable thing in her life, so she held on to it fervently. With Alabama ahead of her, a state she'd vowed never to return to, she took one last glance at the Atlanta skyline in her rearview mirror. *Just a temporary setback, Jules, that's all. It's just temporary.*

As she drove west, crossing the Georgia/Alabama border, getting ever closer to the hometown she wished she could forget, she couldn't shake the mixture of regret and dread that was bubbling up inside her. *You're doing the right thing, Jules. The old man needs you. He was there for you, pulling parental double-duty all those years. You owe him this.*

And yet, as much as she kept telling herself she was doing the right thing, the knot in her stomach had continued to tighten.

3:06. Eight minutes had passed since Jerry's return from the kitchen.

She'd been on the verge of sleep, her subconscious finally overtaking its wakeful counterpart, when something had brought her fully awake. Not Jerry this time. No, this

time it had the *feeling* of an icy hand reaching through the comforter, sheet, and t-shirt covering her. Goosebumps spread like a cold rash across her body, refusing to fade. The icy chill disappeared quickly, but it had left a lasting mark.

“Settle down, Jules.” Her voice broke through the shadowy silence.

She glanced at her phone. Another minute gone, and another minute closer to daybreak – she wasn't worried about missing a few hours of sleep anymore, because the sun would be a reprieve. *A reprieve from what exactly?* She turned her head slowly, letting her eyes lead the way.

Was her bedroom darker than it had been eight – now nine – minutes before? It seemed that way, as if some gigantic blanket had been spread over her new house. *But wouldn't that make things warmer too, Jules?*

“It's called a metaphor,” Julie said aloud, still trying to calm her prickly nerves.

She rolled onto her back and spoke the mantra that always soothed her: “We're all mad here...we're all mad here...we're all mad here...”

When she opened her eyes, the room seemed brighter and less threatening. *Good. That's better.*

There was officially something strange about her dad's surprise house, even though she refused to acknowledge what. A ridiculous idea ran through her head. *No way, Jules. Not possible.* She willed her mind to race like it had before, even if that meant running through the memories of her broken family. Right now, she'd take any distraction from the thought of that cold feeling and the goose bumps barely fading from her skin.

With concerted effort, she went back to the moment six days before, when the truth of her mother's condition had hit her, and she realized she'd gotten herself into much more than she had bargained for.

It had been close to eight o'clock in the evening when Julie pulled her Honda to the curb in front of her parents' house, but the early August sun was still shining in her face from the western end of the street. The neighborhood had always provided a veneer of normalcy, hiding the unusual family life the Danners lived in their suburban dream house. Steeling herself before going inside, Julie watched a pack of pre-teen boys cruise by her car on their bicycles, spread out across the street like some middle-school biker gang, wet pool towels draped around their necks. She listened to the last strains of Tom Petty belting out "Refugee" before turning off the Honda's engine.

*Easy for you to say, Tom. Maybe this girl does have to live like a refugee.*

Petty was one of her dad's favorites, one of the many musicians he had introduced to Julie over the years. "When guitar riffs still ruled the world," he would say with each new introduction. She had been a fan of classic rock ever since. Like father, like daughter. When the song's final chords faded, she switched off the ignition and climbed out of the car.

The Danners' house, a large two-story colonial with the requisite two-car garage, was a picture of suburbia perfection. The weathered plywood ramp that covered the front steps was the only outward sign that things in this house were out-of-step. That ramp had been installed the day Julie turned fifteen, the worst birthday she could remember. It was a glaring reminder of what her life wasn't, and what it would never be – normal.

Julie avoided the ramp and went through the open garage, edging between her mother's Escape and her dad's old GMC pickup. She tried but couldn't avert her eyes from the truck's hand controls rising from the drivers-side floorboard, another deflating reminder of his permanent disability. The truck was more than old. When Chuck was shot, now twelve years in the past, it already had a hundred-and-fifty thousand miles on it. *How is that thing is still running?* She shook her head at the thought and slid through to the kitchen door.

Inside the house, she found her dad exactly where she expected – in the den, laid back in his faded brown recliner, watching baseball, his little mutt Rocko perched on his lap. The dog alerted him to Julie’s presence with a string of yaps. Jerry the MouseDog returned the greeting from beside her feet.

“Hush, Rocko.” Her dad brought his recliner up to a sitting position. Julie’s eyes unwillingly went to his legs, small and motionless beneath his barrel-chested torso. Julie had never gotten used to her dad’s disproportionate body. Years after the shooting, it still made her uncomfortable and sad. She looked to the big-screen TV, where the Braves were playing the Phillies.

“No Cards tonight, huh?” she asked.

“Nah. Gotta watch these damn amateurs instead.” It didn’t matter how good or bad the St. Louis Cardinals played – to Chuck Danner, every other team in the National League was at least one level below them. You could take the boy out of the Midwest, but the Cards were in his blood.

“You do know cable has a baseball package you could order?” Julie asked. “You could watch your beloved Cardinals all season long.”

“What? I’m made of money?”

“You deserve a little something for yourself, Dad. That’s all I’m saying.” She leaned over and kissed him on his forehead. His hair was still black, without even a suggestion of gray, but she noticed it was beginning to thin on top. Her old man was getting old.

“Home sweet home,” The joke fell short. “But seriously, thanks again, Julie-bean.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” She looked toward the ceiling. “Is she upstairs?”

Chuck couldn’t hide his frustration as he answered. “Where the hell else?”

For as long as Julie could remember, Elizabeth Danner’s escape from her own manic mind had been the second-floor guestroom she’d converted into a sewing sanctuary

and a refuge from the real world. When she and Chuck had first moved into the house as a young couple, her hobby led to the drapes, bedskirts, and tablecloths that donned the windows, beds, and tables of their new home. After Julie was born, Elizabeth had created beautiful smocks and dresses that peppered Julie's childhood photos. But as Julie grew older, something changed. Her mother continued to sew, but only as a way to keep her thoughts and impulses under control. By the time Julie was a teenager, it had been years since she or her dad had seen a finished project. But the sewing went on.

Right before her mother's accident, the old man confided that the sewing had become frantic and consuming – so much so that Elizabeth rarely came out of her room.

"Your mother spends every minute up there," he'd said, "with that machine of hers chug-chug-chuggin' away, sewing God knows what for God knows who. All day long, every goddam day."

Now that she was back home, Julie was about to find out just how bad it was.

"Go say hello," Chuck begged after Julie's arrival. "If you're really set on helping me with this, you might as well try to be civil with the woman."

Julie raised an eyebrow. "I'm doing this for you, Dad, *not* her."

"I know, I know. Just try – please."

Julie stood her ground for a few seconds before relenting. She left her dad and walked to the entrance hall off the den. As she plodded up the stairs to the second floor, she could hear the hum of her mother's sewing machine come and go haphazardly.

She knocked lightly on the sewing room door, secretly wishing her mother wouldn't be able to hear it. But the machine fell silent. A chair scraped against hardwood floors. Julie remembered her beat-up but faithful Cardinals cap at the last second, snatching it from her head just as the door cracked open to reveal her mother's emotionless face, but nothing else.

Elizabeth Danner looked much older than the last time Julie had seen her, only a few months earlier. Her face was thinner, almost gaunt, lined with wrinkles that Julie hadn't

seen or had missed. But even aging couldn't alter Elizabeth Danner's stunning good looks. Julie clenched her jaw. Seeing her mother was always a shocking reminder – her own long legs and straight hips, thick chestnut brown hair, and arctic blue eyes were the spitting image of the woman before her.

"Hello, Mother."

"Julianna," Elizabeth said, referencing Julie's given name as she always insisted on doing.

Julie's eyes settled on the bandage covering the left side of her mother's forehead, concealing the stitched gash that had been the result of her mysterious car accident.

"How's your head?" Julie asked, unable to hide her disdain.

Her mother touched the bandage lightly. "Oh, yes. It was nothing. Nothing at all." She smiled her famous Elizabeth Danner tight-lipped smile – the smile that meant she was done discussing the matter.

The smell of cigarette smoke was sneaking out into the upstairs hallway. Julie could picture a lit cigarette perched in the middle of her mother's large crystal ashtray, even though she couldn't see into the room.

"Still smoking?"

"It's one of the few things I have left, Julianna. Now please, let me get back to my project. I would love to hear what plans you have for your stay in Hopes Ridge, but not now."

"Good to see you too."

After her mother had closed the door, Julie stood rooted until she heard the scraping of the chair's legs again, followed almost instantly by the sound of the sewing machine chug-chug-chugging away.

Back in the bedroom of her new home, the last thought Julie had, before she drifted off, was how much had changed in only five short days.

Musing on her reluctant return to Hopes Ridge worked its drowsy magic. Sleep pulled her into a deep and convoluted tangle of dreamscapes. Julie found herself in an alternate dimension, a false reality without paralysis or mental illness or a life that had been placed on hold. She dreamed of a young woman that may have been her, but she couldn't quite tell. In the fog of her subconscious mind, she was in the middle of a baby shower. The dream became clearer, and Julie realized that she was the mother, holding her newborn in her own cradling arms, as a circle of women surrounding her ooh-ed and ahh-ed.

For some reason, there was music being played, just loud enough to be heard over the gaggle of female friends. It was a song she didn't recognize, and yet the words of the call-and-answer chorus were clear.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

The scene shifted, and now Julie was sitting at a decorated dining table, still at the same shower. An antique bassinet, painted white, had been placed on her right, with her baby sound asleep inside. On her left sat her mother, but not the mother she had always known. This Elizabeth Danner was doting and proud. She turned her face to Julie and smiled, genuine happiness shining from her ice-blue eyes.

The music from earlier played on, louder with each lyric.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

The baby next to her began to cry, a startling scream in reaction to some newfound terror. Julie reached for the child, but there was nothing there. The bassinet was empty, and the terror became Julie's.

She looked to her mother for maternal help, but what she saw terrified her even more. Elizabeth Danner was transforming, aging with a frenzy before Julie's dreaming eyes.

The missing baby's cries were gone, but the music churned forward.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

Her mother's face sagged before its skin began to bubble and molt, the flesh melting from a hellish internal fire. The ice blue of her eyes faded to black as they bugged out of their sockets. The bones of her skull showed through her dissolving skin as her hair fell from its roots in clumps.

Julie found herself unable to move, as if she were tied to her chair by invisible ropes. Her decomposing mother raised her hands and slid them up Julie's chest, groping for her neck. In the dream that had become a nightmare, Julie was powerless to stop them. She couldn't even muster a scream to the women around her, who hadn't noticed what was happening, who were going about the celebration without pause.

The knuckles of her mother's fingers were like knobs of steel around Julie's throat, squeezing with a supernatural strength. Julie willed herself to wake, knowing it was a dream, that none of it was real. But consciousness eluded her, until the skeletal fingers choked the life from her, and waking up was all she had left.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

Julie sat up and felt her throat, looking around the room desperately, gasping to breathe and shake off the frighteningly real nightmare. *Think, Jules. Calm down and think.*

It was still dark. She was in her bed. The phone beside her read 3:41. Jerry the MouseDog was gone again. A thin layer of clammy sweat covered her body, like she had just finished one of her morning runs. She rubbed her neck, where her dreamed mother's decaying hands had been, expecting to find the skin and muscles around her throat sore, bruised even, but there was no pain at all. A wave of relief calmed her – but only for a moment.

In the panic of her waking and taking inventory, she hadn't noticed anything out of place. But now, worming its way into her ears, was the faint sound of music playing from somewhere in the house. Her muscles stiffened, concern growing into fear in spite of her usual moxie.

She threw the covers from her sweaty body and put her feet on the cold hardwood floor, the chilly air heightening her senses. Her eyes went to the bedroom closet, where she kept the gun her former police officer father had given her before she moved to Atlanta. It was on the top shelf, in a metal box, and not even loaded. *It's just music, Jules. Go turn it off. Besides, wouldn't Jerry be barking if someone was in the house?*

*Jerry!*

She stood up and walked to her half-open bedroom door, leaning her head through. The music was louder, clearer now.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

Julie froze, recognizing the words from her dream. She focused on her legs, willing them to move. She walked gingerly through the small hallway and through the nearly

empty middle room to the den's open doorway. Catching a glimpse of her own shadowy reflection in the TV's blank screen, she flinched and drew back.

"Come on, Julie! Get it together."

After she turned on a lamp, she saw Jerry, sitting with his back to her in the middle of the den, his ears flexed and his head tilted toward the music. He turned to her and whined.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

She quickly pinpointed the source. It was coming from her pawnshop record player, a giant wooden console that took up half of the den's far wall. She tried to decipher the style of the music, now that she was close to it. It sounded like it had been produced in a bygone era, maybe the 1940s or 50s, long before the classic rock her dad had raised her on. The singer was definitely female, with a powerful voice. The instruments backing her up were simple, natural, and underproduced – drums, guitar, piano, but nothing else. Another chorus erupted from the speakers.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

Julie leaned over the console, afraid to see what she knew was there. Against all probability, a seven-inch record was spinning below her, the needle of her player slowly dragging its way across the vinyl's shallow grooves. She spun around and looked behind her. There was no one there, at least not in her den. She turned back to the record player and lifted the needle, and the music mercifully ended.

*Check the house, Jules. Every. Single. Room.*

She moved through the house quickly, turning on lights in each room as she went. The front door was locked, as was the back. There wasn't much furniture to check behind, but she did anyway. Nobody was crouching in a corner, no one was hiding behind the shower curtain, and the closets were empty. The house was just as it had been when she'd fallen asleep hours earlier. The only people there were Julie and poor Jerry, who was peering up at her from the den floor, his soft eyes full of concern.

"I know, Jerry. I'm a little freaked out too."

She went back to the record player and glared at the mysterious vinyl. It was nearly solid black, its label almost completely worn off. She gently took it from the player, holding it between the tips of her fingers as if it held some real physical threat to her. *How in the world...?*

Five days earlier, on move-in day, she'd found a small stack of old records in the bedroom closet – yet another thing left behind by the previous owners. She had moved the collection to the den, placing the records next to her own with the intention of going through them, just in case there were a few gems hidden in the stack. The record with no label that she now held in her hand had to have come from the previous owners, but who had started playing it?

Julie sat on the sofa, a remnant of her high school days, on loan from her parents' rec room. She held the vinyl disc loosely, no longer afraid that it might harm her, as curiosity began to take over. *What the hell is happening here?* She sat for a few minutes, pondering the mysterious music. Any more sleep was out of the question. Anxious for the comfort that the morning sunshine would bring, she wished the night away.

Jerry had moved to her feet, where he sat staring up at her.

"You can go back to bed if you want, MouseDog. This girl's making some coffee and staying up."

Decision made, Julie rose from the couch and headed to the kitchen, taking the record with her. *There has to be a logical reason for what's been happening. We just have to find it. But first, coffee.*

She opened the first drawer she came to, sliding the puzzling record to the back of it, where it would be out of sight and hopefully out of mind. As she flipped on the coffeemaker, Julie noticed the time: 3:36. *Gonna be a long day tomorrow, Jules. Let's make this first pot extra strong.*

She stretched her back until she heard it pop before crossing the room to get creamer from the fridge. Halfway there, her left foot skidded on something, and her leg flew into the air, her balance teetering for a split-second before leaving her for good. *What the hell was that? Water? Wine from earlier? Did Jerry pee inside?* The questions ran through her mind just before her head hit the floor with a violent thud, the force of the fall knocking her out.

When she came to, she was barely floating on the edge of consciousness. Even still, she could hear Jerry whining from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm okay," she tried to reassure him, but the simple words came out jumbled. She heard her own voice, distant and slurry, saying, "Urm uh-kuh."

Her back was cold and wet, her t-shirt soaking up whatever liquid she had slipped on. It roused her fading mind for a moment. The ceiling above her came into focus, just as a small round section of it began to disappear, exactly where the MouseDog had been barking each night. In its place, Julie saw a circle of light, gradually brightening, its white luminescence bathing her in a peaceful calm. It was as if the light was a physical power, wrapping her in its invisible arms, pulling her upward.

Jerry's whines grew into growls, then aggressive barks.

"Thas nah rel," Julie tried to assure herself, all the while her inner voice speaking to her clearly, telling her otherwise. *That's as real as it gets, Jules. And don't you forget it when you wake up tomorrow.*

The white light continued to squeeze her, soothing her, even though her mind was fading into unconscious oblivion.

And then, with a blinding flash, the light was gone, just like everything else around her.

## Chapter 2

Allison Hargrave, Julie Danner's best friend and reigning Hopes Ridge real estate queen, had been waiting on Julie for twenty-five minutes at Café du Rosé, the closest thing to a French bistro in town. It was Allison's kind of place, a restaurant that would have been considered too sophisticated for the locals ten years earlier. She was hoping that Julie, fresh from big-city Atlanta, would like it too. But now she wasn't so sure. Julie had kept her waiting more than enough time for Allison to finish her first lunch-hour vodka martini, and she hesitated before ordering another one. Julie was never late for anything. Allison wondered if a week back home, dealing with her crazy mother had been enough to send her best friend running back to Atlanta.

She'd already tried calling Julie twice, in between a series of text messages:

Here! Got us a table by the front window.

OMG waiter looks JUST LIKE Liam Hemsworth. Don't u dare wear that stupid ball cap inside.

Where r u? I've got a showing at 1:30.

Hello??? Are u ok?

The good-looking waiter approached as she tossed her phone on the table in frustration. He'd been flirting with her since she sat down. A natural blonde, who knew how to dress, Allison was used to getting attention and usually enjoyed it. But Julie's no-show caused her interest to wane.

"Another martini?" he asked playfully.

"Just the check, please," Allison said distractedly, handing him her AmEx. The waiter's lighthearted demeanor disappeared. She put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, honey – I'm worried about my friend who's missing in action."

A slight smile returned to his face before he went after her bill.

Allison looked at her phone for the tenth time. If she left now, she'd have just enough time to run by Julie's house and check on her before her 1:30 showing. She was on the verge of closing her second million-dollar sale of the year. A young – and married, to Allison's dismay – attorney and his wife were relocating to Hopes Ridge from nearby Birmingham, to escape the city traffic and enroll their future children in better schools. Transplants like them were becoming a trend, and Allison was determined to ride the wave as long as it lasted. The wealthy power couple was ready to make an offer – Allison could feel it in her realtor bones.

"Your check," the waiter said, allowing his fingers to brush the back of her hand as he dropped it into her palm.

Allison added a big tip and scribbled her signature without looking up.

She made a beeline for the restaurant's front door, checking her phone on the way to her car. Still no texts from Julie, and no call back either. As she slid behind the wheel of her sleek BMW, another wave of worry washed over her, followed almost instantly by aggravation – Allison hated missing out on a potential future hook-up. She whipped the BMW out of its parking space and took off for Grayson Lane, leaving a screeching delivery truck in her wake. The startled driver had to veer out of her way.

Julie's head wouldn't stop pounding, even with the bag of frozen peas-and-carrots she was using as a pillow. The couch was more comfortable than the kitchen floor, but in her current disheveled state, not much. Jerry lay on her stomach, the nervous look from the night before still lingering in his big brown eyes.

Three loud bangs from the front door startled her, causing her to sit up straight. A familiar but concerned voice followed.

"Julie!"

*Allison...thank God.*

Julie spun on the couch to put her feet on the floor, and her head spun too, followed by a wave of dizzying nausea that rolled across her stomach.

"You better not be dead in there, Julie!" Her best friend was trying to joke, but Julie could hear a hint of panic too.

"Coming..." Julie tried to shout. She stood, confirming her balance for a second before she walked to the door. When she opened it, the sunlight that poured through was assaulting.

Allison took a step back and snickered. "Hey, hot stuff. Hung over much?"

Julie could only imagine what she looked like – barefoot, wearing only the t-shirt she had slept in, and her hair surely a rat's nest. "Believe it or not, this has nothing to do with alcohol." She slunk back to the couch, sliding the bag of frozen vegetables under her head.

"Then I hope there's a good story to go with the way you look." Allison came inside, closing the door behind her. The room grew mercifully dim again. "But I've got a house to sell in..." she glanced at her watch, "...thirty-five minutes. So let's get to it."

"I wish I had something exciting to tell you, but I don't remember a thing. I woke up in the middle of the kitchen an hour ago with a pounding headache. I must have fallen in the middle of the night."

"You *'don't remember anything'*? You *'must have fallen'*? Are you fucking kidding me?" Allison was known to be both creative and prolific with her use of the f-word, whether she be excited, angry, or, as she was now, clearly frustrated.

Julie moaned. "I'm not kidding you, Allison. Something happened, of course. But I have absolutely no memory of it."

"Julie, you're kind of scaring me. Should you go see a doctor?"

The consideration had crossed Julie's mind, but she had blown it off. Even if it was a concussion, she could handle it. "No. No doctor. I'll be fine."

Allison made a move toward the kitchen. "Good, cause I need a sandwich."

"Oh shit, we were supposed to have lunch today, weren't we?"

"As a matter of fact, we were," Allison shouted from the empty middle room, her voice echoing. "You need a fucking dining room table in here, by the way."

Same old Allison. The girl had never been one to withhold her emotions, no matter the consequences – and no matter her appetite. Julie knew Allison was concerned, but she was also hungry.

She sat up, wincing. *What the hell happened last night, Jules?*

The answer was there, though she fought its reality. She remembered it all, up to the moment she passed out, with the blinding white light from the ceiling reaching out to her. Truth be told, she was a bit embarrassed. The further removed she became from the night before, the more she believed that there had to be a logical reason for everything that had happened. The cold *feeling*? Could have easily been her A/C unit kicking into another gear on a muggy summer night. The wet spot on the kitchen floor? Maybe she had forgotten to let Jerry out before bed. And the random spinning record? *Now that's the one that doesn't make any sense, does it, Jules?*

"Don't you have any turkey?" Allison yelled from the kitchen. "All I see is bologna in here!"

"Because that's all there is!" Julie yelled back, immediately regretting it.

"How old are you?" Allison snapped sarcastically. "Nine?"

Julie ignored her. She heard the fast and hard pace of her best friend's stilettos as she came back through the house again.

"Screw it, I shouldn't be eating anyway. I've got to run. You sure you're ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Go sell a house."

"I'll check on you later – just answer your phone when I call this time." Allison opened the door and put on her oversized sunglasses. "Commission time," she announced to the world outside.

A minute later, Julie listened as her best friend sped away in a rush.

*We're all mad here...maybe so, Jules. Maybe so.*

Despite their dueling personalities, Julie Danner and Allison Hargrave had been best friends since they were six years old. They met on the first day of kindergarten, when Allison stepped in to defend Julie from a first-grade bully, kicking the boy right in his balls on the playground after he called Julie's mother a "loony-bird." Allison's intervention sent him straight to his knobby knees in a heap of pain and sobs. The two girls had bonded instantly, and after that, they were inseparable.

As Julie grew up grounded and thoughtful, Allison remained the risk taker – the friend who pushed Julie out of the world she carefully constructed to deal with life at home. When a sixth-grade Allison snuck her mother's makeup into school, Julie smeared it on with her. When a freshman-year Allison convinced an older guy to buy her a six-pack of Bud Light at Freddie's Fast Stop, Julie shared it with her. And when Allison could barely remember losing her virginity to the Hopes Ridge High backup quarterback at a weekend keg party, Julie consoled her. They came of age together, and when they went to separate colleges – Julie to Vanderbilt, Allison to Alabama – it was hard. But unlike many of their peers, they never lost their bond. They talked and texted every day, and whenever they saw each other, they were right back where they had always been – best friends.

So, when Julie had called Allison a month earlier, to tell her she was moving back to Hopes Ridge, Allison was ecstatic.

"Don't get too excited," Julie had warned her. "It's only for six months, a year max," Julie had warned her. But Allison was determined to make her best friend's return a more permanent one. Not long after Julie's call, her dad Chuck had phoned. He wanted to buy a small house that Julie could live in – one that would guarantee a profit when

he decided to sell it. Allison seized the opportunity. She knew the perfect area, close to the Danners' neighborhood, but far enough away to give Julie a semblance of space. The area had been a seedy part of town when the girls were growing up, dotted with unkempt lawns, junkers on blocks, and couches on more than one front porch. But with more people moving in from Birmingham, the East side had been dubbed East Park, and the renovators and flippers were snapping up houses as fast as they came on the market.

"You're in luck, Mr. Danner! A new listing came across just this morning. On Grayson Lane, East Park's hottest street."

Truth be told, the selling couple had called Allison the night before, desperately needing to move their two-bedroom bungalow fast, so motivated that they wanted to price it below market value, even though she advised against it. Her advice to Chuck had been simple but urgent – "Buy it today, Mr. Danner, because someone else will."

It took Julie another two hours and four Advil to subdue her headache from raging pain to a mild throb. About as long as it had taken to justify the middle-of-the-night disturbances. By the time she'd showered and dressed, she'd convinced herself that the previous night's events hadn't been that unusual at all, even the no-label record playing on its own. Maybe she had picked it up by accident the day before and left the player running. *Keep telling yourself that, Jules. You might just start to believe it.*

What she knew for sure was that she had to remedy Jerry's 2:54 AM barking fits.

"Time for that Home Depot run, MouseDog," she told him as she headed out. He barked once in reply.

She picked out two things at the home improvement store: a retractable baby gate and a swinging wooden door, with the hardware to install it. The baby gate would be a temporary solution to Jerry's nightly kitchen obsession while she worked on putting in

the door, a project that might take a day or two. Julie knew her way around a toolbox, but she was untrained in the art of door installation.

On her way home, she stopped by her parents' house, a daily ritual she'd fallen into since moving back. Her dad had been clear about what he needed from his only daughter: support and proximity. Chuck had learned in his twelve years of disability to take care of himself, but his wife's car accident had spooked him. He wanted Julie close when Elizabeth's next bout of crazy occurred.

"Trust me, Julie-bean," he'd said, "it's not a matter of if anymore."

It was dusk when Julie pulled her car into her parents' driveway. She walked through the garage, noticing her mother's unrepaired Escape. The door into the kitchen was unlocked, and Julie barreled through it without knocking. She expected to find her dad in his den recliner as usual, with her mother upstairs behind her closed sewing room door. But instead, she walked in on the woman, and it stopped her short. The historically haughty Elizabeth Danner was – *gasp* – unloading the dishwasher, filling cabinets and drawers with a ferocious determination.

"Hell...hello, Mother," Julie stammered.

Elizabeth looked up from her chore. "Hello, Julianna," she said, returning to her work as quickly as she had left it.

Julie's headache returned with a vengeance. *What the hell is she doing down here? She only comes out after dark, with the vampires and other creatures of the night.* Julie fought the inclination to go down a long internal disparagement of her mother. Out of respect for her father and her commitment to help him, she would have to find a way to be civil with the woman. Otherwise, life back in Hopes Ridge was going to be much harder than Julie needed it to be.

"Need a hand?" she asked.

"Despite what your father may have told you, I can handle a few dishes."

Julie bit her lip. "Sorry, just asking."

Her mother turned on her sharply, holding a butcher knife destined for the wooden block on the countertop.

“Julianna, I’m not sure why you’re here. I don’t need you here. And if I’m to be honest, I don’t want you here.”

Elizabeth held the tip of the knife at her side, below her hip, next to the meaty part of her thigh. Julie could see the knife’s blade twist in her mother’s hand.

“I know your father has summoned you here. His sweet, helpful little Julie-bean running home to save the day. But I’ll let you in on a secret, Julianna – I can take care of myself. And your father gets by too, for a cripple.”

Her mother was wearing black yoga pants, stretched skin-tight around her thin legs. The hand holding the knife began moving more and more erratically with each word she spoke. The knife’s tip tore into the pants’ fabric. Julie noticed a layer of moisture building in her mother’s ice-blue eyes.

“Mother, where is Dad?” she asked, concerned.

“Let me finish, Julianna,” her mother commanded. “This is *my* house, and it’s always been *my* house.”

A hole appeared near the seam of her mother’s leggings, followed by a smudge of blood on the end of the knife as it dug into the meager muscle of her mother’s thigh.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you? You always have.” Elizabeth laughed nervously as a tear slid down her cheek until it reached the bottom point of her chin and hung there, dangling like a diamond on a necklace.

“Mother, why don’t you put the knife down while we talk?”

Elizabeth looked at her bleeding leg, as if she hadn’t felt what was happening below her waist. She steadied her hand and slowly wiped the blood from the knife’s blade on her pants. Turning her back on Julie, she carefully placed the butcher knife into its wooden block and shut the dishwasher.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to tend to my leg. As I said, I can take care of myself, Julianna. Don’t you dare forget that.”

Julie stood motionless as her mother left the kitchen. She heard the woman’s delicate steps on the stairs. “What was *that*?” she whispered.

Growing up, her mother’s mental illness had been a thorn in the family’s side, a shameful embarrassment, an obstacle to normalcy, a secret carefully guarded. But her illness had obviously mutated into full-blown what? Psychosis? Her father had tried to warn her, but Julie hadn’t yet seen it in person.

“She’s different, Julie-bean,” he had told her. “I can’t manage her on my own anymore.”

Julie hadn’t read between the lines during their recent phone conversations. Chuck Danner had been *scared* of his wife and what her sick mind might force her to do, and now Julie was scared too.

She moved quickly through the bottom floor of her parents’ house looking for her dad. She found him in his downstairs office that had also served as his bedroom since the shooting that paralyzed him. He was facing his computer with headphones on, his back to her. An instant wave of relief rushed over her. His little mutt Rocko was at his feet and gave her no notice as she came in. Trying not to startle him, she tapped him lightly on his shoulder. He jumped anyway, ripping the headphones from his ears.

“Goddammit, who’s there?” he shouted as he craned his neck around.

“Just me, Dad.”

“Julie-bean! You damn near scared the piss right outta me.”

“Sorry – just checking in. What’s with the headphones?” She could see that they were plugged into his computer.

“Music – it’s the only way I can drown out that damn sewing machine when I’m working.”

Her dad's work consisted of trying to crack murder and missing person cases that had long gone cold. He spent hours searching for the one clue that the cops had missed, no matter how detailed and thorough the investigation might have been. In the years since his disability had forced him to retire, he had helped solve numerous dust-covered cases, using the same innate intuition that had made him a renowned Birmingham homicide detective so long ago.

"Speak of the devil, I just saw Mother," Julie continued. "She was unloading the dishwasher."

"She was doing *what?*"

"I know. She's trying to prove a point – she doesn't want me here."

"Don't take anything she does or says to heart, Julie-bean. She's not herself – now more than ever."

Julie pictured the butcher knife in her mother's hand. "I'm starting to see that." She rubbed her eyes.

"You alright?" her dad asked.

"Yeah. I didn't sleep well last night." She stopped there.

"Well, go on and get outta here. And remember – she doesn't mean to be hurtful."

"Sure Dad, whatever you say." Julie leaned over and kissed him on his cheek. "See you tomorrow, old man."

"Old man, my ass. Don't let the wheelchair fool you."

"I never have," Julie said as she left, letting him get back to the work that made him feel like the cop he could never be again.

By the time she made it home, Julie had forgotten all about putting up the baby gate in the kitchen doorway. Her head was still pounding, despite another double-dose of

Advil. She decided sleep would be the best medicine, while the thoughts of Jerry and his 2:54 wake-up call escaped her muddled and pained brain.

She had been right. As soon as her head hit the pillow and she stretched out under the covers, the pain subsided and the worry of the day slipped away. She fell into a blissfully dreamless sleep almost instantly.

She woke, groggy and stiff, groping in the dark for her phone. It was 3:55 in the morning. Jerry's barking hadn't roused her on that sixth night in the house on Grayson Lane, but she realized that the MouseDog *had* been the reason for her disturbance. She could hear him, at the side of her bed, crying in muffled whimpers. As Jerry's whines got louder, she reached for him.

"What's wrong, MouseDog?"

When the palm of her hand touched the top of Jerry's head, she pulled away, instinct driving her reaction. *Ew...what is that?* She mustered up some bravery and slid her hand along the side of his small body, and the sensation was there too. *Is he wet? Why is he wet?*

She took her hand from Jerry and probed for the lamp next to her. Her damp fingers slipped as she tried to turn it on. When she tried a second time, they slipped again. *Grip it and rip it, Jules.* The third time, she grabbed the switch tight and twisted it with determination.

The room brightened, her surroundings coming to life. In the light, she saw what she had hoped was all in her head: Jerry the MouseDog was sitting beside her bed, staring up at her with nervous eyes and whimpering, soaking wet from head to tail.

### Chapter 3

Like a lot of kids, Julie Danner had inherited certain traits from her parents she had no control over. Some obvious, others more obscure. One such trait she had noticed early in life had come from her dad – she had her father’s innate intuition, a God-given sensibility that had made him a great cop. It was always there beneath the surface, guiding her through her life and leading her to the next scoop, the next big story. It was her own kind of sixth sense, and it almost never let her down.

When the soaking wet and whimpering Jerry woke her, Julie’s sixth sense lit up, her intuition overpowering her fear. Jerry’s soggianness coincided perfectly with her slippery fall the night before. Something wet *had* been on the floor last night, and now her dog was covered in what *had* to be the same substance.

She jumped out of bed and got down next to Jerry, smelling his fur. Whatever was on him was odorless. She ran her hand over his back and looked at her dampened palm. The substance was colorless too.

“I think we can safely say you’re covered in water, Jerry.” He had not stopped whining. “I know, let me get you a towel, poor thing.”

She dried him off until his whimpers faded. When she was done, Julie made her way to the kitchen, careful not to step where she had fallen the night before. She knelt by the spot and placed her hand on the floor. There was no puddle, not even a wet residue, but the floor was so cold, it was almost painful to touch. She yanked her hand away, confused. Her bare feet felt fine – the biting cold was just in that one spot. She looked up to the ceiling, halfway hoping to find the shining light she had seen the night before, halfway hoping it wouldn’t be there. Only the popcorn ceiling stared down at her. Julie put her hand back on the floor, making sure she wasn't imagining things, but she had to pull it away just as before. Her palm was stark white and numb. *Like a dead man’s hand, huh, Jules?*

Jerry appeared in the kitchen doorway, recovered from his momentary pitifulness. He barked – at Julie, not the ceiling.

“I don't know, MouseDog. I just don't know.”

She stood and walked to her coffee pot, just as she done twenty-four hours earlier. She pulled out a filter and loaded it full of coffee grounds. There would be no more sleep for Julie that night – her mind had already started down a path of fierce curiosity that she knew she couldn't stop.

She started the swinging door project the next day with resolve. On top of ending Jerry's middle-of-the-night mania, the project offered a welcome weekend distraction.

*You know what they say about idle hands, don't you, Jules?*

The thought led her straight to her mother, always sewing, always working on...something. Julie hoped she would never understand what drove the woman to live her life the way she did, and yet there was a worry that lingered in the back of her mind. *Her blood is your blood, Jules, just like those ice-blue eyes. And there's nothing you can do about it.*

The door installation went easier than expected, and the kitchen deterrent worked like a charm – Jerry the MouseDog showed no interest in pushing the heavy door open with his nose. *One problem solved.* That night before bed, Julie made a few additional preventive strikes, unplugging the record player, setting the air conditioner at 70, and shutting her bedroom door to stop any additional late night wandering by Jerry. She was thrilled when she woke up Sunday morning having slept seven straight hours of uninterrupted sleep. She repeated her ritual with the same result Sunday night.

Out of curiosity and playing a hunch, she left a large bowl in the kitchen throughout the weekend, right in the spot where she had felt the stinging cold with her hand, and where she had fallen. The bowl remained dry all weekend long, leaving Julie with a

strange sense of disappointment. *Maybe that imagination of yours is more powerful than you thought.*

Monday morning, she went for her first run in weeks, a six-mile blood-pumping, head-clearing route that left her ready to meet the day. But her day held no plans.

*You're not one for sitting around watching daytime TV, Jules, and you know it.*

It was time to pay a visit to her old friend Bruce Woods.

Bruce Woods was the stalwart editor of *The Hopes Ridge Herald*, which, like so many of its daily news counterparts across the country, was gasping for air by the time Julie moved back home. Bruce was also one of Julie's oldest friends. Their camaraderie had grown out of a mentorship when, during her sophomore year in high school, Julie had discovered the allure of investigative journalism.

That year, not long after Chuck Danner was shot and nearly killed in the line of duty, Julie stumbled on her first big story. The shooting, which had left Detective Danner paralyzed from the waist down, meant immediate approval for lifetime payments from the Birmingham Police Pension and Disability Fund. But the monthly checks were slow to come, and one check never came at all. Julie wanted answers, and her family needed the money.

With Bruce Woods as her guide, Julie uncovered layers of corruption and embezzlement, not only inside Birmingham's police department, but throughout the city's government. She forwarded her findings to *The Birmingham News*, and the next thing she knew, she'd written a series of pieces that were picked up by the Associated Press. She had to share her byline with a professional reporter, but she still got a rush seeing her name in the paper – *A CITY BUILT ON GREED: Special Report by SAM WOFFORD and JULIE DANNER*. The chief of police was the first to be indicted, followed by two city councilmen. It wasn't long before national TV networks caught

wind of the sensational sixteen-year-old who had brought down a major metropolitan government. They interviewed Julie for their morning shows and nightly newscasts. Katie Couric even dubbed her “The Birmingham Bulldog” live on the *Today Show*. Julie had been a star for a moment. And without an old news hound like Bruce Woods guiding her, she couldn’t have done it. The memory of that first story brought a smile to her face as she pulled her Honda into the newspaper’s weathered parking lot.

To get to Bruce’s office, Julie had to walk through the huge warehouse that held the paper’s only printing press. The monstrous machine itself was sadly quiet as she passed by it that Monday morning. Bruce had cut the paper’s production to three days a week, a reaction to dwindling demand. But even with the giant mechanism in a dormant state, Julie admired its capability. She slid a hand along its blackened metal surface, an example of human ingenuity and invention she still found exhilarating.

At the other side of the lengthy building, she saw Bruce ripping into a young cowering man – a rookie reporter who had obviously made a mistake. She’d been on the receiving end of one of Bruce’s rants more than once. She snuck up on the old editor and slapped him hard on his back, saving the newbie from more humiliation.

Bruce wheeled around defensively, but quickly recognized his former protégé. “Julie Danner! Look at you, all grown up.” He stretched out his arms, his irritable demeanor gone. His face was wrinkled and his hands were stained black from decades of handling newspaper ink – Julie was thankful for the navy-blue color of her t-shirt as she gave him a hard hug.

“Hey, Mr. Woods,” she said, squeezing him.

The two had stayed in touch over the years. She called him for advice whenever a big career decision loomed before her, and at other times just to check in. But they hadn’t seen each other since her high school graduation.

“Mr. Woods, my ass,” he snapped, holding her at arms’ length. “You’re old enough to call me Bruce.” He stared at her, pride beaming from his face. “C’mon. We’ve got some catching up to do.”

He started up the wooden stairs that led to his second-floor office overlooking the printing-press floor. He was tall and still lean, despite his age, and he ascended the steps quickly with Julie on his heels.

Bruce’s office was small and dank, smelling of ink and machine oil and stale coffee. His large metal desk was scattered with the various submissions in need of approval for the next edition: article drafts, photo replications, layout mockups. An open MacBook laptop sat teetering on top of the pile. The office hadn’t changed since the last time Julie had seen it.

“Take a sit,” Bruce said. He walked to a corner of the office where a skinny table held a decades-old Mr. Coffee. “Just brewed a pot. Have a cup?”

“Sure.” She sat in the room’s solitary chair, a squeaky rocker on wheels behind Bruce’s desk.

He filled an oversized Styrofoam cup without offering cream or sugar and brought it to her. “Hope you like it black. You know, I never understood why people put that other shit in perfectly good coffee. If I wanted cream and sugar, I’d eat a scoop of ice cream, goddammit.”

“The grouch lives on,” Julie said, raising her cup in a mock toast.

“Guilty as fucking charged, alright?”

“How you been, Bruce?”

He grimaced. “Gotta say, things could be better. I’m a croaking dinosaur in a dying industry. Kids your age don’t give a damn about picking up a paper. They never did.”

“Now that’s not completely true. It’s just that people don’t *need* to pick up a paper anymore.” She pointed to his laptop.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But the writing on those websites? It’s shit, and you know it.”

She laughed. "Agreed."

"So, what'd you do? Tell the boys at CNN to take their job and shove it?"

"Not quite. And my boss was a woman, Bruce."

"One of those, huh?" He rolled his eyes. "Women can write, without a doubt. And they can get interviews that men can't – for obvious reasons. But managing the news? C'mon. I have yet to meet a woman with big enough balls to run a successful news organization."

Julie was all too familiar with the sexism in her industry of choice. And if not for her self-confidence and writing ability, she may not have been able to rise above it. But it still stung to hear it mentioned so blatantly, even from an old dog like Bruce Woods.

"Pardon my directness, Mr. Woods, but shut the hell up. You're starting to show your age."

"Sorry, no harm meant." Bruce put his hands in the air. "Now seriously, why in the world did you leave Atlanta?"

"My dad," Julie said plainly. "He needs me. At least for a little while. Besides, CNN's not going anywhere."

"So you say. But you know as well as I do Julie, this is a fickle business – it will pass you by without you ever knowing it."

How well she knew. She took a long sip from her cup of coffee. Maybe it was fate. Maybe she'd come back at exactly the right time, to help her old friend Bruce and his faltering newspaper. To be there for him the way he'd always been there for her. She didn't know how long she might be in Hopes Ridge, but she could use the time honing her craft – now to convince him. *He'd be a fool not to take you on, Jules. You just saw what he's dealing with downstairs.*

"Might pass me by, huh?" she said. "Well, maybe that's why I'm here. You hiring?"

Bruce dropped his chin into his chest, eyeing her over the glasses that always hung on the bottom of his nose. "Hiring what?"

“Very funny, Bruce. You need good writers, don't you?”

“I need a good arsonist to burn this damn place down, is what I need. Then maybe I could finally retire.” He gave her a sly smile. “This paper won't be around much longer, Julie. Go get a job in Birmingham – newspaper, TV, whatever you want. There's nothing here for you.”

“Why fight my way up from the bottom in Birmingham when I can start at the top here?”

“If there's one thing I've learned how to do in my forty years in this biz, it's how to smell the bullshit when it's being shoveled my way. With your CNN credentials, you wouldn't have to fight for anything. I may be old, but I'm not senile just yet, Miss Danner. What's the angle?”

Julie sighed and took another sip of coffee. What would be the best way for her to play this? The family story would work, and it wasn't entirely untrue. “I've got to stay close to home, Bruce. It's the whole reason I'm back in Hopes Ridge. My mother's not doing well. And you remember my dad's situation.”

“Damn sure do. That was a bad night for the city of Birmingham. Don't forget, I went to the scene myself.” Bruce shook his head at the memory. “How's he doing?”

“Pretty good, I'd say. But my mother's another story. She had a car accident, and it's got him a bit edgy. She's less herself than she's ever been. So, that's the deal. I can't go to Birmingham and get in the rat race there. I need to keep my writing sharp, but I don't need to be obligated. Got to be close and available at a moment's notice. That's the angle.”

Bruce walked to the window that faced the printing press, his back to her. “I can't pay you much.”

“I know.”

“And there isn't anything in Hopes Ridge worth writing about.”

“Yeah, there is.”

He turned toward her again, frowning. "You're not gonna be busy, and you're not gonna be happy."

"Perfect. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Well, shit. I guess there's no changing your mind?"

"Nope."

"Alright, then. Miss Julie Danner, welcome to *The Hopes Ridge Herald* – where the paper's getting thinner every week."

Julie stood up and gave Bruce another big hug. "Thanks, old friend. I needed this."

"Me too," he whispered in her ear.

There was a group of five desks stationed on the printing-press floor, right below Bruce's upstairs office. Three of them sat vacant.

"Take your pick, Miss Danner," he told her.

She chose the desk furthest from the others and sat in the rolling chair behind it. The cushion on the chair sank too much, and Julie could feel the springs poking through it. The metal desk was cheap, old, and dented in places.

"Low-tech workspace – I like it."

"Don't patronize me, Julie. It's the best I can do. Now listen, I don't have time to hold your damn hand. You're gonna have to find the stories on your own. And the paper's down to two sections, so make your writing count. There's no room for fluff."

"Yes, sir." Julie straightened herself as much as she could in the worn-out chair. Hearing Bruce bark out demands reminded her of Atlanta and her old boss at CNN. She tried her best to stifle a reactive smile. "I'll do my best, Mr. Woods." She saluted him as she said it.

"Jesus Christ – just do what you do. Ok?"

"Do what I do. Got it."

Bruce turned and climbed the stairs back to his office.

*Okay, do what you do. Well, what you do is find leads. And since there's nothing else leading you right now, might as well see what we can find out about that house of yours.*

Julie grabbed a pen and a pad of paper, and headed to the archive room.

*The Hopes Ridge Herald* Archive Room was bigger than its name suggested. It was more like an attached but separate warehouse that was connected to the printing-press area by a single doorway. Julie had spent hours and hours in the room as a curious teenager, pulling papers with coverage on Birmingham elections and commissions as she built her story of city corruption and government greed. When she walked into the room, with its smells of aging paper and musty storage boxes, she imagined herself a decade earlier, discovering truths in life that she wouldn't be able to ignore ever again.

Back then, the archives had been stored on microfilm, and there had been two bulky microfilm readers on a long table near the entrance to the room. But now the long table was gone, replaced by a single desk. On it sat a flatscreen computer monitor with a keyboard and mouse. *At least Bruce has upgraded something – very nice.*

She sat at the computer and wiggled the mouse. The monitor's screen came to life, displaying a desktop that showed access to the internet along with a myriad of virtual file folders labeled by years. *1913-1917, 1918-1922, 1923-1927*, and so on. Julie clicked on the first chronological folder, and its vast contents popped open: five years' worth of early Hopes Ridge newspapers. There was a blank search box at the top of the page with a flashing cursor inside it.

"Might as well start from the beginning," she said to herself. She typed "Grayson Lane" into the blank box and hit enter. Her fingers tingled with anticipation – the start of a hunt was always the most exciting part.

The morning clicked by as Julie made her way through folder after folder, searching for any recorded history on her house. There wasn't much. Based on city development news, she determined the house was built in the early '30s, as part of a housing program for Hopes Ridge mill workers. Another file revealed a paving project announcement for Grayson Lane and the surrounding streets in a paper from 1948. The historical information was interesting, but fruitless. It wasn't until she opened the folder containing newspapers from 1978 to 1982 that anything truly significant showed up.

The story was strange. It was only three lines long, and it appeared almost as an afterthought on the last page of the August 9<sup>th</sup> edition from the year 1981. The sentences, while vague, gave Julie a deep chill as she read them:

*Woman Found Dead In Home*

*72-year-old Martha Jennings was found dead as a result of unknown circumstances in her home at 143 Grayson Lane Tuesday morning. Mrs. Jennings, better known in the community as "GranBelle Jenny," was a longtime employee of Dr. and Mrs. William Persall. The police are requesting anyone with information concerning her death to come forward.*

Julie read and reread the blurb, her stomach tightening more and more with each pass. The address mentioned was hers. And the day was the same. *Today is August 9<sup>th</sup>, which means she would've died on...* Julie stopped her brain mid-sentence. A woman had died in her house mysteriously, quite possibly on the same date as her slip-and-fall, but that was all she could glean from the story. The painfully brief news item led her to

more questions than answers. *What in the world did they mean by “unknown circumstances”? Why were they requesting more information? Why was this story so unimportant that it ended up on the back page of the paper, and barely even there at all?*

She quickly scrolled through the following two weeks of saved newspapers, but found nothing more on the unusual death of Martha Jennings, aka GranBelle Jenny. No mention of her at all, in fact. No case solved, no obituary, no person-of-interest who had come forward with valuable information. Nothing. The woman’s death had garnered her a measly three sentences in the local paper, and then she was gone.

Julie sat back in her chair. The morning and early afternoon had disappeared, and she hadn’t even noticed. Her stomach groaned with hunger. She closed out the folder she had been combing through and stood, stretching her arms and back and neck. Her mind was racing.

*What have you gotten yourself into, Jules?*

Without missing a beat, she answered the question out loud. “Simply put? The middle of a frickin ghost story.”

It was supposed to be a joke, but her words hung in the stale air of the archive room, and Julie wasn’t laughing.

## Chapter 4

Julie spent her first week working for Bruce Woods in the trenches, trying to find where her stories might fit in his short-run newspaper. The two reporters he had on staff were woefully inexperienced, their writing still based on the strict rules of their schooling. Julie, on the other hand, knew that good journalism was finding a balance between the guidelines of structured reporting and a writer's own voice, between the facts and his or her own perspective. She had a natural talent for the work, while many of her contemporaries didn't. Her plan was to do what she'd done at CNN – investigative research and reporting, except on a bit smaller scale. "Sounds good to me," Bruce told her. "Bring me a story as soon as you've got one, and I'll print it."

When she wasn't looking for stories, Julie kept searching for details on the history of her house and the woman who died there in a shroud of mystery. At the Hopes Ridge courthouse, she uncovered deeds and titles showing the various owners of the property, including Dr. William Persall – the same doctor mentioned in the newspaper article from 1981, who apparently GranBelle Jenny had worked for in some capacity. The doctor had sold the house in 1982. After that, it had not changed hands until two years earlier. *When the motivated sellers, who left in an awfully big hurry, purchased the home.*

A week went by without any more eerie incidents. Jerry the MouseDog had thankfully returned to his docile self, the swinging kitchen door doing its job as blockade throughout the nights. Her record player remained blissfully quiet, and the only cold *feelings* came from the air conditioner's attempts to keep the August humidity at bay. All in all, the house on Grayson Lane was peaceful and calm, and Julie's nerves followed suit. As interested as she was in the house's history, her fears, for the most part, dissipated with each day that passed.

That Friday, Julie was deep in the weeds of research for her first investigative piece – a story on a Birmingham financial advisor who had allegedly swindled five Hopes

Ridge residents out of their million-dollar nest eggs – when she saw Allison’s name light up her phone. She sent the call directly to voicemail. Thirty seconds later, her best friend called again. Julie reluctantly answered.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something, can I call you back?”

“I kind of am too,” Allison responded. “It’s called a vodka-soda with two limes.”

“Very funny. Believe it or not, I’m working.”

“It’s Friday afternoon, Julie. Nobody works on Friday afternoon around here. Come on...you know you want to join me for a drink.”

Allison had successfully broken Julie from her concentration, which was her friend's intention, Julie was sure. But a drink did sound tempting. “Where are you?”

“At The Blue Camel. I’m ordering for you as we speak.” Julie overheard Allison placing an order for two more vodka-sodas in her faux British accent. “With two limes, please, dah-ling.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Julie said.

“See what I mean?”

“What?”

Allison giggled. “Nobody works on Friday afternoon around here.”

Allison was camped at a tall table on The Blue Camel’s front porch, half a cocktail in front of her, and a full one waiting on the side. The porch was already packed with early weekend revelers, and the atmosphere was lively.

“Welcome, my dearest bestest friend!” Allison shouted as Julie approached. “Thanks for dressing up,” she added derisively, eyeing Julie’s worn jeans, t-shirt, and Cardinals cap.

“Hello to you too,” Julie said calmly. “Looks like I need to catch up.”

“You sure as hell do.” Allison handed Julie the full drink.

Julie took a sip, wincing.

“Bartenders sure know how to pour a drink here, don’t they?” Allison said with a wink.

“Depends on what you’re trying to accomplish, I suppose.” Julie took another sip – the second one wasn’t as harsh.

“Just a little fucking happiness, that’s all. This is the first chance I’ve had to take you out since you moved back. Welcome home, officially.” Allison held out her glass, and Julie clinked her own against it. “Plus,” Allison continued, “I closed on two houses this week. We’ve got plenty of reasons to celebrate.”

“Congratulations...*Al*.” Julie had been noticing the hard-to-miss Hargrave Realty “For Sale” signs blanketing town, each with her best friend’s gleaming headshot, and her shortened name “Al Hargrave” printed in bold letters underneath.

“Unfortunately, some still think it’s a man’s world,” Allison said. “Especially in our beloved South. You can’t imagine the looks on the Birmingham and Atlanta boys’ faces when they meet ‘Al Hargrave’.” She straightened up in her chair and pulled her shoulders back, pushing her ample chest forward. “It throws ‘em every time, and I’ll take any advantage in negotiations I can get.”

Julie shook her head and laughed for the first time in weeks.

“Another round over here!” Allison yelled to the waiter on the other side of the porch. He nodded his acknowledgement.

Julie switched gears. “Ok, before this gets out of hand, I need to ask you something.”

Allison pouted. “Julie, why do you always have to get all serious?”

“Not necessarily serious, just something I’m curious about. What do you know about the people who sold the house to Dad?”

Allison considered the question. “Not much. Youngish couple, one little kid and a new baby, I think. That’s why they wanted to move – after the second kid came, the house was too small. Nice folks.”

Julie worded her next question carefully. "Did they seem anxious at all?"

"Anxious? No...not really. But now that I think about it, they had already moved out when they called to list it. And they priced that house below market – against my recommendation, I might add. Your dad paid a lot less than he should have." Allison raised her cocktail above her head. "But at Hargrave Realty, we aim to fucking please."

Julie pondered the information. Maybe it had been a new baby and the need for more space, but Julie's intuition told her there was more to the story. A young couple with a family didn't leave money on the table unless there was a reason. Hell, nobody did.

"Where did they move?"

"Not sure. They stayed in Hopes Ridge. I can find out."

"Would you?"

"Maybe," Allison said, sitting back in her chair. "What's with all the questions anyway? Are you working on a story?"

Julie wasn't quite ready to tell Allison about what might be happening in her house. In truth, she wasn't ready to talk about it at all, to put it out there as a possible reality. It sounded crazy, and with a mother like Elizabeth, crazy was the last thing she wanted people calling her. She would rather solve the mystery herself than have Allison worry she was morphing into her mother. *Don't you forget, Jules – "We're all mad here" – aren't we?*

"No, nothing like that," Julie said. "They left some stuff behind, that's all." It wasn't totally a lie. She wasn't working on a story and they *had* left things.

Allison stared at her for a few seconds, squinting her eyes. "Ok, I'll see if I can find them. Now – let's have some fucking fuuuuun!"

It was going to be a long night.

When Julie opened her eyes, she sensed the morning had passed her by. Looking at her phone, she confirmed her suspicion – it was almost noon. *You haven't slept this late since college.* She didn't move for a few minutes, her stomach swirling and her head throbbing. Jerry sat at the end of the bed staring at her, judging her. *"So this is what happens when you hit the town with Allison Hargrave,"* he seemed to be thinking.

The night was a blur, but she remembered bits and pieces. After dinner at The Blue Camel, she and Allison had walked to one of Hopes Ridge's two downtown clubs, where a local band was playing covers right out of Julie's record collection: songs from the Stones and the Beatles to Clapton and Hendrix. They stayed for a while, dancing and letting the hopeful male patrons buy them drinks. At some point, Julie remembered dragging Allison away from one suitor in the nick of time and making a mad dash for the door. She had directed their Uber driver to Allison's house first, then to her own, where Julie at least took her clothes off before she fell into bed.

She sat up and steadied herself with her hands. Her stomach rolled. She put her feet on the hardwood floor of her bedroom. The room wobbled until she found her balance.

*"I've got to get something in my belly, Jerry."*

He whined at her, as if to say, *"Me too."*

She went to the kitchen, swinging the door open wide for Jerry to follow. She poured him a bowl of dog food before pouring a bowl of cereal for herself. They both devoured their delayed breakfast, Julie standing the whole time. Her stomach settled with each spoonful.

*You know what the best hangover cure is, don't you, Jules?*

*"Yeah, yeah, I know."*

Jerry looked up at her, his head cocked in bewilderment.

*"Never mind, MouseDog."*

He put his nose back into his bowl, not noticing when Julie went to put on her running clothes.

The run was excruciating, but she was committed to getting in her standard six miles. She ground her way around the neighborhood, the churning rhythms of her workout playlist pumping loudly through her ear buds. She always ran to a solid mix of tunes from her dad's era along with those from a generation closer to her own: Zeppelin gave way to Nirvana, Janis to Alanis. A full-throated Eddie Vader was declaring that he was still very much alive when she collapsed in exhaustion on her lawn, last night's toxins pouring out in a heavy sweat. Remembering one of her dad's classic colloquialisms, she was finally feeling a step above the "pile of hammered shit" she'd felt like when she woke up. She lay in the grass until the song ended.

When she clicked off the music and opened her eyes, she heard a voice, close by. Two people were standing at the edge of her yard, just a few feet away. She pulled the ear buds from her ears.

"Hello there," the voice was saying.

Julie sat up and wiped the sweat from her forehead. It was a young couple, with a little boy on a bike behind them, doing circles in the street.

"Hi," Julie responded, barely getting the single syllable out in her exhausted state.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," the woman said. "Sorry we haven't stopped by yet – life with a six-year-old never slows down."

"That's ok. I'm Julie." She pulled herself up from the grass and walked over to them.

"I'm Becca." The woman offered her hand. After a few seconds of silence, she nudged her husband.

"Oh, hi there, I'm Thomas."

They were maybe ten years older than Julie, good-looking and dressed stylishly despite it being Saturday morning.

"How are you liking the house?" Becca asked.

"Still getting settled." Julie wiped grass from the back of her legs, her strength returning.

“Listen, how about I bring you over some dinner tonight?” Becca asked. “Lord knows it’s overdue. Let’s say six o’clock?”

The proposal started as a question but ended quite differently. Julie couldn't think of a reasonable way out of it fast enough – between the hangover and the run, her brain was moving too slowly to come up with a good excuse.

“Sure, sounds good,” she said, faking a smile.

“Great! And don’t worry – I’ll leave my little terror here with Tom. It’ll be just us girls.”

Thomas and Becca said good-bye, instructing their son to do the same. He didn’t seem like much of a terror to Julie at all. She stretched her legs for a few minutes, watching the family as they moved away from her. Once they were out of sight, she went back inside her house, looking forward to a cool shower and a big lunch.

The sun was still casting a hazy glare and the air still muggy when Becca tapped on Julie’s front door that evening. Dressed in white capri pants and a loose designer t-shirt, with her shortish blonde hair curled under, Becca looked more prepared for a backyard cocktail party than a casual dinner. In one hand, she carried a wicker picnic basket, and in the other, a bottle of chilled white wine. *She’s that special breed of Southern woman, Jules – one part charming hostess, and if the situation warrants, one part Queen of Hearts.*

“An extremely belated gift,” she said, handing Julie the wine.

Without another word, Becca squeezed by Julie and strutted straight to the kitchen, walking with pace. She unloaded items from the picnic basket: two blocks of gourmet cheese, a sleeve of crackers, a large salad bowl with aluminum foil covering it, and a casserole dish.

“Appetizer,” she announced, holding up the cheese, “then we’ll have summer salad and shrimp pasta. Sound good?”

"Yeah, it does," Julie answered sincerely.

"Good! Now where's your corkscrew? This mama could use a glass of wine."

Julie directed her to the silverware drawer. "Thanks for all of this. It's nice to be welcomed."

Becca poured them each a glass. Julie despised white wine, but she didn't want to disturb the social ethos Becca had worked so hard to create. She clinked her glass against Becca's and drank the wine with a smile. At least her hangover from earlier was gone.

"I just hate that it took me so long to get over here. This summer has been an absolute blur. Little Tommy slipped and broke his arm our first day at the pool, my husband was on the road more than usual, and our cat up and disappeared – damn coyotes got her, I know. Anyway, we are rejoicing that the fall is almost here. Hallelujah!"

Julie laughed. It was hard not to like this woman, at least a little.

"So you're new to town?" Becca asked as she pulled plates from a cabinet. She had taken charge of Julie's kitchen as if it were her own. Julie, amused, sat back and watched her go.

"Not necessarily. I grew up here, but I just moved back. I've been gone for nine years."

"Wow, a hometown girl. What part of Hopes Ridge?"

"Not too far from here. Over on Green Valley Way."

Becca raised her eyebrows. "Oh, I love that street. So pretty. And such gorgeous homes."

Julie noticed a hint of envy in her neighbor's voice. "This neighborhood is nice too. And it really has changed. When I was growing up, our parents wouldn't even let us ride our bikes over here."

"Really?"

“Yeah. But that’s all different now. Everything is different – I barely recognize Hopes Ridge these days. So where are you from, Becca?”

“Oh goodness, where do I start?” With that, Becca was off and running.

As the evening progressed, the wine flowed – Julie switched to red for her next two glasses – and the food was served. The conversation was easy, to Julie’s surprise. Becca turned out to be funny and down to earth, despite her obvious social-climbing inclinations. She and Thomas were Ole Miss alums, both from small towns in Mississippi. When Thomas got a job in Birmingham, they chose Hopes Ridge. “The big city would have just been too much.” Too much what, Julie could only guess. They lived a few doors down, in a renovated bungalow like Julie’s, but Becca was itching to upgrade when she got pregnant again. “I want a baby girl so bad I might die,” Becca said at one point. The more they got to know each other, the more Julie liked Becca, in spite of their single-working-female and stay-at-home-mom differences.

After dinner, they moved the discussion to Julie’s backyard, taking the wine with them. The night had cooled, and Becca wanted to sneak a cigarette. “Please don’t tell Tom,” she begged. “I only smoke when I drink – and when he isn’t around, of course.”

“Of course,” Julie assured her. She watched as Becca lit her cigarette and sucked down the first drag. Taking advantage of Becca’s buzz, Julie decided to see if she could relieve some of her own curiosity. “Let me ask you something, Becca – did you happen to know the previous owners?”

“Who, Maggie and Coop? Oh yeah, we were good friends. Still are, in fact.”

*Bingo, Jules. Let’s see what she knows.* “They sure were quick to get out of here,” Julie said leadingly.

Becca stared at her, taking another deep drag from her cigarette. She blew out a thick cloud of smoke, directing it away from her new neighbor. When she finally spoke, the words came out slowly. “Tell me, Julie – do you scare easy?”

The question hit Julie unexpectedly, but roused her sixth sense too. "Let's see – my dad was a cop, my mother is certifiable crazy, and I was a reporter for CNN for two years. I've seen it all. So no, I don't scare easy."

"Good. That's the feeling I got from you." Becca pointed the glowing tip of her cigarette at Julie as she said it. "It all started when Maggie got pregnant with Emma, their second child. They had been living in the house for a little over a year by then. Maggie noticed it first. It was a smell, really strong. *Too* strong. So strong at times she couldn't breathe."

"What kind of smell?"

"Baby powder."

Julie was confused. It was an unusual answer, to say the least. She had expected Becca might describe a sewage stink or the smoky stench from some unseen timber fire.

"Baby powder?"

"Weird, right? I didn't believe it when I first heard it either, but it's true. I've smelled it myself." Becca glanced at the house with a disgusted look on her face.

"Ok, so it smells like baby powder. I can think of worse odors in the world."

"No, Julie, you don't understand. It can be so powerful that you can't stay in the room, or sometimes the whole house even. And there are other...things."

"Like what?"

"I really don't want to scare you."

"Well, now you have to tell me."

"It was their little boy. He saw something. Or *someone*. More than once..."

Becca took the last drag from her cigarette and dropped it into the Solo cup of water she was using as an ashtray, where it hissed as its light was extinguished. She swallowed a gulp of white wine. Julie could see she was stalling.

"Come on, Becca, spit it out. What the hell should I be scared of?"

"You're living in a haunted house, Julie. You're living in Powder House."



## Chapter 5

Julie didn't sleep a wink the night of her neighbor Becca's revelation. Her mind raced, circling around the same thought – *This house has a frickin nickname. You're into something awful deep here, Jules.* Hearing Becca confirm Julie's unspoken suspicion had been unnerving, but it had also piqued her curiosity. And it had kicked her intuition and investigative instincts into high gear. If she was willing to consider the haunting of her house as more than a ridiculous theory, then she was going to have to learn something about ghosts. Julie was built one way – research until she was exhausted, then research some more.

With her sleepless night behind her, she got in her Honda that Sunday morning and headed north on the interstate – as helpful as the local Hopes Ridge library could be, it wasn't suited for the kind of in-depth investigation Julie wanted to pursue. Twenty-five minutes later, she was in downtown Birmingham, where she found the big-city library closed for another hour. *Shit, Jules, nice planning. Now you've got an hour to kill.* Lucky for her, downtown Birmingham was also home to one of her favorite vinyl shops, which just so happened to be a few blocks away. *Perfect!*

Charlemagne Records inhabited a non-descript storefront in the city's famed Five Points district. A flurry of nostalgia rushed through Julie as she turned the corner. Her dad had first taken her there when she was thirteen, and she'd been a regular throughout high school, expanding her own vast collection of vinyl as she got older. She relished a chance to browse the racks of a rare record shop, especially Charlemagne's.

The store's doorway opened to a narrow flight of stairs, which were covered in a worn and stained red carpet that should have been replaced at least a decade earlier. The smell – a mixture of cardboard and wax and unfinished wood – permeated the stuffy stairway that led to the second-floor store, growing stronger with each step up.

As she emerged from the tight space, Charlemagne sat waiting as always. Wooden bins and shelves filled the smallish store, leaving little room to walk. Mismatched oriental rugs covered the floors, and rectangular flags from all over the world hung from the low ceiling overhead. From a corner record player, music floated effortlessly throughout the room.

A young guy with bushy brown hair and a thick beard sat reading a magazine behind the cash register. His only greeting was a subtle nod before he went back to reading. With anonymous glee, Julie set about rummaging through the store's records.

The music playing from the corner record player wasn't something Julie recognized, but she didn't mind. That was one of the reasons she loved visiting Charlemagne – the off-chance she might discover something new from what an employee had chosen to play that hour. Unfortunately, bushy-hair's current selection wasn't Julie's style. It was older, scratchy, and even before her dad Chuck's time.

Julie had been browsing for a half-hour, diving deep into the "USED" section of albums, when she noticed the faint strains of a song she recognized. She raised her head, trying to place the vaguely familiar tune. Bushy-hair hadn't changed the record on the player – in fact, she didn't think he'd moved since she came in. She stopped, her fingers holding her place in the bin, and listened. *Where have we heard this?*

An unusual urgency came over her, followed by a thin layer of goose bumps, but she didn't know why. The song's intensity kicked up a notch as a woman's voice wailed through the first verse. Julie struggled to recognize the music. Then it came to her, the memory flooding her brain, just as the first line of the chorus reverberated through the speakers:

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

Julie's jaw tightened. The muscles of her stomach clenched. She stood frozen as another verse went by before the chorus came around again:

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

"What is this?" she yelled too loudly at the bushy-hair guy across the store.

It startled him from his reading. He looked at her blankly.

"This music?" she asked, pointing to the corner. "What is it?"

"Oh, this? Yeah, this is Sister Rosetta. Good stuff, right?"

"Sister who?"

"Sister Rosetta Tharpe." Bushy-hair stood from his stool and came around the counter, picking up an album sleeve as he did. He handed it to Julie.

The album's cover was dark and faded and coming apart at each of its four corners. An older black woman in a flowered dress was pictured on the front, sitting in shadows and holding a Les Paul Goldtop electric guitar. Emblazoned next to the woman was her name and the album's title: *SISTER ROSETTA THARPE – GOSPEL TRAIN*. A chill raised Julie's goose bumps even higher.

"The *original* blues woman," bushy-hair told her.

Julie was still studying the album's cover as the song's last chorus rang out and the song ended.

"How much?" she asked him.

He grinned. "Twenty-two bucks. And worth every penny."

Julie drove back to the library with the album perched ominously on the passenger seat. She couldn't keep from glancing over at the woman from the past with the rock 'n'

roll guitar – the instrument looked almost out of place in her hands, and yet she held it with the second-nature of a virtuoso. Sister Rosetta’s song kept repeating in Julie’s head too. *Yes indeed, Sister Rosetta. There are strange things happening every day.*

A librarian was unlocking the library’s doors as Julie approached. She entered briskly, making a beeline for the closest computer, starting with a general search of the library’s database for books on hauntings. Including periodicals, there were 1,462 results. *Okay, let’s narrow this down some.* Julie refined her search, adding the word “music” to her entry. The number of returns shrunk to a manageable 21. She picked out three titles that seemed more educational than the others and set off to find them.

For the next two hours, Julie read. She discovered studies on musical ghosts from across the world, and how they had used song in various forms to reveal themselves. But unlike Julie’s experience, all of the examples described were centered around a musical instrument, most oftentimes a piano. And rarely was a ghost able to form a melody of any sort. Julie found a chapter in a book about whistling haunts, and another about spirits who snap, but nowhere did she find a single story that mentioned possessed radios or stereos or record players. *Just your luck, Jules. You’ve got Casper the Cutting-Edge Ghost in your house.*

She went to the library’s lounge to get a cup of coffee and clear her head. As she sipped the bitter, lukewarm drink, she considered what else she might look for. She also questioned the whole investigation, and what a ridiculous waste of time it might be. But before she could convince herself to give up her ghost hunting for the day, her intuition stepped in, urging her to perform one more search. *Don’t forget about the nickname – don’t forget about Powder House.* She tossed the coffee into the trash and went back to it.

This time, she typed the words “ghost smells” into the library’s computer system – only three results appeared. “This won’t take long,” she said, making note of the books’ locations. Fifteen minutes later, her search was done, without a single book found – all three were missing. *That’s strange.* She went to the library’s front desk.

“How can I help you?” the older woman behind the desk asked, helpful but distracted by an overflowing pile of returned books surrounding her.

“I can't seem to find these.” Julie handed her the list of titles. “Can you tell me if they're checked out?”

The woman typed a few keystrokes into her computer for each title. “Yes, ma'am, they're all out at this time.”

“Ok,” Julie said, somewhat pleased to be finished with her digging for the day. But then her sixth sense perked up again, pushing her to ask the woman another question. “Can you tell me who checked them out?”

“No, ma'am, I can't,” the woman replied flatly. “But they are due back on Friday.”

“All three of them? The same day?”

“Yes, ma'am. The same day.”

*So, the same person checked them all out. Guess that's not completely unusual, since they're all based on the same subject. Nah...there's no coincidence here, and you know it.*

As Julie left the library, she was already planning her return trip on Friday – she had to know who else was so interested in smelly spirits.

The week went by slowly, and the house on Grayson Lane stayed quiet. Allison, as promised, texted Julie the contact information for the house's former owners. Their names were Cooper and Margaret Easton – *Coop and Maggie, just like Becca said*. Allison also confirmed that the Eastons had stayed in Hopes Ridge, and as an added bonus, she passed on their phone number. Julie stored the names and number into her cell phone, but wasn't quite ready to reach out to them.

On Thursday, Julie filed her first story for *The Hopes Ridge Herald*, a full-length investigation into that Birmingham financial advisor-turned-thief. Using victim testimony and an SEC informant, Julie all but indicted the million-dollar swindler in the

article, even though his preliminary hearing was still a month away. Bruce gave her his famous finger-on-the-nose after he read it, and Julie knew she had nailed it.

First thing Friday morning, with no other obligations hanging over her, she parked her Honda across from the Birmingham library, hoping to spy whoever had checked out the books on odorous ghosts. She knew it was a long shot, but curiosity and intuition kept telling her she was on to something. Her plan was to stake out the drop slot on the side of the building.

*You're going to need to get closer than this, Jules. How can you see what books are being dropped off from here?*

"Ok, sure. I'll just camp out right next to the slot, like a homeless person. Shouldn't get me into any trouble at all." Five minutes later, there she sat, on the concrete sidewalk, where she could spot exactly what titles were being returned.

Library patrons came and went, unloading books by the armful. A few gave Julie the once-over or quizzical looks as she craned her neck in an awkward attempt to see the titles written on their books' covers and spines. But no one reported her, and her search was allowed to continue.

Having struck out all morning, she went to her car at noon to eat her sack lunch, where she would still have a bird's-eye view of any book returners. Sitting in the driver's seat of her Honda, she unzipped the soft-sided cooler that held her meal: bologna sandwich, banana, and a bottle of water. She pulled the sandwich out and removed it from its Ziploc bag. As she took her first bite, she glanced back to the library, just in time to see someone standing at the book drop.

"Dammit," she mumbled through a mouthful of white bread and bologna.

A middle-aged man, dressed in khaki chinos and a short-sleeve polo, dropped his books into the slot.

"Let one slip by," she said, taking another bite of her sandwich and shaking her head.

She kept her eyes on the man as he turned from the slot. Instead of walking to the parking lot or a car along the sidewalk, he crossed the street and headed toward her. As he neared her car, Julie's sixth sense sent a shiver down her body, putting her on alert. She dropped her sandwich and swung open her car door. The man was just a few feet from her.

"Excuse me, sir. My name is Julie Danner, and I'm with the newspaper." She stuck her hand out, official-like. He hesitated before he took it. "Sorry to stop you like this, but I'm conducting some research on libraries and the public's reading habits. I saw you dropped off some books over there. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?" None of what she said was untrue. *Get him to talk, Jules.*

The man stammered for a moment. "I-I-I suppose that would be alright. How long will this take?"

"Just a couple of minutes, Mr...?"

"Easton. Cooper Easton."

Julie was stunned. *Cooper Easton – Coop – the motivated seller himself.* She recovered, trying to hide her shock at the turn of events.

"Thanks, Mr. Easton. I'll make it quick. First off, how many times a month would you say you visit the library?"

"Oh, I don't know. Once, maybe twice. I work close by."

Julie pulled out a small notepad and pretended to jot down his answers.

"And how many books a month do you read, Mr. Easton?"

He looked to the sky before he answered. "Two to three, I'd say. But I wish I had time to read more."

Julie smiled at him. "Don't we all? One last question, Mr. Easton."

"Please, call me Cooper – I feel old enough as it is, Miss Danner."

Was he flirting with her? If so, he just might answer her next question without qualm.

“Ok, Cooper,” she said, smiling at him. “What books did you just return?”

He froze. Julie could see that he didn’t know what to say. He moved his eyes up and to the right, a tell that revealed he was trying to concoct an imagined answer. He was about to lie. “Oh, just some books on finance. Boring stuff, really.”

*Why are you lying, Cooper Easton?*

Julie stuck her hand out once more. “Thanks so much for your time, Mr. Eas...I mean, Cooper.”

“No problem. Good luck with your research.”

He was already walking again as he said it, with quick and focused steps. He glided past Julie with his head down. Once he was around the corner behind her, she sprinted across the street and into the library. She went straight to the front desk and asked the young man there if she could see inside the drop box.

“I’ve been desperately waiting for a book to be returned, and it’s supposed to be back today.”

The young librarian was much more cheerful than the older woman Julie had spoken to Monday. “Yeah, of course. Follow me.”

He led her to a door across the library’s atrium, taking a ring of keys from his pocket.

“Right this way,” he said as he opened the door.

Inside the room, a waist-high canvas basket with wheels sat underneath the slot, a heaping pile of books inside it. Julie stepped to the basket and looked inside, and there they were, right on top of the pile: the three books about ghosts and their smells that had been missing from the library on Sunday.

“I knew it!” she shouted too loudly.

“Knew what?” the librarian asked.

Julie turned to the young man sheepishly. “Oh, nothing – just found what I was looking for.”

She grabbed the closest book. It was titled *The Brimstone Deceit: An In-Depth Examination of Supernatural Scents, Otherworldly Odors, and Monstrous Miasmas*.

Apparently, Mr. Cooper Easton, the man who had moved from her new house in such a rush, still had the smell of ghosts on his mind.

## Chapter 6

Julie spent the rest of her day at the library poring over the three books that Cooper Easton had dropped off. Unfortunately, she didn't learn as much about ghosts and their smells as she had hoped, but still more than she had known before. Like the most common instances of spirit scents: cigarette smoke and perfume. And the cases, though rare, of haunted stinks, like rotten eggs and dead skunk. One story even told of a flatulent ghost – “We knew right away that it was Uncle Edgar, back from the grave,” a relative was quoted as saying. Julie couldn't contain her laughter on that one, garnering puzzled looks from fellow library visitors. At the end of her day, and in all her studying, she had found no mention of baby powder anywhere. *First the music, now the smell. This damn ghost is creative.*

She left in time to beat the Friday rush out of the city, taking the books with her just in case a lingering question cropped up. When she got back to Hopes Ridge, she decided to make a stop before she went to her house on Grayson Lane. It was time to tell someone else what was going on.

The afternoon sun was fading as she turned into *The Herald's* cracked and faded parking lot, empty save for one vehicle. She pulled her Honda next to the rusting Ford Bronco that dated back at least thirty years. Bruce Woods was still at work, just who she wanted to see.

Inside, the press had been running all day, and the warehouse smelled of burnt ink and oily machinery. She climbed the stairs to Bruce's office and knocked on his closed door. Bruce spoke warily from the other side.

“Who is it?”

“Your favorite reporter, that's who.”

The door swung open. “Miss Danner! What the hell are you doing here? After that gem of a story you turned in yesterday, you deserve a few days off.”

Bruce held a coffee mug in his hand, but Julie knew he was drinking something stronger – she could smell whiskey when he spoke. “I’m not here for work. Can I come in?”

He peered at her over his glasses before opening the door further and extending his arm. “Be my guest.”

Julie took a seat in the old editor's only chair and tossed her baseball cap on his desk. She ran a hand through her hair, unsure how to broach the subject of her personal paranormal investigation.

“To what do I owe this visit, on a Friday night no less?” Bruce asked, leaning against the office glass that overlooked the giant press below.

Julie nodded to his coffee mug. “You got some more of that?”

“Top right drawer. Help yourself.”

She opened the drawer and pulled out a pint of Jack Daniel’s. She unscrewed the cap and took a long pull. The whiskey was hot and biting, and it went to her head almost instantly.

“What's on your mind, Julie?” Bruce's tone had turned serious.

She closed her eyes, preparing to make her haunted house a real-life thing. “I’m not sure how to ask this without sounding crazy, so I just will. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Ghosts?”

“Yeah, ghosts.”

“What the hell are we talking about here?”

“I don't know,” Julie said, exasperated. “I'm letting something stupid get in my head. It's distracting me, is all. I need a voice of reason.”

Bruce straightened his back, putting a hand to his chest. “And you chose *me* as your voice of reason?”

“I did – but whatever you do, don't let it go to your head.”

“Kidding aside – why don't you tell me exactly where all this is coming from?”

With that, Julie spilled her story, from Jerry's barking in the kitchen, to the vague 1981 article on GranBelle Jenny's death, to Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and finally Cooper Easton's unusual library selections. "I'm letting myself go down a rabbit-hole here, Bruce. Just tell me to stop digging. Please."

"I wish I could, Julie."

She scrunched her face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I can't tell you to stop. I'm sorry, but when it comes to ghosts, hauntings, the supernatural...I'm a believer."

"Are you serious?"

"I am," Bruce said bluntly. "Ever since March twenty-seventh, nineteen seventy-five. That was my first – and only, thank God – encounter with something I still can't explain."

Bruce's chair squeaked as Julie sat up to listen closer.

"I was in D.C., back when I was working for *The Post*. There were so many beat reporters working back then that it was survival of the damn fittest. We would chase down any lead we got, even if it sounded like there was nothing to it. Anyway, I overheard an emergency call – we were always listening in on the police dispatch hoping to scare up a story. It was just crazy enough to get my attention. Some woman had reported her son was 'walking up the walls' in their house."

"Walking up the walls?" Julie asked incredulously.

"That's right. I'll never forget the way she said it. According to the dispatcher, the kid was 'walking up the walls' and threatening the family with a hunting knife. It had been one helluva slow news week, and I was desperate for a story at that point, any story. So I grabbed my notepad and took off." Bruce was pacing his office floor now, faster as his tale progressed. "This all happened in Dupont Circle, swanky part of town. I get to this big mansion-like house, two cop cars are already there, and the kid is in the

front yard, naked as the day he was born. It was a cold March day, mind you, but he wasn't fazed.

He's wandering around the front lawn, this creepy blank stare on his face, hunting knife in hand. And that's when it happened, Julie."

"What happened?"

"This kid walked up the side of the house, like it was nothing. He walked right up the walls, just like his mom had told the cops."

"So he climbed up the house?"

"No, Julie, he *walked*. Without breaking stride, without straining a muscle. The crazy sonofabitch did it like it was something we all do every day."

The way Bruce said it, it was almost like he still couldn't believe it. He shook his head in amazement, his mouth squeezed so tight his lips disappeared.

"And?" Julie finally asked.

"And then he fell. He had walked up two stories, one step at a time, and he was close to the roof. Then it was as if the superpower left him, and he fell straight to the ground. BAM!" Bruce clapped his hands, startling Julie. He stopped pacing before he continued. "But I caught sight of something the moment he lost his footing. Something that I can still see in my mind today, clear as crystal. I saw a black shadow leap out of the boy's body and take off across the sky. Flying, you see, but not with wings. It was shaped like a person, Julie. The shape of a ghost. And right before it disappeared, it looked back – and I swear it looked right at me."

The room chilled around them. Julie took another pull from the bottle of Jack Daniel's. She ventured with her next question cautiously. "You're telling me the boy was possessed?"

Bruce stuck his mug in front of her, and she poured him more of the whiskey. "I don't know what I'm telling you. I just know what I saw. Scared the shit out of me. Still scares me to this day."

“Did you report on it?”

“Hell no! I would've been fired on the spot if I brought in some crazy-ass story like that. I got in my car and went home and poured myself a tall glass of cheap bourbon. And I tried my damndest to forget about it, but I never could.”

“What happened to the boy?”

“You know me too well – us reporters always do our follow-up, don't we? The boy broke a few bones in the fall, nearly cracked his neck in two and died. He made a full recovery, and his family swept the incident under the rug. He's still in D.C. Big-wheel lobbyist these days. I keep track of him – I have no idea why.”

The two of them didn't speak for a minute or more. Julie was disappointed for the second time that day – she had not gotten from Bruce what she was looking for.

“That's unbelievable,” she said, cutting through the unsettling quiet.

“I wish it had been. But it was real, Julie. I believe it without a shred of doubt in my heart.”

She put the bottle of Jack Daniel's back in Bruce's top drawer and stood.

“Thanks...I guess.”

Bruce shrugged. “You asked.”

“I suppose I did. See you Monday, boss.”

The old editor gave her a salute with his mug of whiskey on her way out.

Julie walked past the giant printing press and out of the newspaper building, more confused than she had been before she decided to confide in Bruce. She avoided looking at the side of the building, where the flickering fluorescent light in the parking lot was casting eerie shadows. Julie was almost to her car when her cell phone vibrated in the front pocket of her jeans. She jumped, her edginess getting the best of her. *Settle down,*

*Jules. Don't let this stuff get to you.* She pulled out her phone and saw that it was Allison calling.

Her best friend and worst influence was already talking before Julie had a chance to say hello. "Please tell me you're done with work for the day. Please, please, please."

"I suppose you could say I'm done," Julie told her. "I haven't really been working, per se."

"Yay! How soon can you be ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"To hit the town, honey! I met a crazy-cute boy today at a closing. He's a doctor, still in residency. No money yet, but..."

Julie didn't share Allison's inclination toward life's shallower pursuits, but she admired her friend's honesty.

"Not tonight, Allison. It's been a weird day. I wouldn't be very good company."

"Oh, come on. He's bringing a friend with him. They're driving all the way from Birmingham. I promised them you'd come!"

"You know what they say about promises? They're made to be broken." Julie started her car as she said it.

"And what do they say about best friends?"

"Don't give me one of your guilt trips. That's the last thing I need right now."

"Just come for an hour. Please."

Allison was pulling out all the stops. She had a way of being incredibly persuasive, one reason she was such a strong realtor, Julie supposed. The more Allison asked, the more Julie was convinced to go – she hadn't been on a date in so long she couldn't remember.

"Let me stop by my parents' and check on Dad, then I'll run home and take a shower. But listen – this guy better be worth it."

"So you want him to say 'please' before and 'thank you' after?"

"Jesus, Allison, it's either money or sex with you, isn't it?"

"There's nothing wrong with getting laid every now and then, Julie."

"Sorry, I wouldn't know."

"Maybe that'll change tonight. We'll be at Monarch's. See you there!"

Allison hung up before Julie could say anything else. *Before she gave you a chance to back out.*

On the way to her parents' house, it occurred to Julie that she had not talked to her dad in two days. *You've been preoccupied with ghosts, remember, Jules?* She could make a quick call from the car, say hello, and save herself some time, but she nixed the idea as soon as it formed. Something was telling her to check on Chuck and Elizabeth Danner that night, before she did anything else.

The sound of loud music assaulted Julie's ears as soon as she entered the house. One of Gregg Allman's southern-drawl pleas for forgiveness was blaring from the den. *What the hell? The old man's got that loud enough to wake the dead, much less drown out your dear mother's sewing.* Rounding the corner from the kitchen, she saw him laid back in his recliner, his eyes closed, a pile of empty Budweiser cans on the floor next to him. Rocko was lying faithfully on his lap. The mutt raised his head and perked his ears to stiff attention at Julie's entrance, but didn't make a sound. Something was off. She'd never known her dad to drink more than a few beers in the evening. *Listen to your gut, Jules. It's the best radar ever invented, and you know it.*

She went to her dad's side. He was motionless, his skin paler than she remembered. Rocko whimpered, peering at her with wet, black eyes. *Don't you dare be dead, old man.* She put her hand on his arm, but got no reaction. Up close, she noticed that his chest wasn't moving as it should. *Don't do this, Charles Danner. Not now.* She leaned over him,

searching desperately for any sign of life. As she got within inches of his face, he let out a gargling snore that made her jump.

“Dammit, Dad!”

Relieved but annoyed, she looked around for the stereo’s remote. She hit the power button, and the music abruptly stopped, leaving the house in a silence that was too quiet. Rocko barked twice, two sharp shrill yelps. Her dad didn’t budge. She counted the beer cans. *Nine*. Chuck Danner was a two-beer-a-day drinker – three if he was celebrating a Cards win. But that evening, he had gotten shitfaced. *Why?*

It was then that Julie noticed the unmistakable absence of the whir of her mother’s sewing machine. The house was so still, it caused a chill to run through her. Every time she had stopped by before, with the exception of the day she’d encountered her mother in the kitchen, Elizabeth Danner had been locked in her room sewing, the sound of her manic hobby filling the air like machine gun bursts, an intermittent but never-ending pattern. But tonight, an eerie and disheartening silence filled her childhood home.

*Maybe that crazy mother of yours left, for good. Wouldn’t be the first time she split without saying good-bye. Julie could see the headline now. ‘Local Woman With Mental Issues Still Missing; Search Called Off’ – what an easy ending that would be.*

But she knew better. Her sixth sense was pulling her to the stairs. And as much as she wished she would find Elizabeth Danner gone, her drawers and closets emptied into a missing suitcase, she knew in her gut that wasn’t the case. Besides, she’d passed her mother’s still-damaged vehicle in the garage, and even though the woman was crazy, she still had her standards – she wouldn’t be caught dead in the back of a cab. Julie’s heart dropped a bit further into her stomach. *Maybe she and the old man tied one on together and she’s passed out upstairs?* The lunacy of that thought made her chuckle nervously.

Her dad let out another loud snore, breaking her from her contemplation. Rocko yapped in surprise.

“Stay here, Rocko.”

The mutt twisted his head in confusion – he wasn’t going anywhere. She gave him a rub on his snout.

“If I’m not back in five minutes, call the cops,” she joked, trying to calm her nerves.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs, she stopped and listened, hoping to hear a noise, any noise. There was nothing. Mercifully, a car passed on the street outside, its muffler rumbling too loudly. *Redneck teenagers*. A glint of hometown annoyance was a welcome distraction, albeit short-lived.

“Get back to it, Jules,” she said aloud, the sound of her voice echoing up the hollow stairwell. “Time to rip off the Band-Aid.”

Julie took each step slowly, still listening intently. When she got to the top of the stairs, she was surprised to see her mother’s sewing room door open. She couldn’t remember the last time Elizabeth Danner had left her lair unguarded. *Never, Jules, that’s when*. The door to her old childhood bedroom was also ajar. Both rooms were dark. The only upstairs door that was closed was the one to her mother’s bedroom, which had been Elizabeth’s alone since her dad’s paralysis.

Even though Julie knew the sewing room was empty, she checked it first. Working up her courage, she flipped the switch next to the door, illuminating her mother’s madness. A wooden chair was pushed snugly under the old sewing machine table, the only pieces of furniture in the room. Covering the rest of the room’s floor were stacks upon stacks of clothes, all neatly folded, all organized straight and tall as high as Julie’s shoulders, two and three stacks deep in some places. Julie could make out what looked like shirts, slacks, dresses, and jumpers in an array of stripes, solids, and florals. A narrow path was cut through the columns of cloth from the door to the sewing machine.

“Oh my God,” Julie whispered.

She picked up a blouse from the nearest stack and let it unfurl in front of her. It was an intricate design made of sheer blue fabric. The details were immaculate, the stitching exquisite. Elizabeth Danner was a gifted seamstress, and yet so crazed that she kept her hobby, this art, all hidden in a second-floor room in No-wheres-ville, Alabama. A twinge of guilt tugged at Julie's heart.

Carrying the blouse at her side, Julie walked through the stacks of her mother's brilliance, stunned. When she got to the sewing machine, she saw that it had been turned off. The table was clean, free of any sewing paraphernalia except for one thing. Directly under the machine's horizontal arm sat a curious item, if only for its solitary placement. It was a single spool of thread, a kind made of wood instead of the modern-day white plastic. Julie picked up the spool and noticed that the thread it held was unwound and trailing away from it, across the table and down to the floor in front of her. It was a bright red color, and Julie could now see it clearly as it followed the path from the machine to the room's open doorway. She had overlooked it before, distracted by the enormity of her mother's creations. A specific kind of dread, this one carrying more fear with it than she was accustomed to, came over her. She dropped the blue blouse and squeezed the wooden spool in her hand as she walked back through the stacks of clothes.

When she got to the door, she followed the trail of thread along the floor of the upstairs hall to her mother's closed door, where it disappeared underneath.

"Don't be scared," Julie told herself. "Just be careful."

Still gripping the spool, she decided against knocking. *Element of surprise, Nancy Drew*. She turned the brass doorknob and threw open the door. The room was empty, but a noise greeted her. A soft but steady drip of water, every few seconds, was coming from her mother's bathroom.

Julie crossed the bedroom cautiously, moving her eyes left and right to assess the situation. A lamp glowed serenely beside the crisply made king-size bed. Everything on

the dresser and bedside table was perfectly in its place, arranged with right angles and equal spacing. The only other light came from the bathroom, where the door was slightly ajar. Looking down, Julie saw that the spool's bright red thread was guiding her there. The dripping sounds persisted, louder now.

Her calming mantra cut through the silence, her voice acting on its own. "We're all mad here...we're all mad here...we're all mad here..." Julie was Alice, exploring her own twisted land of wonder, and she knew that when she pushed open the bathroom door, her life would be changed. Her sixth sense was already showing her what was in the next room, what had happened to her mother while Julie was trading ghost stories with Bruce or talking with Allison about the necessities of casual sex. And while her father drank himself into a stupor downstairs. All that was left was to see it for herself.

The bathroom was large, with a double vanity to Julie's left and a door leading to the walk-in closet beyond. An oversized shower took up part of the other wall. And at the back of the room, opposite the doorway, beneath an arched stained-glass window, was a giant jacuzzi. Julie's eyes followed the thread, snaking its way along the bathroom's white tile, winding loosely toward the bathtub, where it finally turned upward, disappearing over the edge. She walked slowly into the room, knowing exactly what she would find when she got to the other side, but willing herself to postpone the inevitable.

The dripping Julie had heard was the steady rhythmic pattern of drops falling from the tub's swan-neck faucet into the nearly full bath below. A step closer and Julie could see her mother's hair, dark and long, floating like a nest of cottonmouths on top of the water, slithering ever-so-slightly with each drip from above. A step more revealed Elizabeth Danner's body, submerged and heavy with death despite the weightlessness of water surrounding her. Julie stared at her mother – naked, her skin loosened by time, her breasts low and spread flat, her stomach pooched just enough to notice. Her face set with...what? A look of resignation? Her ice-blue eyes dulled only by the haze of the

murky water. Those eyes – the same ones that Julie saw in her own mirror every day – still looked so alive. Julie expected her mother to turn and glare at her. But the eyes didn't move, didn't flicker with any hint of life. *She's dead, Jules. Now let's figure out what happened.*

The red thread that had led Julie to the scene in front of her dangled on the surface of the water, disappearing under her mother's left arm. *We've come this far – might as well go fishing.* Julie plunged her hand into the water and grabbed her mother's arm by the wrist. Not knowing what to expect, she was surprised to find that the water was still slightly warm, as was her mother's skin. Carefully, she raised Elizabeth Danner's limp hand to examine it. She knew she was tampering with a possible crime scene, but she needed answers. The damp thread lifted out of the water too, reaching up to her mother's hand, to her fourth finger, to the thin gold wedding band there, where it had had been tied in a miniature knot around the ring, tight and secure.

"What in the world?" Julie asked aloud.

She carefully placed her mother's arm back in the water and across her bare stomach. She looked away from the tub and the misery it held. Her eyes rested on the windowsill and an open prescription bottle, its orangey translucence and white label offering a potential cause. Julie had to lean her entire body over the tub to reach it. For an instant, she imagined her dead mother springing from the water and grabbing her, like she would in some teenage horror movie. Julie took the medicine bottle in her hand as fast as she could and backed away.

The bottle was empty.

"Trazadone," she read aloud. "Sleeping pills." She looked at her mother's lifeless face, her blue eyes open and staring blankly. *How many people fall asleep with their eyes open?* More questions. Her whole life had been punctuated by questions. And now her mother's death was the same – full of questions that Julie would have to find the answers to.

Julie decided she had seen enough. She set the empty prescription bottle back on the windowsill where she'd found it and searched for a small pair of manicure scissors. When she found some, she went to the edge of the bathtub and lifted her mother's hand again. She carefully slid the wedding ring off her mother's finger, and the bright red thread came with it. Then she cut the connection her mother had left for Julie to find, and the thread, wet for who knew how long, dropped harmlessly to the white tile floor.

Julie placed her mother's ring back on her finger and her hand back in the water, where she noticed a new reflection along its surface, from something above her. Whatever it was, it hadn't been there before, she was sure of it. A renewed fear came over her.

*You can't not look up, Jules, no matter how scared you might be.*

With caution, she twisted her head and cut her eyes defensively toward the bathroom ceiling. A horrifying sickness stirred in her midsection at the sight. It was an eerie black hole, oblong and shifting in shape. Its oscillating edges were jagged and torn, as if an unseen creature who lived in her parents' attic had ripped through the sheetrock with clawed fingers to peek below. And its darkness was unlike anything Julie had ever seen. It was a suck-the-life-out-of-you black. The sickness in her stomach started to spread.

Julie ran for the bathroom door, her mother's spool of red thread in hand. She wound the thread around the wooden cylinder as fast as she could. When she reached the end, she took the spool and stuffed it into her jeans pocket. Another shudder of fear ran through her body at the thought of the black hole. She flew down the stairs in four long strides.

Her dad was still sleeping soundly in the den, and Rocko was still alertly perched on his belly, his watchful canine eyes following Julie closely. She went into the kitchen without slowing her pace and made herself a glass of water, gulping it down, her throat parched. When she closed her eyes, the image of her dead mother in the bathtub

appeared, followed by the jagged black hole in the ceiling above, and her legs went weak.

*Get a hold of yourself, Jules.*

Her cell phone vibrated in her back pocket, breaking her mind from the disturbing bathroom scene. She pulled it out and answered without looking to see who it was. The sound on the other end was muffled from a din of background activity, but she recognized Allison's voice anyway.

"Julie, where the hell are you? I've got some very nice guys with me, and they're just dying to meet you."

Julie could hear her friend's clenched teeth through the phone. How much time had passed? Had the world somehow slowed down as she was discovering her mother's elaborate suicide scheme?

"I'm not coming," Julie said plainly.

"You're not coming?" Allison responded, her disappointment clear.

"She's dead, Allison. My mother killed herself tonight."

Julie hung up on her friend and dialed 9-1-1.

## Chapter 7

They buried Elizabeth Dempsey Danner's body three days after Julie found her dead in her bathtub, in the flat and treeless Garden Grove Cemetery on the western edge of Hopes Ridge. The police investigation into Elizabeth's death was clear-cut and simple: empty bottle of sleeping pills, bathtub full of water, no foul play – Elizabeth Danner had committed suicide, case closed. In the meantime, Julie struggled to comprehend the turn their lives had taken. She didn't have the courage or the strength to ask her dad about his drunken stupor that night. Not yet, at least. But something had led her mother to act on a final and fatal impulse. Had they fought? And what about the stacks of clothing? And the red thread tied around her wedding ring? *Get the woman in the ground first, Jules. There will be plenty of time for questions later.*

There wasn't much of a crowd at the funeral – Elizabeth had shut out everyone she'd been close to over the years. And her own blood relatives had been curiously absent from the Danners' lives for as long as Julie could remember. Chuck and Julie were the only family there to say goodbye to a woman who may have never really loved them. At least not in the way that a wife and mother should.

The service was a short graveside affair, nothing more. "It doesn't feel right asking God to forgive her for what she did in the end," Chuck told Julie. "At least not in His own house." Besides, Elizabeth hadn't set foot in a church since Julie's baptism, and Chuck had given up on the place after his legs were taken from him. He did, however, have a preacher there in the cemetery, a retired Hopes Ridge Methodist who had known the Danner family and tried to stay in touch. While the preacher read passages from the New Testament and said his prayer, Julie couldn't stop squeezing her mother's spool of red thread, hidden inside her right fist.

Allison came, purely for moral support. After the funeral was over, she insisted on making Chuck dinner that night.

"You need a home-cooked meal. And I'm not taking 'no' for an answer."

"I don't know," Julie said from behind her dad's wheelchair. She raised her eyebrows and motioned her head toward him. "I'm not sure we're ready for visitors."

"The hell I'm not!" Chuck exclaimed. "I haven't eaten a good meal from that kitchen in years. Allison, my dear, I humbly accept your offer." He took Allison's hand and kissed the top of it.

Julie grimaced at her dad's animated reaction. Now that his wife was below ground, he wasn't acting grieved at all. He didn't even bother to put on a sad face. In fact, he seemed excited, exuberant, ecstatic. *Maybe he's relieved, like a dead weight he's been forced to carry has been lifted. Maybe he felt some weird obligation to her. Maybe, Jules, there are some things you'll never understand.*

Allison clapped her hands together. "Dinner it is! I'll go by the grocery and pick up a few things. How does my world-famous chicken spaghetti sound?"

"My mouth is already watering," Chuck answered.

"Good! I'll be there in an hour. Julie, you'll be there too?"

"Ok," Julie said, shrugging her shoulders.

Allison flashed her sparkly smile before trotting down the line of marble headstones, her blonde hair bouncing as she went.

"One thing, Allison," Chuck yelled after her.

"What's that, Chuck?"

"Don't forget the wine!"

They weren't even out of the cemetery before Chuck reached for the Honda's radio dial from the passenger seat. Julie knew exactly what station he was tuning in, still confused by her dad's cheerfulness.

"Dad, what's going on? You're acting strange. Don't you want to take it slow?"

“Later, Julie-bean. I’ve got plenty of time to take it slow. Right now, let’s listen to some tunes, like we used to.”

She glanced over at him and saw a grin of deep contentment spread across his face. She hadn’t seen him smile like that in years. A hint of the old Chuck Danner was shining through that look, the man who Julie had adored throughout her childhood, despite his blind dedication to her mother.

The Honda’s speakers came to life. It was Thin Lizzy’s “The Boys Are Back In Town.”

*Guess who just got back today... Them wild-eyed boys that had been away...*

Chuck’s grin spread even wider as the rock ‘n’ roll steamed onward. *Let it go, Jules, if only for this one moment.* Turning her eyes back to the road, she turned up the radio’s volume slowly, until she couldn’t hear anything but the music, and her worries disappeared.

Allison’s chicken spaghetti lived up to her self-proclaimed hype – “Only one helping of that would be a crime against stomachs,” Chuck joked as he asked for seconds – and the red wine she had brought to go with it flowed generously between the three of them. They knocked back two bottles with dinner, talking about old times while they ate. Times when Julie and Allison were sweet little girls, then miserable teenagers. When the two of them had gotten in trouble together, and somehow avoided it. When they both left for college and Julie’s absence nearly broke Chuck’s heart.

By the third bottle, the laughter and talk fell off, Elizabeth Danner’s elephant filling the room with awkward silence. None of them wanted to broach the subject. In both life and death, the woman was a difficult thing to discuss.

“I wanna tell you girls something,” Chuck finally said, his words slightly slurred. “Something I’ve never told anyone.”

Julie flinched at the comment. Her dad wasn't used to drinking wine. She worried he was about to air dirty laundry he'd regret sharing later, even if Allison knew it all anyway.

“Dad, not now.”

“No, no, no. This is important. What I've got to say will explain so much. I want you to hear it, Julie-bean. Tonight, right now.”

Allison became as still as a statue, her interest obviously piqued. Julie wanted to know what her dad had to say too, but she was also scared, her instinct to protect him stronger than her curiosity.

“You've had a lot to drink, Dad. Maybe we can talk about it tomorrow?”

“No, I'm gonna talk about it now,” Chuck insisted. “Today was the day of your mother's funeral, and it's the day you need to know why I stuck by her all these years.”

The statement hit Julie like a bolt of lightning. She could no longer stop her dad from saying his peace, no matter what awful details he might share, especially if he was about to reveal the reason he had persisted in the madness for so long.

“You girls know how I was paralyzed. You remember the story about that night in west Birmingham. Well, there's more to it. There's more to what happened when my partner and I went into that house that night. I never told the investigators. I never told my fellow officers. I never even told Liz'beth. But it's something that's haunted me ever since. It's something that still keeps me up at night.”

The dining room seemed to grow dark as Chuck took a long drink of wine to fortify himself.

“It was a strange call from the get-go. Domestic violence call – the worst kind. Me and Dan Crocker – best partner a cop could ever have – we shouldn't've even been there. We were leaving a scene downtown, hadn't been back in the car a minute even,

when the call came over the radio. '2-7-3 in progress, eighteen-oh-four South Farrell Avenue.' It was the address – hit both Dan and me like a whack to the head. That was the address of a suspect we'd been investigating for months with no luck – guy named Hector Lopez. Real piece-of-shit, that guy. He had killed a couple college kids during a drug buy, but we couldn't prove it. Strange call for sure – a minute earlier, and we would've never heard it come across the radio."

He took another drink. Julie listened nervously – her dad had never told the story in this much detail.

"We get there, to the house – goddam crackhouse, more like it – and there's only one squad car there. Now the thing about domestic violence calls, they can go two ways: the subject gives up quick and easy, or they dig in and create a standoff. The standoffs never end pretty. The two officers on scene had their spotlight on the house, and one of 'em was yelling through the bullhorn, 'Come on out, with your hands up where we can see 'em!' And that's the tense part, girls – the part where you either see the front door open, or you don't.

"I was afraid we had ourselves a standoff that night, but after five minutes or so of this uniform yelling at the house, the door finally opens. And sure as the devil himself, a man comes out with his hands up. We were all relieved. The guy comes on out, we take him down, cuff him – we're sure it's Hector Lopez and that we get to bring him in for questioning. But then we get a good look at this guy's face, and we see it's not him. It wasn't Hector."

The disappointment was still clear in Chuck's voice thirteen years later.

"Protocol in that situation is you put the perp in the back of the car, then check on the welfare of the residents in the house. Make sure everybody's good. And typically, me and Dan would've let the uniforms do it. But this was still the house of our suspect. And maybe, just maybe, he was in there, doing something he shouldn't've been doing. 'We'll handle the welfare check on this one, boys,' Dan tells 'em. The uniforms look at us

weird, two homicide detectives going in on a welfare check. But we had a hunch. And damn if we weren't right on the money."

Chuck closed his eyes for a moment. He was looking at the dining room ceiling when he continued his story.

"We walk to the front porch, and as we're getting closer, we can hear the TV from the house blaring. Some cartoon shit, Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck or some-damn-body like that. So we know the front door is open. We get to the doorway and see four kids, sitting on the floor like little Indians in their undies, their eyes glued to the TV. No lights on, and nobody else in the room. 'Police at the door!' Dan yells. 'Need to speak to somebody!' We wait a few seconds, and this woman comes around the corner, all beat to hell and back. She comes to the doorway, and we start asking questions. 'You the one who made the call? You need an ambulance? Any of the kids hurt?' The standard stuff. She's answering the questions over the cartoons, but real slow, real confused-like. And I'm getting that feeling real strong, the one I know all too well when something isn't right."

Julie thought of her own sixth sense, her own intuition.

"All of a sudden, there's a flash of movement behind the woman. A man was running through the house to the back door. I acted before Dan did. I run past the woman into the house. 'Freeze!' I yell, even though I couldn't see him anymore. I should've known then to stop, regroup, make a plan. But I didn't. I was too focused on getting Hector.

"The whole house was dark. It smelled like cat-piss and weed. The next room I come to is nearly empty, and I don't see anyone. I keep running, my gun out, but that didn't matter. As soon as I hit the third doorway, where the kitchen was, the bullet hit me, right in the gut. I never saw it coming. Did you know you feel a bullet before you ever hear it, girls?"

"No, sir," Allison said reactively. Chuck looked her way and continued as if she hadn't spoken.

"Dan was right on my heels. He couldn't stop himself when he saw me go down. Hector unloaded on him. I only took one bullet...Dan took five. I couldn't move when I heard Hector run out the back door of the house. I found out why later – the bullet had severed my spine after it traveled through my belly. My whole body was paralyzed at first. I was as helpless as a damn baby on that crackhouse floor.

"I knew Dan was dead. Don't ask me how, I just did. You get to know somebody the way I knew Dan, and you just know it when they're gone. I thought I was a goner too. But something kept me here. And listen up, Julie-bean – 'cause this is the part I've never spoke of.

"A woman came to me while I lay there helpless on that kitchen floor. Not a real woman, but something else. She was old, and she was comforting, and she brought me peace in that moment that I thought was my last. And she told me something, Julie-bean – she told me I was dying, right then and right there, but that I could stop it. That I could live if I chose to do something for someone else. She told me I could live, if I lived to take care of your mother."

The last of Chuck Danner's words floated in the air like the phantom he was describing. Julie was flabbergasted by what he had said.

"You saw a woman who wasn't real?" Allison asked skeptically.

"Oh, she's as real as they come," Chuck answered. "I still see her – almost every night, in fact – just as I'm falling asleep."

Julie couldn't speak. First Bruce Woods, now her own father – the two men she respected more than anyone else in her life. And they both believed in ghosts.

"I know it sounds crazy, girls. That's why I've never told anyone. She was a spirit, or a ghost, or whatever you wanna call it. But she was there as sure as I was. And she told me that Liz'beth needed me – that from that day forward, I was to make sure I was

there for her. This...spirit...brought me peace in my weakest moment, Julie-bean, but she also brought me a commandment to live by. In a way, she scared me into staying with your mother. And that's what I did."

Another blanket of silence fell over the dining room. Allison was the one to end it, standing from her chair at the end of the table.

"Well, folks, the wine is gone. And so am I. Chuck, that was a fucking fascinating story. If you believe it, I do too."

She walked over to Julie's dad and kissed him on his forehead.

"It's true," he whispered to her.

"And that's all that matters," she whispered back. She went to Julie and gave her a hug. "Don't forget to put the leftovers in the fridge. I cook, but I definitely don't clean."

"Of course, you don't," Julie said.

"And don't you forget it. Now walk me to the door. Good night, Chuck."

"G'night, Allison. Thanks again for dinner – just what a grieving man needed."

Allison stopped at the front door and turned to Julie.

"Sorry to leave like this, but I don't do ghost stories. Your dad was talking some crazy shit in there."

"Might not be as crazy as you think." Julie regretted saying it as soon as it left her mouth.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired – been a long day."

"Yeah, it has. You know what? You should stay here with him tonight."

"Maybe so. Thanks for the food, sweet friend."

Allison turned to go. "I ain't sweet and you fucking know it," she yelled from the front yard.

Julie closed the door and stood by herself in the entrance hall for a moment, listening like she had the night she discovered her dead mother. For the life of her, she

swore she could hear a faint version of her mother's sewing machine coming from the second floor. Almost like an echo of Elizabeth Danner's brilliant but insane secret. She shivered, the memory of the cold *feeling* from her own house washing over her.

She decided Allison was right – she did need to stay the night with her dad. But she wasn't going upstairs. Not that night, and maybe not ever again.

Chuck's den couch was only slightly comfortable. That, combined with dreams of her mother and talking ghosts, made for a fitful night of sleep. But it was worth it to see how happy her dad had been when she said she would stay the night. He had gotten edgy after Allison left – maybe dredging up the ghost who had come to him in his dying moment so many years before had been a mistake. Julie knew all too well what haunted thinking could do to a person. If he was scared, he had apparently recovered from it quickly – she could hear the steady pattern of his deep snores from the next room over.

In between lapses of slumber, Julie fought against her own notions of spirits. A month back in Hopes Ridge and her life had been spun on its head like a toy top. She would have scoffed at the idea of an actual haunted house before, but now it was so real, so possible, that she couldn't deny it.

She thought of sweet Jerry the MouseDog. He was the reason this long train of paranormal possibilities had left the station in the first place. Although he was alone that night, Julie wasn't worried. She knew he could fend for himself. *As long as the ghost of Grayson Lane doesn't get him, that is.* The voice in her head was followed by another uncontrollable shiver. She pulled the couch afghan up to her chin and tried once again to fall asleep.

The next time she woke, a noise came to her ears. It was the sound of her mother's sewing machine chug-chug-chugging away from the second floor, louder than before, clearer than before. *It's not real, Jules. It can't be real.*

As the noise pushed on, almost refusing to let up, Julie reached for her phone on the coffee table next to her, but her fingers fell on something else instead. She had placed her mother's spool of red thread there earlier, when she emptied her pockets, and now that it was in her hand, the chugging of the sewing machine was gone. She pulled the spool to her chest, her grip strong and tight, her heartbeat beneath her closed fist heightened. And for the remaining sleepless hours on the couch that night, she never let it go, because it was holding back the dark shadow from the past – or somewhere else – that had come for her.

*We're all mad here...we're all mad here...we're all mad here...*

## Chapter 8

With her mother buried and her dad settling into his new solitary life, Julie decided it was time to press the Cooper Easton connection she had made at the library the week before. The ghost of Grayson Lane was obviously still on Coop's mind, and Julie wanted to know why. She called him twice a day, sent him repeated text messages, but never got a response. Finally, on a rainy September afternoon, she got a reply, in the form of a handwritten letter that had been left leaning against her front door.

"What's this?" she said to the MouseDog as she walked into her house, flipping the sealed envelope over. He was greeting her in his normal fashion: yelps and hops that wouldn't stop until she opened the back door and let him run, even in the rain. "Alright, calm down," she told him.

The envelope had two words on the outside. It read simply "Miss Danner" in big block letters. When she opened it, there was a single piece of stationary inside, with "From the Desk of Cooper Easton" printed across the top. The letter was short and to the point:

*Miss Danner,*

*I want to apologize. We should have told your father about the house before he bought it. I think that Maggie and I were hoping it would disappear, that maybe it was only bothering us. If it helps at all, please know that none of us were ever hurt, at least not physically. And in fact, our son says he liked the damn thing. He said it was nice to him. So there's that, I guess.*

*Anyway, I also want to ask you to leave me alone. I know why you were at the library that day, and I know we both lied to each other. Maggie is trying to move on the best she can. We all are. Please, no more phone calls, no more text messages. We're trying to forget the house on Grayson Lane. Please let us do just that.*

*Cooper*

Julie didn't know what to think. All she had really wanted was an acknowledgement that he had seen the supposed ghost. And that's what the letter said, in so many words. But there was a sinister element to his message too. He and Maggie had been scared of the spirit. Unlike their son, apparently.

Jerry pawed at the door, the rain driving him back inside. When she opened the door, he came trotting in, stopping in the middle of the kitchen to shake the water off his dripping coat, in exactly the spot where Julie had fallen her first week in the house. That seemed so long ago. And although nothing had happened since, she couldn't shake her curiosity.

And now Cooper Easton's letter. "...please know that none of us were ever hurt..." That was the line she kept coming back to, the line that said more to her than anything else. There was real fear in those words. The Eastons had left the Grayson Lane house in a rush because they were afraid – of all the things that Julie couldn't quite figure out, at least that much was clear.

She put the letter down and grabbed her phone. She sent Allison a text:

Come over tonite? Need some company.

Allison's reply came within seconds:

Sure thing. See u around 7.

Julie was ready to tell her best friend about the ghost on Grayson Lane.

After listening to Julie relate her haunted house story, Allison stared at the letter Cooper Easton had written without raising her eyes. She had not said a word.

"Well?" Julie begged.

"Well what?"

"What do you think?"

Allison sighed. "I think I need to apologize."

“What? Why?”

Allison looked at Julie sheepishly. “Because I might have known about it.”

“Known about what, Allison?”

“Ok, listen, I’m sorry. The first time I spoke with the sellers – the Eastons – they mentioned something. They said they thought it might be haunted. I laughed it off. I just don’t believe in this stuff, Julie.”

Julie was astonished with her best friend’s blatant secrecy, no matter her reasoning. “Did they tell you the house has a nickname? Did they tell you people call it ‘Powder House’?”

“Fuck,” Allison said, shaking her head. “No, they didn’t say much at all. Just that they’d heard things go bump in the night and smelled things that weren’t there. To be honest, I thought they were a bit, you know, cuckoo.” Allison started looking around the room, at the walls, up to the ceiling.

“This is unbelievable.”

Allison set the letter down. “Look at it this way – you’ve been here almost two months now, and you haven’t actually seen anything. So that’s good, right?”

“I guess so.”

“And if you do, I might know someone who can help.” Allison had said it like she didn’t want to.

“Help *how*?” Julie asked. “Have you got a ghost whisperer on standby?”

“Sort of. There’s this woman in Birmingham. She knows how to, I don’t know, ward off evil spirits or something. The agents there use her from time to time, if they need to close a deal on a ‘haunted house.’” Allison made air quotes with her fingers as she said the last two words. “I don’t necessarily believe in the shit she does, but agents who do swear she’s the one to use. Her name is Madam Angeline. You can guess the type.”

“I still can’t believe you didn’t say anything. You should have told Dad.”

“I’m so sorry, Julie. I really am.”

"You want to make it up to me?"

Allison hesitated. "Depends."

"You owe me, Allison. You know you do."

"Ok. What do you want?"

"I want to talk to Cooper Easton. Just one conversation."

"But he's told you all you need to know in this letter."

"No, not everything."

Allison, confused, squinted her eyes.

"I want to know why good ol' Coop had those library books," Julie said. "And why, if he and his family have moved on, he's still so interested in this ghost."

Cooper Easton's phone call came two days later, just after eight o'clock in the morning. Julie was sitting in her den, catching up on the news with a bowl of cereal when Cooper's name, stored in her phone, jumped off the screen. She answered with her mouth full, trying to say hello, but only managing to mumble a few milky syllables.

"Hello? Miss Danner?" Cooper asked.

She forced the cereal down her throat before she answered. "Yes, it's me, Julie. Thanks so much for calling."

"Your agent – if you want to call her that – guilted me into it."

*Work that guilt, Jules.* "I just have a few questions for you. You owe me that much."

"I'm on my way to work in Birmingham. This conversation, which will be our only one, ends as soon as I arrive. Maggie would kill me if she knew I was still talking about this."

"Understood. Let's start with the ghost – who is it?"

She heard Cooper chuckle to himself. "You think I know that?"

"Your son saw it – isn't that what you wrote in the letter?"

There was a drawn-out silence on the other end of the phone. "I don't want to talk about my kids," Cooper finally said.

"Ok. Well, did you or Maggie ever see it?"

"No."

Julie switched gears without a segue, a trick of her journalistic trade. "Was there ever any music that played randomly in the house?"

"No," he answered slowly.

"I found some old records in a closet."

Cooper paused before he spoke. "I had forgotten about those. They were there when we moved in. I don't have a record player, so I never listened to them. I had intended to take them to a vinyl shop and sell them, but I never did." He cleared his throat. "I'm not far from work now. What else?"

"The name 'Powder House' – is that something you guys came up with?"

"Maggie and Becca did. It was a joke at first, but the smell kept returning. It wasn't so funny after a while."

"So why the books at the library? If you were trying to forget about the ghost and the smell, why were you still researching it?"

Julie could hear a shuffling sound through the phone. Cooper wasn't answering, or maybe didn't want to. "I was waiting for that question." He hesitated. "She's followed us. At night, when it's so dark that nothing is moving, and no one's awake, she's there. I wake up, and I know she's there."

"Wait, who's there? You said 'she' – you do know who it is."

"I've said too much."

"Tell me, *please*."

"I'm here. I'm at work. I have to go."

Julie tried not to get flustered. Cooper knew more than he was letting on. She refocused, while she still had him on the phone. "Hold on, one more question."

“What is it?”

“Water on the kitchen floor – did you ever find any water in the middle of the kitchen floor for no reason?”

Another few seconds of nerve-racking silence ticked by.

“No,” Cooper answered simply.

“Are you sure? Just think.”

“Good-bye, Miss Danner. I’m sorry about the house. Don’t contact me again.”

The other end of the phone clicked off, and her Cooper Easton connection was gone.

## Chapter 9

In spite of his physical limitations, Chuck Danner had been living a life of servitude since his shooting. For twelve years, he had been obligated to watch over his wife Elizabeth and her unraveling mind, convinced by the ghost who had come to him the night he was shot. He never questioned why – the spirit’s simple message had been that powerful. And he faithfully stayed at Elizabeth’s side, creating whatever normalcy he could muster around her growing illness until the night she took her own life and he was finally released from his promise.

He had no doubt he’d been liberated. The old and comforting female spirit had come to him the night of Elizabeth’s death, drifting through his sleep as she always did. She had said only two words to him, and those words meant his commitment was finished: “Thank you.” He had watched her float away in his dreams until she was gone. When he woke the next morning, he had an overwhelming sense of relief. It was over.

After that, Chuck awarded himself two weeks of self-induced amnesia, blocking Elizabeth completely from his mind. Her entire world had been upstairs anyway, which meant no marital reminders to mar his first-floor sanctuary. He played his stereo loud and late into the night. He drank too much beer and watched too much baseball. And he “worked” without distraction, dissecting the evidence of countrywide cold cases online.

But eventually Elizabeth Dempsey Danner crept back into his brain. He could feel the weight of her upstairs. Her things hung over him like a heavy blanket. And if he didn’t do something about it soon, she’d be hanging over his head forever, haunting him from above. It was time to clear Elizabeth from his house and his head for good.

“Time to move your mother’s things outta here, Julie-bean,” he told her one night over dinner.

Julie agreed to help him without question. "Ok, Dad. I'll get some boxes from the newspaper. We'll spend the weekend cleaning it all out."

"Saturday morning, seven AM," he instructed. "And bring me a sausage biscuit when you come."

Julie skipped her morning run on Saturday in anticipation of a long day packing up her mother's clothes and personal items. The work would not only be tiring physically, but she knew it would be emotionally draining too. Especially her mother's sewing room.

She stopped at the local drive-thru for biscuits and coffee on the way. Chuck was wide-awake and raring to go when she arrived. She hadn't seen him this eager to start a project in years. They ate breakfast on the back porch, planning their packing strategy. Halfway through her biscuit, Julie decided it was time to prepare her father for what was upstairs.

"When's the last time you were on the second floor, Dad?"

Chuck didn't answer right away. "Been ten years at least. Only went up there a few times after my legs were gone."

Julie was careful with her next words. "There's something you need to see, before we get to work."

"Let me go ahead and burst your bubble right now, Julie-bean – there isn't a thing about Liz'beth that can surprise me. Nothing at all."

"Even so, Dad. It's important – to me – that you see this, before we do anything else."

Chuck looked at her, taking another bite of his sausage biscuit, chewing it slowly while he thought. When he was finished, he agreed. "Ok, Julie-bean. If it's that important, I'll take a look."

Julie eyed her dad while he finished his breakfast. She sensed an apprehension in him that she had never seen before – maybe he already knew what she was about to show him.

The motorized chair lift that tracked alongside the Danners' staircase had been installed six months after Chuck was shot and paralyzed, but he had only used it a handful of times. "This goddam wheelchair is bad enough," he had said. "I don't need some machine carrying me up to bed every night." Soon after, he had decided to make the first floor his domain, and that was that.

Julie noticed a layer of dust on the lift as she helped him onto its seat. She hoped the mechanism was still in working order as she pressed its UP button.

"You stay right beside me, Julie-bean. If I fall outta this damn thing, I'll be a heap of flimsy flesh at the bottom of these stairs."

A flash of memories went through Julie's head with her dad's words. She could remember being a child and overhearing him and his cop buddies, joking about unconscious and apprehended perpetrators – "heaps of flimsy flesh." *Shake it off, Jules. Cops have to joke about that stuff or they'll go crazy.*

"Don't worry, Dad. I'm right here." She dragged his empty wheelchair up the stairs as she followed him.

When they reached the second-floor landing, she helped her dad off the machine and back into his wheelchair. Chuck grabbed hold of its back wheels and started roaming the upstairs area.

"Boy, it sure is strange, being up here again," he said, poking his head around like a hound trying to place a vaguely familiar scent. He peered into his old master bedroom and Julie's childhood room before he rolled himself to the closed door of Elizabeth's sewing room.

“Hold on, Dad. Don’t go in there yet.”

But he was already turning the knob. “I’ll go where I damn well plea...” His last word vanished before he had gotten it out of his mouth, his eyes growing wide as he saw what was behind the closed door. Julie let him take it all in. He finally rolled himself forward again, venturing between the stacks of clothing that loomed over his head by a foot or more.

Julie followed him in, still not saying a word. As he approached his dead wife’s dormant sewing machine, he spoke.

“I had no idea.” He kept looking at the stacks around him, rubbing his hands up and down the towering folds.

“I don’t guess anybody did,” Julie said. “Except for her. Dad, this stuff is immaculate. She had amazing talent.”

Chuck turned his head away from the clothing. He stared over the sewing machine and through the upstairs window, out over his front lawn and the houses beyond. Julie could hear the laughter of children playing in a yard nearby.

“Dad?”

“Go get the boxes, Julie-bean. It’s time to pack your mother away.”

Chuck spent the morning in Elizabeth’s bedroom, her other area of escape from the real world. He left Julie the task of transferring her mother’s brilliantly sewn creations to cardboard boxes and carrying them downstairs to the garage. “We’ll take ‘em to the Goodwill tomorrow,” he had told her. It was shameful, sending the delicate designs to a thrift store, but she knew better than to challenge her dad. It was, after all, his choice.

As she worked, she noticed a distinct and thoughtful pattern in the stacks of clothes – they were methodically organized. Not by style, and not by color. Instead, the stacks followed a specific progression in size. In one corner, almost hidden by everything else,

was the beginning of the pattern: two towers of baby and toddler outfits, most with the same initials intricately smocked onto them. Surrounding the larger “D” on either side were the letters “C” and “E.” *That D is for Danner, Jules – but those other letters don’t make any sense.* And yet every set of initials she came to was the same.

Julie discovered jumpers, dresses, and outfits for a young child, followed by those for a pre-teen. The next few stacks held clothes that a teenager would have worn a decade or so ago. And the shortest stack held clothes for a young woman. It became clear that all of the clothes were for a girl, from her baby years through adulthood. *It’s like they’re all for the same person, Jules. Someone with the initials CED.*

A shiver ran from her shoulders down her back – the cold *feeling* had returned, stronger than the first time. She grabbed one of the smocked rompers and left the room in a rush, shutting the door behind her. Her heart was racing, her mind a scramble of questions with no answers.

*We’re all mad here...*

She took the romper into her mother’s master bathroom, where her dad was removing bottles of perfume from the vanity’s lower cabinets.

“What is this?” she asked, pushing the romper close to her father’s face. It was all she knew to ask.

He took the piece of clothing from her and held it up with two hands. The decorative initials fell right in front of his eyes, staring back at him from just a few inches away. After looking for a few seconds, he placed the romper on his lap, where he folded it into a tight square. He handed it back to her.

“Pack it up, Julie-bean. Pack it all up.”

She snatched the romper from his hands and shook it. “What does this mean? Whose initials are these?”

"I don't know, and I don't wanna know." His voice was shaking and laced with either fear or anger – Julie wasn't sure which. "I'm pretty sure you don't wanna know either. Just put it all in boxes. Please, Julie."

Heat flushed into her face. "Dad, I love you, but I know you're avoiding something."

"Pack up the goddam clothes, Julie! And not another word of this, to me or anybody."

Chuck Danner had spoken. He went back to packing up the vanity, and Julie knew that he wouldn't say anything more. She took the romper back to the sewing room and packed everything into boxes like he had asked. As she did, her shame and guilt were replaced by something very different – her intuitive sixth sense. *The old man knows more than he's letting on. Why's he holding back?*

Julie was done with the room by the afternoon. She took all of the boxes to the garage except for one. With her dad still upstairs and preoccupied, she put the box that was filled with baby clothes into the trunk of her Honda. When she returned to her mother's sewing room, she found Chuck sitting in the doorway, staring into the empty space. All that was left was Elizabeth's sewing machine and the old wooden table it was sitting on, with her mother's worn chair tucked snugly underneath it.

"All packed up," Julie said to her dad.

"All packed up," he replied softly, without breaking his gaze.

"Come on, Dad. We've done enough today."

"Julie-bean, I wanna ask you to do something. One more favor for me." He still hadn't looked at her.

"What's that?"

"I want you to stay in Hopes Ridge. For a little while, at least. I can take care of myself, but I still need you. Just to be close."

Her dad wasn't a needy man, but something had happened to him that day. *And you're all he's got left, Jules.* She put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll stay, Dad – for a little while. Now let's get you downstairs."

He touched her hand. "Yeah, let's do."

Chuck backed his wheelchair out from the doorway and shut the sewing room door. Julie eased him onto the lift and lowered him down, until he was back in the comfort of the first floor, and safely removed once again from the hold of Elizabeth Dempsey Danner's madness.

Back in her house on Grayson Lane, Julie was so tired that night that she fell asleep on the couch, a movie playing on TV and Jerry the MouseDog curled up in the crook of her knees. It was the kind of sleep that she never saw coming – she was awake one moment and snoring the next. She slept so deeply, the sound of her cell phone's text message alerts almost didn't wake her. And had it been only one text, it may not have.

Julie blinked her eyes open as the third alert, a replication of chiming bells, rang out. She lay still at first, contemplating the decision before her: drift back easily to blissful sleep or look to see who was texting her. It was probably Allison anyway. But it could've been her dad, who had been through quite a day. She propped herself on an elbow and rubbed her eyes. The phone chimed again. *Whoever it is, they've sure got something to say.*

When she picked up the phone, its screen was still lit, displaying the name of the messenger. When Julie saw who it was, her body stiffened, prompting a grunt from Jerry.

"Cooper frickin Easton. I never thought I'd hear from you again."

She clicked open her text messages. Cooper had sent her a series of four in a row:

Julie it's Cooper. I was wrong about the water in the kitchen. It happened to us too.  
Twice.

Maggie remembered. I hated to ask her, but I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Now she's suspicious. So, this will absolutely be my last communication.

Sorry to bother you, I just wanted you to know.

Julie looked away from her phone. A combination of validation and disbelief gripped her. She was desperate to know more. She texted Cooper back:

Twice? Did Maggie remember when?

There was no response.

Cooper, please talk to me.

She sat on her couch without moving for thirty minutes, hoping for a response that never came. Her weariness eventually returned, and she made her way to the bedroom, with Jerry on her heels and her phone in her hand. She climbed into bed and turned off the lamp on her nightstand before checking her phone one last time – there was still no response from Cooper Easton.

Her mind was too tired to race, but one thought kept rotating through it like a child riding a merry-go-round. *The water, Jules. The water is the key.*

A moment later, Julie was fast asleep, with Jerry the MouseDog snuggled next to her feet, snoozing as soundly as she was. And the ghosts and secret initials and puddles of water on the kitchen floor were forgotten.

At least for one night in the haunted house on Grayson Lane.

## PART TWO

### Chapter 10

For months, Julie Danner's house on Grayson Lane remained ordinary, devoid of any supernatural circumstances. In the lull, she went about the home renovations she had been considering before her paranormal distraction. She replaced Cooper and Maggie Easton's leftover drapes with thick wooden blinds, purchased a sturdy oak dining room table, and, under her dad's supervision, hired a local sheetrock contractor to scrape off the popcorn ceilings. In the back of her mind, she hoped the ceiling man would uncover a gouge or an indentation or even a simple imperfection in the kitchen, but there was nothing, no sign of anything unusual at all.

Thanksgiving and Christmas came and went, fall turned into winter and then spring, and Julie found herself settling into a life in Hopes Ridge, in spite of her every intention of returning to Atlanta. She stopped in on her dad daily, typically bringing him lunch or dinner. She was there for him, even though he could have survived without her. *It's called emotional support, Jules. We could all use a little of that.*

Eventually, she stopped asking him what had happened the night her mother committed suicide. If there was an answer, he refused to offer it, and he always found a way to change the subject. The same went for Elizabeth Dempsey Danner's sewing room wardrobe, made for a girl who didn't exist – Chuck wasn't going to talk about that either.

Her friendship with Allison grew stronger too. They had never been adult women in the same city together, and their relationship morphed into a grown-up version of what they'd had as kids. There were happy hours and after-work dinners, porch nights with wine and movie nights with popcorn. Allison even coaxed Julie on a few double-dates, as she was always looking for a wing-woman, but none of them led to much more for

Julie than a few hours of forced conversation and thwarted advances. All in all, she and Allison were as tight as friends could be now that geography wasn't an obstacle.

*The Herald* kept Julie busy, even though she still couldn't commit to how long she might stay. "I'll take you for as long as I can, Miss Danner," Bruce told her with a smirk one day. His struggling paper was seeing a slight increase in subscribership – the first time that had happened in five years. People were reading the paper again, and with readers came advertisers. Bruce, not one for compliments, celebrated in silence, sipping each night from his desk-drawer bottle of Jack Daniel's. Julie's writing had given the old editor-in-chief a semblance of community importance again, but it had also brought him something that was much more vital: the money he needed to keep the *Herald* in print.

When she wasn't working on her next big story for Bruce, Julie continued to pursue her own personal investigation, researching the house whenever time allowed. The ghost there, although absent for a long while, was always lingering. Julie could feel it. Her intuition, that sixth sense she depended on so often, was still pushing her to find the connection between the death of GranBelle Jenny and the water on the kitchen floor. *That's the key, Jules.* Unfortunately, she kept running into dead-ends, and over time, GranBelle Jenny and her mysterious death dropped from the forefront of Julie's mind.

Soon enough, June rolled around, bringing with it a balmy execution to the pleasant spring weather in Hopes Ridge that year. Temperatures spiked, and on the tidal wave of heat came something else, like a fearless ocean-swell surfer from the past. It was a different kind of ghost that returned to Julie's life her second summer back in Hopes Ridge – the ghost of an old flame.

Among many things, Allison Hargrave had been the president of her and Julie's high school senior class. That meant that she was in charge of their ten-year reunion,

which was fast-approaching. Had Julie still been in Atlanta, she wouldn't have even considered returning for the reunion. But now she couldn't avoid it, especially with Allison laying on one of her classic guilt trips.

"You're coming, right?" Allison asked for the fifteenth time two weeks before the big weekend.

"Um...I'm not sure, Allison."

"You're not sure? Why wouldn't you come?"

"I don't know. This whole thing of faking it for a weekend with people I haven't seen in ten years – it just seems contrived to me. And a big waste of time."

"Since when was Tyler Sexton a waste of time?"

The name caught Julie off-guard. Tyler Sexton, her long-lost high school boyfriend. She hadn't thought of him in years. These days, he was just a fleeting memory conjured up on the rare occasion she heard a Jeff Buckley song or saw a guy with long blonde hair. Tyler wasn't the type to come back for a reunion. That was one of the things he and Julie had in common – neither was sentimental. But Tyler must have changed, because Allison swore Julie's old boyfriend was going to be there.

"Right. I'll believe it when I see it."

"Which means you'll have to be there to find out," Allison said slyly.

"Ok, so what if he is? That's ancient history."

"I'm not saying you guys are going to rekindle some old fucking romance. Give me a break."

"What are you saying then?"

"I'm saying you should make Tyler regret the choices he made, by doing what all girls do at reunions – show that asshole you're still hot shit."

Julie smiled at the thought. Maybe stopping by the reunion wasn't such a bad idea after all.

It was Tyler's brain that had made him so attractive. He was smarter than most of his classmates, and worldly. He'd moved to Hopes Ridge in the middle of their sophomore year, from California, which seemed like another planet. He was tall and lean, with shoulder-length sandy hair that got him second and third glances when he walked the school hallways. Julie met him in her third period Advanced Placement English class, when he slid into the desk right behind her.

"What are we reading?" he whispered to her after the bell rang.

"*Catcher in the Rye*," she answered, tucking her hair behind her ear so she could hear him.

"Nice," he said with a lazy surfer affectation, noticeable even through his hushed tone. "Holden Caulfield is one of my favorites – the first real rebel without a cause. I'm Tyler." She could sense him smiling at her, sending an unfamiliar flutter through her stomach.

"Julie," she whispered back.

From that day forward, Tyler was relentless. He asked Julie out at least twenty times before she said yes. She didn't have nearly the experience with boys Allison did, and he seemed too passionate, too experienced for her. In their English class, he would answer questions about books with the intensity most guys she knew reserved for football. He knew poetry, history, and literature. He played guitar and drums, and wrote songs. When she finally said yes, he took her to Birmingham's majestic Alabama Theater to see a revival showing of *The Graduate*. Afterward, they parked in an empty field outside Hopes Ridge and drank cheap wine under a sea of stars. Julie had never felt more like an adult in her life.

She fell for Tyler fast, and their teenage romance ran deep. After graduation, they both headed to Nashville. Tyler kept chasing his dream of music, while Julie pursued her education at Vanderbilt. "Not all higher learning comes from a classroom," he tried

to explain time and time again. Inevitably, their lives began to diverge. Julie spent her days in class, while Tyler spent his nights in bars. They were on the verge of breaking up when she caught him in bed with another girl. She threw his apartment key at him and screamed. She called him a no-talent asshole and a fraud – the two things she knew would hurt him most. “Your first lesson in love,” she told herself as she left.

After that, she had put all her energy into a future that would be hers alone, and Tyler Sexton became a shrinking image in her life’s rearview mirror, all but gone, until talk of the fast-approaching reunion brought him back.

The big event of the reunion weekend, and the only one that Julie agreed to attend, was the Saturday night party at the Hopes Ridge Country Club. Julie was anxious all day, halfheartedly plotting ways to back out. The confident woman she’d become since she last saw Tyler fought the nervous love-sick girl he’d cheated on. Her head was a mess.

To make sure Julie didn’t jump ship, Allison insisted they ride to the event together. The arrangement gave Julie a bit of comfort. At least she wouldn’t have to walk into the party alone. She called Allison that afternoon to see what time she was picking her up. When the former class president answered the phone, she sounded as if she were just waking up.

“Did someone have a long night?” Julie asked mockingly.

“Shut the fuck up,” Allison mumbled. “I feel like shit.”

“What did you do?”

“Two words: Nate Markinson, lake party.”

“Technically that’s four words.”

“I think we saw this morning’s sunrise.”

“And?”

“Sunrise is highly overrated.”

“I meant Nate Markinson.”

“Oh that. Let’s just say we relived some of our best high school moments. Some things really are better the second time around. Nate’s finally got the experience to keep up with me.” Allison snickered.

“You never cease to amaze me, Allison Hargrave.”

“I’m pretty sure Nate said that same thing last night...more than once.”

“Spare me the details, please. What time are you picking me up?”

Allison yawned loudly through the phone. “I’m not even sure I’m going.”

“Come on, Allison. You’re the one who talked me into this.”

“I’m joking. You think I’d miss seeing you and Tyler hook up again? I’ll rally.”

“Who said anything about hooking up?”

“Me, that’s who. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

A recuperated Allison whipped her BMW into Julie’s gravel driveway on Grayson Lane at seven o’clock on the dot. Julie saw her pull up and came out, wearing her skinniest jeans with a loose silk blouse and black heels, an outfit she deemed appropriate for the night's affair. When she got in the car, she saw that her best friend had chosen to go with a more provocative number – a low-cut red dress that fit skintight around her body.

“You know you don't have to entice Nate anymore?” Julie said. “You took care of that last night.”

“I’m not dressed for Nate,” Allison answered, waving her hand across the length of her body. “This is for everybody else.”

Julie laughed at her friend's open flamboyance. Allison always had a way of keeping life loose, and that's just what Julie needed before the party. Her nerves were wound tight, and Allison's levity eased her mood.

"Well, let's get going already," Julie prodded from the passenger seat.

"Yes, ma'am."

Allison backed her BMW into Grayson Lane and squealed its tires as they sped off toward the Hopes Ridge Country Club.

The club was decorated with bunting and streamers and balloons in yellow and black, Hopes Ridge High's school colors. White posterboards featuring yearbook photos of Julie's classmates lined the entranceway. A giant *Welcome Home, Hawks!* banner hung over the doorway to the ballroom. When Allison and Julie arrived, the band was plodding through a Third Eye Blind song, the lead singer trying his best to howl the same question throughout: "Can I Graduate?!?!?"

*Fitting way to start a reunion party. How long do we have to stay?*

Julie looked around the room and recognized a few faces. There was Mandy Linden, the drop-dead gorgeous prom queen, who had moved to L.A. to pursue acting, but was now in Memphis, married and quite obviously pregnant. And there was Barry Blankenship, the class valedictorian who had gone to MIT and was now heading up NASA's next big space project just up the road in Huntsville. And there was Meredith Flugger, who had worked with Julie on the high school paper all four years. She wasn't quite ready to get into a conversation with Meredith, who rumor had it taught feminist film studies at a private college up north.

"Let's get a drink," Allison said.

"Uh-huh," Julie answered, nodding eagerly.

The bar was set up in a separate, dimly-lit room to their left. Hightop tables and a running slideshow with more images from way-back-when kept people circulating and helped break the ice. Julie caught a glimpse of her teenage self on the wall as she and Allison walked through. She froze when she saw it, cringing.

“Allison, you promised.”

A voice from behind her cut through the mediocre music, just as she was recovering from the outdated picture of her former self.

“Hey, I recognize that girl on the wall.”

The voice was just as Julie remembered it, deep but still California lazy. She turned around, and there he was, smiling that same way he had on the day she met him in AP English. His hair was longer than it had been, but now it was styled and cut with purpose. He had a light shadow of stubble on his face, and he was dressed in a dark suit and white shirt open at the collar. She couldn't help but look down at his shoes – Julie always looked at men's shoes – where she saw that he was wearing faded brown boots instead of loafers. There was still a working musician in there, although this reunion version of Tyler Sexton was keeping him well-hidden.

“And I think I recognize this guy,” Julie said, not knowing where the whimsical line had come from. She pulled her chin down and cut her eyes sideways.

“Hey, Julie.” He took a step toward her. “Been a while.”

“Sure has. I see some things never change.” She pointed to his boots.

He looked down, turning his left foot on its side. “Here I am, dressed in my Sunday best, and you're looking at my feet.”

“Because the reality of the man lies in his shoes. It's a proven fact.”

“It is, is it?”

Whatever anxiety Julie had been feeling about seeing Tyler again was gone. They were flirting, spontaneously and without caution, and Julie was enjoying every minute of it.

“How about you let me buy you a drink, and we can stop talking about my boots?”

“I can't make any promises – but a drink sounds like a good start.”

Allison was waiting at the bar, pretending that she hadn't been watching them.

“Allison Hargrave,” Tyler said as he and Julie approached. “Don't you look all...grown up.”

Allison squinted her eyes and smirked. “I'm going to choose to take that as a compliment. How you been, Tyler?”

“I am alive and well – and that's saying a lot, given I spent three hundred and sixteen days away from home last year.”

“Living your life on the road, huh?” Julie asked. “The vagabond troubadour.”

Tyler smiled. “I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“I'm sure you wouldn't.” A pang of regret hit Julie by surprise.

The band in the other room started playing a song by Coldplay – one of the few bands that Julie and Allison both loved.

“Come on, Julie – let's go have some fun.” Allison said it with an underlying intention: to insinuate that Tyler wasn't being fun at all.

Julie looked at her old boyfriend and shrugged.

“Don't worry,” he reassured her. “I'll bring your drink to you. Dance-floor service. What are you having?”

Julie looked at the drink in Allison's hand, a clear and bubbly concoction in a short cocktail glass.

“Vodka,” Julie decided, against her better judgement – it always went down too fast, and to her head too quickly. But she didn't care about either that night. Tyler Sexton was in town, and Julie Danner was ready to have a good time.

The band improved as the night progressed, or so it seemed – it was more likely the vodka tonics that kept flowing. She and Tyler danced and talked and laughed about how naïve they had been ten years before. She told him about grad school in Chicago and CNN in Atlanta, about why she moved back to Hopes Ridge, about discovering her dead mother in the bathtub. He was sympathetic and rubbed her shoulder as she reflected.

He told her about his own winding path. How after struggling and starving for a few years, a music publisher bought a few of his songs, which had paved the way for his own dream. He still “lived” in Nashville, even though he toured the country most of the year, and he doubted he’d ever settle down. But when he couldn’t tour any more, he would still write songs. Late in the evening, they found themselves outside on one the balconies so Tyler could catch a smoke.

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out with us,” he said, his eyes turned away from her as he leaned on the balcony railing. “And I hate how we ended. It’s my one true regret in life, Julie.” He took a final drag from his cigarette slowly, looking down as he flicked its butt to the ground two floors below. “I’m sorry.”

Julie had never given Tyler a chance to apologize after she caught him cheating on her. She had let him have it with a barrage of insults, slamming the door behind her, and never looking back. But now, a decade later, with a little more wisdom and experience under her belt, the apology sounded sincere and comforting. She realized she had been waiting for that apology all this time.

She leaned against the railing next to him, touching her shoulder to his. “It wasn’t *all* your fault, Tyler. Things had gotten weird. I’m sorry too.”

He turned his head and looked at her. She moved her face closer to his. He slid his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck, leaning in to kiss her, and Julie let him. The memory of his kiss flooded her mind, and she felt a thrilling shudder run through her

body. He tasted and smelled like cigarettes and bourbon, but she didn't mind – it made it all seem more dangerous than it actually was. She kissed him back.

She didn't want to stop, and she could tell that Tyler didn't want to either. If not for another group of classmates coming outside to smoke, they may have stayed intertwined on that balcony all night.

"Sorry, guys," the first one in the group of smokers said with a cough and a laugh.

"No problem," Tyler responded. He looked back to Julie. "Wanna get out of here?"

Julie felt like she was floating, both drunk and aroused. "Please."

They rushed down the country club's back stairs, avoiding the rest of the reunion. Julie had a fleeting moment of regret about leaving Allison behind. *If anyone would understand, it's her, Jules. She'll figure it out.* Julie laughed at the thought of Allison putting two-and-two together.

"What's so funny?" Tyler asked.

They were in the parking lot, almost to his truck, an older model two-door Tahoe, the same one he had driven in high school.

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking about leaving Allison here to fend for herself."

"With the dress she was wearing, I think she'll be just fine," Tyler joked.

The inside of Tyler's Tahoe unleashed another flood of high school memories, and Julie kept floating as they cruised the darkened streets of Hopes Ridge. She gave him directions to Grayson Lane. He drove slowly, reaching over and touching her thigh at one point. She wanted to urge him to drive faster, but she held her tongue, not willing to show how much she wanted him.

"I remember this street," he said as he pulled into her gravel drive. "It definitely wasn't this nice."

"You're like me," Julie told him. "You stayed away so long, it feels like a different town. Come on."

She led him to her front porch, where she fumbled for her housekey and slid it into the doorknob's keyhole. He came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist, nuzzling his nose and mouth into her neck, kissing her behind her ear. She hesitated, his touch giving her a chill.

"Let's get inside," he whispered.

"Let's do."

Jerry the MouseDog greeted them in his typical way, bouncing up and down and yelping without pause. Julie turned around and shut the door. Tyler met her with another kiss. She pulled away from him, even though she didn't want to.

"Just a minute, ok?"

"I don't know if I can wait."

She smiled. "I'll be right back."

Julie pushed Jerry toward the kitchen with her leg. She opened the back door, and he went running out. She grabbed a bottle of red wine and two glasses. When she got back to the den, Tyler was standing next to her pawnshop turntable, thumbing through her collection of vinyl records.

"This is some killer stuff you've got here," he said.

"Did you forget how much I loved music?"

"I don't know – maybe I did." He pulled out a record. "Can I put this on?"

Julie looked at the cover: *Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band – Night Moves*. "You can play whatever you want."

He worked the turntable like it was his own, switching it on and gently placing the needle on the outer edge of the spinning record. The opening guitar riff of "Rock and Roll Never Forgets" came on. Julie opened the bottle of wine and poured them each a glass. She sat down on the couch.

"What else did you forget about me?" she asked.

Tyler took off his jacket and threw it across the only chair in the room. He took a sip of wine as he sat down next to her. "Too much, I'm afraid. Like how unbelievably blue your eyes are." He put his hand on her cheek.

"What the hell are we doing?" Julie asked, a sudden sense of reason popping into her head, momentarily overpowering her drunken eagerness to let him have her.

"Remembering." He leaned over and kissed her again.

The blip of reason in Julie's mind vanished. The familiarity of his kiss returned, but this time different. Now it was more sexual than romantic. He traced the shape of her lips with his tongue before he eased it into her mouth, almost like he was requesting permission. She slid down the back of the couch. His arms were around her, his hands underneath her, squeezing her in places that hadn't been touched by anyone else in so long.

Bob Seger's second song was playing, the album's title track – a song about teenage lust. Julie felt like she was in high school again, only more confident. They were removing each other's clothes slowly, rediscovering each other's bodies, one part at a time. Soon they were naked, and Tyler was on top of her. She bent her left knee and rotated it outward, opening her leg enough so that his hips fell between her thighs. And then she felt him, inside her.

Time stopped while they made love. Near the end, Tyler tried to pull away, but Julie squeezed her legs and arms around him, holding him in place – she was enthralled with the intimacy, and she didn't want it to end. Tyler's weight on her, his skin pressed against her own, the two of them connected again – she had needed him more than she could have ever known.

Afterward, Tyler stayed on top of her, not moving. The first side of the record had ended, but Julie didn't know when. Her house was silent except for their deep and steady breathing, matching with rhythm the scratchy revolutions of the record's afterplay.

"I had forgotten," Tyler breathed, his mouth so close to her ear that it tickled when he spoke.

"Me too." Her body was still tingling.

He raised himself up on his elbows and looked at her. "I may need another reminder."

"You think you're up for that?"

"I think I could be."

"How about we move this to the bedroom?"

"Sounds good to me."

He got up off the couch, the muscles on his lean body taut from the physical exertion. *My God, he's beautiful.* She admired him for a moment before she stood. Any modesty she may have had was gone – she let him watch her as she walked toward the bedroom.

"That way," she pointed, leaning against the bathroom door. "I'll meet you there in a minute."

"Hurry."

Julie closed the bathroom door behind her. She flipped on the light and eyed herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess, the little bit of lipstick she had been wearing smeared. But she looked radiant, basking in the afterglow of nostalgic sex.

"Damn, that was fun," she said to her reflection.

She went to the toilet and sat. As she urinated, Julie closed her eyes and replayed in her head the last few minutes. She smiled until her mind went to the way it had all ended. With her inhibitions dulled by alcohol and lust, she had forgotten her senses, letting Tyler finish inside her. *Jeez, Jules, that was pretty stupid.* She reached up to the medicine cabinet above her sink and pulled out a disc-shaped plastic container. After double-checking the circle inside, she let out a sigh of relief. *Thank the good Lord for birth control.*

The thought had barely left her head when something in the bathroom changed. It was a smell, so faint at first that she barely noticed it. She looked around the tiny room, frantic as the smell grew stronger with every second that passed.

*It can't be, can it?*

The question hung in the thickening air. Try as hard as she might, she couldn't deny the familiar scent. Her heart began to sprint, and a cold sweat broke across her naked body, giving her an uncontrollable shiver that seemed close to panic.

*That's baby powder, Jules, even though you don't have a single bottle of it anywhere in the house.*

The ghost of Grayson Lane was back.

## Chapter 11

The time Julie spent with her old flame Tyler Sexton was brief, and anything longer might have ruined their perfect reunion. He was up and ready to go early the next morning. "I wish I could stay longer, but I've got a gig in Kentucky tonight," he said as he put on his crumpled suit pants. He kissed her on her cheek as he left, and Julie wondered if it would be another ten years before she saw him again.

She never once mentioned her ghost to Tyler – the one that had returned out of nowhere, revealing itself to Julie by smell for the first time. But she hadn't been able to sleep either, because she couldn't shake her neighbor Becca's words from months earlier, this time sounding more like a warning: "*You're living in 'Powder House'...*"

That evening, she went to her dad's house for dinner. It had become a weekly tradition for the two of them: take-out and *Sunday Night Baseball* on ESPN. Julie picked up food from Franklin's Bar-B-Que on the way, a Hopes Ridge staple and one of Chuck Danner's longtime favorites. She had been eager to get out of the house and away from the lingering smell of baby powder that had returned that afternoon, stronger than the night before, following her from room to room.

"Julie-bean!" her dad yelled as she came in the house. "What are we having tonight?"

"Famous Franklin's," she said, unloading the bags of food on the kitchen counter.

Chuck wheeled into the kitchen with Rocko on his lap. "Damn, you're good. I had a hankerin' for some pulled pork."

"Got ribs too."

"Well, look at you, going all out. What's the occasion?"

"No occasion, just hungry."

Julie grabbed two plates from a lower cabinet. She spooned pulled pork on each, along with potato salad and green beans. She separated the ribs and put three on each plate.

"Who's playing tonight?" she asked.

"Goddam Yankees again. I swear it's every other Sunday with those guys. Tonight they're playing Tampa Bay. Another game you can file in the 'who gives a shit' category."

Julie was secretly happy that the baseball wouldn't be a distraction. She wanted to talk serious with her dad, and a good game would have been hard to pull him away from. With their dinners on TV trays, they moved from the kitchen to the den, where they ate with little conversation, mostly watching the game as they filled their bellies. After they were finished, Julie went to the kitchen and scooped her dad a bowl of chocolate ice cream. The Yankees were up six runs by then, and Julie seized the opportunity.

"Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Anything, Julie-bean. You know that." He stuck a heaping spoonful of ice cream into his mouth.

"It's about the night you were shot."

Chuck stiffened and swallowed slowly. Julie remembered her dad talking too loosely the night of his wife's funeral, telling her and Allison too much. She could see he remembered too.

"Alright. I suppose I opened this can of worms. What do you wanna know?"

"I guess I'm wondering..." Julie started. She didn't know how to put it. "I just want to know..."

"Well, c'mon. We ain't got all night."

"How did you know the spirit that visited you was real?"

Chuck wiped his mouth with the napkin he had stuffed in the collar of his shirt. He crumpled it up and dropped it into his bowl of half-eaten ice cream.

"It's hard to say. I just knew it."

"But I mean, specifically. You said you saw her, right?"

"Yeah, but not the way you might think. I saw her like you see things in a dream. Kinda fuzzy-like. And there was a smell too."

The muscles in Julie's stomach tightened. "A smell?"

"Yeah, I remember that part well, 'cause that crackhouse we were in smelled God-awful. But when she came to me, the stink went away. I couldn't smell anything at first, then..."

"Then what?" Julie was sitting on the edge of the couch.

"You're gonna think I'm crazy, if you don't already."

"Tell me, Dad. I'll believe you – I promise."

Chuck looked at her across the room, gauging her sincerity. "It was something I hadn't smelled in years, Julie-bean. Since maybe I was a child. It was the smell of jasmine, like my mother used to keep round our house growing up."

Julie had never known her grandparents, on either side of the family. Chuck's parents had died together in a car accident when he was just 25, six months before Julie was born.

"Your mother?"

"Yeah," he said wistfully. "Mama used to grow jasmine all around our house, when nobody knew what the hell jasmine was. She had picked some up on a trip to Florida once, and she had fallen in love with its fragrance. Mama loved the smell of tropical flowers. Hard to believe, isn't it? A country woman from the middle of Missouri keeping jasmine everywhere."

Julie let him live in his memory for a moment before she continued her impromptu interrogation. "And the spirit spoke to you? Out loud?"

Chuck came back to the conversation. "I don't wanna say that she spoke to me. It didn't come across that way. More like she was carrying a message, and she put that message in my mind, without ever saying a word."

Julie didn't know what to think. Her father had been in a state of shock, she was sure, and the visitor he described sounded an awful lot like his mother, down to the smell she had brought with her. Maybe he had been on the verge of some afterlife, walking through that tunnel of light that the near-deathers always seemed to describe with dramatic consistency, their deceased loved ones calling for them to join in the heavenly glory.

"What's all this about?" Chuck asked, breaking her from her musings. "Why all the questions?"

Julie sighed before she answered. "It's my house, Dad. As foolish as it may sound, I think it may be haunted."

He stared at her, contemplating what she had said. "Good ghost or bad?" he asked.

"I don't know." She fell back into the couch, her hands on her head. "What's the difference?"

"A helluva lot. In my years on the force, I saw it all. The good, the bad, the ugly, and the just plain miraculous. I saw bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad. And I saw things that didn't make a lick of sense at all. There are angels at work in the world, Julie – but there are devils too. And plenty of 'em."

"Let's just say that I haven't gotten to know this one that well yet. It seems to be a little bit shy around me." Julie told her dad everything, from Jerry's incessant kitchen barking to the possessed record player to the house's neighborhood nickname. She left out what had happened the night before and that day: the unmistakable smell of baby powder that had seemed to confirm it all.

Chuck wrinkled his face. "You want out of that house? You just say the word."

"I don't think so. I'm intrigued. The reporter in me, I guess."

“Well, listen – you be careful. If you get any sense that this thing might hurt you, you leave. You hear me?”

“Wait. You think it could hurt me?”

“I’ve seen it all, Julie-bean. Just be careful.”

Julie didn't say anything more, and Chuck turned his attention back to the boring baseball game. Trying to forget about her haunted house for a few minutes, she stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes. Before she knew it, she was asleep in a deep slumber, and she didn't wake up until the light of Monday morning was shining through the den's bay window.

When Julie awoke on her dad's couch, she didn't know where she was at first. Chuck had spread a blanket over her at some point, and she threw it off as she popped up, gathering her bearings.

“Shit,” she said. “What a way to start a Monday.”

In the kitchen she found a pen and paper, and she jotted her dad a note: “*Had to run. Thanks for the blanket. Love you, old man.*” She quietly opened the back door and left.

Back at her house on Grayson Lane, she sat frozen in her car, staring through the windshield, wondering if the smell of baby powder would be hanging in the air when she walked through the front door. As she got to the porch, she could hear Jerry yapping and jumping up and down.

“I know, I hear you,” she said as she unlocked the door.

Jerry was barking loudly by then. Julie held her breath as she stepped around him and entered the house. *You gotta breathe, Jules. Either that or stock up on clothespins.* She released the air from her lungs and waited for it. But the house was odorless. The smell of baby powder was gone.

“Come on, MouseDog.” She moved through the rooms warily. “I know you’re starving.”

After feeding Jerry and letting him outside, Julie went to her bedroom and undressed, anticipating the smell’s resurgence at any moment, waiting helplessly for the ghost to reappear. She took a shower without washing her hair, keeping her eyes open and the curtain pulled halfway, questioning every move she made.

*We’re all mad here...oh yes, we are...*

As if in defiance of her anxiety, her stomach growled as she turned off the hot water. She got dressed quickly and went to the kitchen to scrounge up some breakfast. While she ate, her mind drifted, thankfully far away from the ghost for a minute.

She was working on a new story for Bruce Woods, a deep-dive investigation into a Birmingham cold case from decades before that her dad had mentioned in passing a few weeks ago. Julie mulled over what she knew so far: two single women from the same apartment complex had been murdered in 1983, but their killer had never been found. One of the women had been from Hopes Ridge, the local connection. With her dad’s interest – and impressive success rate – in cold cases, Julie thought she might enlist his help, and they could work on the story together.

She took the last bite of her morning bagel as the ideas of how she might craft her new story took shape. She peered out her kitchen window, the ghost of Grayson Lane long gone from her head, her nervous energy focused on something else.

*There’s a story here, Jules – a good one. Especially if you can help solve the case.*

A smile of future satisfaction crept across her face, and the shimmering glare of sunshine landscaping her backyard rejuvenated her spirit. She took her plate to the sink and poured herself another cup of coffee.

*Start with the murdered girl from Hopes Ridge – see if she’s got any family left around here.*

As she brought the coffee to her mouth, a new smell invaded her nose, ripe and pungent. Her hand dropped the ceramic cup instinctively, and it shattered into

hundreds of tiny pieces on the kitchen floor, the black coffee inside splattering like blackened blood across the linoleum. Julie turned sharply, expecting to see a rodent's carcass that Jerry had dragged in from the backyard, but there was nothing there. The MouseDog was still outside.

An uncontrollable cough came up Julie's throat, startling her. The smell – *the stink* – was getting stronger. It wasn't baby powder this time, that much was clear. This odor was menacing and angry. Julie couldn't place it, but she knew she had to escape it. Her eyes filled with water, her vision blurred.

Grimacing and coughing as she went, she ran to her bedroom. The stink followed her, like an invisible swarm of insects. It seemed to be surrounding her no matter where she went, enveloping her in a suffocating cocoon.

She found her car keys and cell phone on the dresser. Out of the corner of her bleary eye, she spotted her mother's spool of red thread. She had left it out, setting it on the back corner of her dresser as a reminder – of what, she wasn't quite sure. The stink grew more smothering, and a dry-heave erupted from her stomach. *Run, Jules. Run!* With her throat closing in on her, Julie grabbed the spool of thread. She pushed it deep into her pocket and sprinted for the front door. The stink stayed on her like a wet winter coat.

As she fell across the porch and into the dewy grass of her front yard, she felt like she was surfacing from the depths of a putrid scum pond that had tried its damndest to drown her. She turned over and lay on her back, sucking in huge gulps of fresh summer air.

*What in frickin hell was that?*

The awful stink had been unlike anything she had ever smelled before, dark and sinister. Evil, if that was possible. She couldn't wrap her head around what was happening, no matter how hard she tried.

*That was the smell of death, Jules. Old, dirty, devious death.*

## Chapter 12

The downtown office of Hargrave Realty was two stories high, occupying a ruddy brick building that sat snugly between two others on the north side of the Hopes Ridge town square. A historical society sign sat in front of the building's original wooden door, designating its status as one of the community's first established businesses. The hardwood floors in the building tilted in places and its doors creaked as they opened, but it was both comfortable and classy at the same time. "Al" Hargrave's office was on the second floor, where she had twelve-foot ceilings and a large picture window that overlooked the city's revitalized square.

Like every Monday morning, Allison was working at her computer when she heard a quick scramble of footsteps coming up the building's stairwell. She looked up just as Julie barreled through her office door, her friend's cheeks flushed red and sweat glistening her face. Julie slammed the door shut behind her and started pacing the floor.

"Good morning to you too," Allison said.

"I think I need that name you mentioned. Madam something or other."

"Whoa, hold on a second. What happened?"

Julie wouldn't stop walking, her eyes focused on her steps and nothing else.

"Tell me what the fuck is going on, Julie!"

"I don't know," she answered without stopping her back-and-forth pace. "But I need help."

"With your ghost?" Allison asked the question slowly.

"That's right," Julie said, staring directly at her friend. "With my ghost, because there's no doubt that it's real. And now it's starting to haunt me."

Julie sat in one of Allison's leather-bound chairs and spilled her weekend story, from the smell of baby powder right after she had slept with Tyler up to just a few minutes

earlier, when the horrid stink of death had flat-out attacked her. Allison was already scrolling through her phone's contact list as Julie finished.

"Got it – Angeline LaChappelle." Allison touched the screen on her phone and put it to her ear.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting this fucking show on the road."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for..." Julie stopped short – Allison's phone call had been answered.

"Yes, hello, Madam Angeline?"

Julie stayed quiet, listening closely to the conversation. When Allison said, "This Friday at three?", Julie shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

"Great. See you then. And thank you, Madam." Allison hung up the phone and smiled. "Miss Danner, your exorcism is set."

"Very funny."

"You can stay with me this week if you'd like. I've got the extra bedroom."

"I might just do that – if you don't mind Jerry tagging along." Allison saw another layer of distress come over Julie's face. "Oh no! Jerry – I left him in the house alone!" Julie jumped up from her chair. "See you at your place tonight." She ran out of Allison's office.

"I'll have the bed made up for you!" Allison yelled back to her, just as she heard the old wooden door to Hargrave Realty swing open and slam shut.

Friday came quicker than Julie thought it would. She and Jerry had stayed with Allison during the week after all – the stink had been too much for her to take, even though it was gone when she went back for the MouseDog. She had driven straight to her house from Allison's office, and Jerry had been waiting on her at the door, with his

usual yap-and-jump routine. All was normal as she walked inside. The house had smelled fine. Julie packed some clothes and left anyway, with the hope that Madam Angeline could allay her fears when she made her visit.

That Friday afternoon, she and Allison waited on the front lawn of her haunted house for the mysterious madam to arrive. At five minutes after three, a long white Cadillac turned onto Julie's street, slinking toward them like a snail. The car was a lumbering boat of a vehicle, in pristine condition.

"It's her," Julie said, almost in a whisper.

"You think so?" Allison asked.

"I know so."

The Cadillac eased up to the curb in front of Julie's house and slowed to a stop. The driver's door opened, and a short black man in a dark suit and tie stepped out. He was wearing sunglasses and a fedora-style hat. Without acknowledging the two women in the yard, he walked around the back of the sedan and opened the rear door, extending his hand inside.

The first thing to emerge from the car was a pearl-white cane, its large rounded tip searching for solid footing before it settled in the grass. A woman's sandaled foot followed, then the other, and the rest of Madam Angeline was not far behind.

She was a tall, thin woman, and she leaned on her cane with undeniable dependency. Her stark white dress covered her from the bottom of her jaw to the soles of her shoes, and she wore a wide-brimmed hat that matched. Her face, a perfect ebony contrast to her dress, was hidden behind jeweled sunglasses. She moved slowly from the car, her head sweeping from side-to-side, like a cat taking in new surroundings. Her driver closed the car door and took a stiffened position next to the Cadillac's taillight. He reminded Julie of a secret service agent guarding a presidential motorcade, despite his small stature.

The woman removed her sunglasses as she approached, and they fell to her chest, hanging from a gold chain draped around her neck.

Allison reached for the woman's hand. "We've never met, but I've heard a lot about you, Madam Angeline. I'm Allison Hargrave."

"I am not here for you, dear, now am I?"

"Um...no, ma'am, you're not."

"Let's get to it then."

Julie took that as her cue to speak. "My name is Julie Danner, Madam. I'm the one who lives here."

"Yes, this much I know."

Trying to continue as best she could, Julie stammered. "Well, it all started with my dog..."

"No, no, no, dear. Don't say a word about what has happened in the house. I will discover that on my own. Tell me about you – why did you move here?"

Julie felt flustered for a moment, but recovered. "I moved back for my parents – for my dad." She had brought the spool of red thread with her, and she rolled it between her fingers inside the front pocket of her jeans. "He bought this house for me, for my stay."

"But you didn't intend to stay long?" Madam Angeline asked.

"No, ma'am. It's only temporary."

"And yet you haven't left."

Julie could tell it was a statement, so she didn't answer.

"I see. Now show me into the house, Julianna."

*Wait, what name did she just use?*

"What was that, Madam?" Julie asked, furrowing her brow.

The woman put her free hand on Julie's arm. "Show me your house, dear."

Confused but suddenly submissive, Julie walked to the front porch, guiding Madam Angeline as she went. When they reached the front door, the woman pulled Julie back.

“Let me go first, dear. Follow me closely. If I ask a question, answer quickly. Otherwise, do not say a word.” She twisted her head around. “You stay outside, Miss Hargrave. This is just for the two of us.”

Allison seemed happy to comply.

Julie stepped aside, and Madam Angeline opened the door. Before she went in, she slipped off her sandals. She led herself through the doorway with her pearly cane. As directed, Julie followed right behind.

Inside the first room of the house, the madam stopped. She turned to the corner, where the pawnshop record player sat. As she moved toward the old console, she asked her first question. “What song does the spirit play?”

Stunned, Julie couldn’t speak.

“What song, dear?”

“It’s an old song – ‘Strange Things Are Happening Every Day’ – by Sister Rosetta Tharpe.”

“Yes, yes. I know the song.” Madam Angeline was stroking the wood of the console as she spoke. “Strange things do indeed happen every single day.”

With measured steps, they moved through the middle room into the stunted hallway between the two bedrooms. The madam held up at the bathroom doorway.

“This spirit has revealed itself by smell?”

“Yes,” Julie answered quietly.

“What smell, dear?”

“Baby powder.”

“Mm-hmm,” the madam muttered with a smile. “And you are with child?”

“No,” Julie answered, her face shriveling at the question.

“Mm-hmm,” Madam Angeline mumbled.

Julie pressed on. "And there's been another smell..."

"Yes, I know. We'll get to that."

The madam took a step sideways and leaned her body into Julie's bedroom. Her eyes focused on a cardboard box in the far corner – the box filled with monogrammed baby clothes that Julie had snuck from her mother's sewing room.

"Those clothes there," she said, somehow knowing what the box held inside it.

"They are your mother's, no?"

"They are."

"They hold some importance to you?"

Bewildered by the madam's knowledge, Julie didn't know how to answer the question. "I'm not sure yet. I think so."

"Mm-hmm."

Her eyes scanned the room, stopping at Julie's dresser near the door. Julie rolled the spool of thread in her pocketed hand, an anxious shiver running up her arms.

After a few seconds of silence, Madam Angeline backed out of the hall, and Julie slid out of her way. She walked slowly, cane first, to the kitchen, where she stopped abruptly one step in. Her head began to twist in every direction as she surveyed the room. She looked up to the ceiling, to the spot where Julie had seen the bright white light, then to the floor that had been so painfully cold.

"This is the room," the madam declared. "This is where everything happened."

Julie forgot about the madam's initial directions for a moment and asked a question. "Where what happened?" Even she could hear the desperation in her own voice.

"No questions, dear." The madam moved to the center of the kitchen and leaned over the area that had been so cold. "She died right here. In her own kitchen. At the hands of another." She turned to Julie with a look of sadness on her narrow face.

"Forgive me – sometimes I see too much."

Julie stood in the doorway without words. She watched intently as the madam continued her exploration.

"I have a name for you, if you'd like."

"Yes...please."

Madam Angeline nodded once. "Jenny is here. She is the one. She says she likes you."

*GranBelle Jenny. So now you know.*

The madam closed her eyes, acting as if she were listening to someone speak. "This is strange. Another name, not as clear. This person is not yet on the other side. Does the name 'Theo' mean anything to you?"

Julie rummaged through her brain. "No."

"That's what I see – 'Theo, the brother' – she says he's the one you should be looking for."

The name meant nothing to Julie. And who's brother could it be?

"Put it in your back pocket," Madam Angeline said softly. "It may come to you someday."

A knot formed in Julie's stomach and crept up her throat.

"Jenny says one last thing, Julianna." The madam looked directly at her, squinting her cat-like eyes almost completely shut. "She says you're right about the water – it is the key."

Julie couldn't quite comprehend everything that was happening, everything that Madam Angeline was telling her. It was all confirmation, but it was so much more than that. It was supernatural inspiration, if there was such a thing.

"It's time for me to go, dear." The madam shuffled past Julie toward the front door. "There is nothing more for me to see."

The sunlight in the front yard was overwhelming. Madam Angeline made her way to the long white Cadillac without saying anything to Allison.

“Rufus, water, please.”

Her driver opened the car’s front door and retrieved an oversized metal thermos. The madam took it with her free hand and sucked deeply from its thick plastic straw. Julie rushed up next to her.

“Dead people can be so dehydrating,” Madam Angeline said out of the corner of her mouth.

Rufus opened the door for her, and the madam climbed into the backseat gingerly.

“Wait,” Julie pleaded. “What about the other smell? You said you knew what it was.”

“I said we would get to it. Let me tell you, dear, there’s one thing about the spirits who have chosen to stay with us – there’s a reason why. Jenny is speaking to you in different ways, at different times, and she’s trying to tell you something. One last question, and the answer will only be for you – something else for your back pocket. What thoughts were you holding in your head when the deathly odor came to you?”

Julie turned her face to the sky, thinking back to her Monday-morning breakfast bagel and what had been rolling through her mind.

“Answer that, dear, and the reason for Jenny’s presence will follow.”

She motioned to Rufus and he shut the Cadillac’s door. He walked briskly to the other side and got in behind the oversized steering wheel. A minute later, the long white sedan was just a dot at the end of Grayson Lane, and Madam Angeline was gone.

## Chapter 13

As soon as Madam Angeline's Cadillac disappeared down the street, Julie remembered what thoughts had been in her head the morning of the deathly stink. While eating breakfast that day and staring out her kitchen window, she had been formulating an approach to her latest investigative piece for *The Herald* – she had been thinking about the two Birmingham women who had been murdered decades before, and their case that was still unsolved.

Leaving Allison behind in her front yard without much more than a "Gotta run," Julie went straight to the newspaper. It was time to dig into the story of the girls who had been killed so long ago.

Bruce was still there when Julie arrived, sitting alone in his office, nursing a late afternoon Jack Daniel's. She knocked on his door, fully aware that she was disturbing his habitual wind-down from wrapping up another weekend edition of the paper.

"It's me, Bruce," she said as she knocked.

The door opened slowly. He stared her down before he spoke. "You gotta stop making these after-hours visits a regular thing. People are gonna think you're trying to seduce me."

"Come on, Bruce – you wouldn't go for a girl like me and you know it."

"And why's that?"

Julie tapped her temple. "Because I'm smart enough to see that you're broke."

The old editor chuckled. "No truer words have ever been spoken. Now what the hell are you doing here, Miss Danner?"

"Research. For my next story. I need to work in the archives. This weekend, if that's ok?"

"I don't see why not. What's the story?"

Before answering, Julie thought back to her kitchen, and the stink. "I'm not sure yet."

"This isn't gonna be about some fucking ghost, is it?"

"It might be, Bruce. But I promise you this – it'll sell papers. Trust me."

He raised his chin and eyed her with a squint. After a moment, he pulled out a ring of keys from his pocket and handed it to her. "The keys to the kingdom. Don't forget to lock the place up when you leave."

She grabbed the keys from his hand. "Thanks, Bruce. If this story comes together, it may be my best yet."

"High expectations can be the downfall of even the greatest of men. Good luck with your research, Miss Danner."

He took a sip of whiskey from his mug and shut the door.

The archives room greeted Julie with stale and musty air. It was still and desperately quiet, but she wasn't alone. Madam Angeline had made GranBelle Jenny's ghost a reality that day, and Julie had sensed Jenny's presence with her ever since, almost like the spirit was following right behind her, nudging her forward. The notion could have been scary, but Julie didn't find her ghost frightening anymore. Instead, she was starting to believe that GranBelle Jenny really was here for a reason.

Julie sat down at the archives' computer and began her search. *The Hopes Ridge Herald* had covered the disappearance and murder of the two young Birmingham women extensively. The first report was from March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1983, a Wednesday, and its content was innocuous enough:

### *Local Family Asks For Help*

*Hopes Ridge residents Ronald and Marilyn Russett are requesting information on the whereabouts of their 23-year-old daughter Pam. Pam recently moved to Birmingham, where she is working for First Alabama Bank as a teller. The Russetts have not heard from their daughter since Saturday. They have filed a missing persons report with the authorities. Please contact either the Birmingham Police or the Clarke County Sheriff's Department if you have any information.*

From there, the stories grew longer and more frequent, with a sense of urgency that Julie found palpable. There were interviews with Pam's parents, and the neighbors from her apartment who had barely gotten to know her. There were police statements, each one more frustrating in its canned information as the detectives put on the case remained stumped. The final story, which Julie found difficult to read even though she already knew the fatal outcome, confirmed that one of two female bodies found in the Cahaba River just south of Birmingham was Pam Russett, who had been missing for over a month. No one knew who had killed Pam or why. And after all the years that had passed since, there were still no answers to those two questions.

The other girl's name was Natalie Nix. Just like Pam Russett, Natalie was only twenty-three years old. She and Pam had lived in the same Birmingham apartment complex, but it was unclear if they had known one another. Natalie disappeared first, a week before Pam did, but her vanishing had not raised much suspicion. According to police interviews, Natalie had been a quiet girl, "a loner," one quote read. Her disappearance wasn't reported because no one knew to report it. Even her employer, a downtown Birmingham restaurant-owner, ignored her sudden no-show – she had only worked there for two weeks, and he assumed she'd returned home, wherever that was.

From the beginning, the police assumed a connection between the two girls' disappearances. Both women had been abducted from inside their apartments, with evidence of a struggle in each. They both owned cars, which had been left untouched in the parking lot, just steps from their doors. And although they had not known each other, Pam lived directly across a first-floor breezeway from Natalie.

The search for the girls was intense at first, as searches tend to be. A week went by, and another, and another. Julie had seen her fair share of search-and-rescue operations in her short journalistic career – she knew that the hopes of a happy ending fade with each day that goes by, and that rescue becomes recovery rather quickly. The story of the missing Birmingham girls appeared to be no different. Pam's parents offered a \$10,000 award. Natalie's family stayed silent and far removed. When two ten-year-old playmates found the girls' bodies near the western bank of the Cahaba River, the police weren't terribly surprised. The detective tasked with answering reporters' questions had kept his answers simple, but the poignancy of his remarks rang true, even decades later: "We never get used to this outcome, even though, when cases like this linger on, it's the outcome we expect."

There was no suspect in the horrific crime. The crime scene had been free of any reliable physical evidence, all of it supposedly washed away by the river's fast-moving current. Jefferson County's coroner determined that both young women had died from drowning after being dropped in the river not long before they were discovered. But that was all that was reported in the newspaper. Not a single other detail. *Were they weighted down? Were they abused beforehand? Tortured? Raped? There's so much more to this story.*

Julie stood and stretched her tightened muscles after reading the last article, which included the coroner's generic report. Glancing at her phone, she was shocked to see that it was almost two-thirty in the morning – and that she had missed a series of texts from Allison:

R u still at the paper? How much longer?

Hello???

Going to sleep now. Guess ur staying at your house tonight. Ur dog is still here btw.

*Nice, Jules. Looks like you'll be home alone tonight.*

Despite the late hour, Julie wasn't tired – the stories of missing girls and bodies in the river had heightened her senses and given her a rush of adrenaline. But coming to the end of the tale – at least the one told by the newspaper – seemed like a good place to stop for the night.

"Come back tomorrow refreshed and start digging deeper," she told herself, shutting off the archives computer.

A flurry of chilled air ran across the back of her neck, sending goosebumps down her arms. She knew exactly what it was the moment she felt it. It was the same cold *feeling* from her first week in the house on Grayson Lane. But it didn't scare her this time.

"Don't worry, GranBelle Jenny," Julie promised the spirit. "I'm going to dig deeper on you too."

The late-night streets of Hopes Ridge were almost empty. Julie drove with her windows down and the radio off, mulling over the story of the murdered girls and the death of GranBelle Jenny, and how the two could possibly be related. Her intuition was speaking to her, whispering in her ear. *The water is the key, Jules. The water holds the answers.*

As she pulled into her driveway, the digital clock on her old Honda's console caught her eye. Its green numbers read 2:54. Julie shook her head in disbelief.

"Well, isn't that fitting," she said, opening the car door.

The summer-night heat was thick, and the charge of energy she had carried from the newspaper was fading. Her back ached as she stepped onto her front porch. The anticipation of stretching out in her own bed, which she had avoided for a week, made it ache even more.

Inside the house, Julie risked a deep inhale. The air was fresh and absent of any smell at all. She looked around, scanning the walls and floor and ceiling. A normal house, by all appearances. *We're all mad here...we're all mad here...* An unconscious laugh came from Julie's mouth at the mantra waltzing through her worn-out mind.

Nearly asleep on her feet, she went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Like the rest of the house, the room showed no signs of the supernatural – no smells or stinks or vicious odors. As Julie filled her glass, she glanced down at the cabinet drawer next to the kitchen's entrance, where she had hidden the blank vinyl record so long ago, as much from herself as anyone else. The house was eerily quiet, and the drawer gave Julie an idea.

She pulled it open, until it was teetering toward the floor. The record was just as she remembered it, worn and almost solid black, with no label or demarcation at all. Julie took it to the den and placed it on the turntable, then flipped the switch, setting the

circle of vinyl in motion. As she put the needle down, she had an inkling of curiosity, a hint of wonder about what she had really heard that night of her slip-and-fall in the kitchen. The music began to play, and her curiosity was gone. It was the same song by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, about strange things happening every day.

Julie sat on her couch and closed her eyes. The song filling her ears was no longer ominous, as it had been before. Neither was the ghost, who Julie knew was watching from some otherworldly place. Julie's body became heavy with languor. Before the song had ended and Sister Rosetta had sung her last chorus, Julie was asleep, the strangeness of her situation not so bothersome anymore.

She was back in the archives room the next day before noon, ready to renew her research on the deaths of Natalie Nix and Pam Russett. This time, she wanted to pull out the physical papers, from boxes stored deep inside the dingy warehouse. She appreciated Bruce's computer files, but like any good reporter, she didn't trust them completely. The actual newspapers could hold an edition or article that had been overlooked, and Julie wasn't going to leave any stone unturned.

For most of the day, she worked through the boxes from 1983. The newspapers themselves were in good condition, considering their age. Julie pulled out stack after stack, flipping through each page in search of an answer she hadn't found the night before. But there was nothing else on the two young women and their murders. Every story had made it to the computer files.

*We can get back to the girls later, Jules. Now for the mysterious death of Mrs. Martha Jennings.*

Easing down the aisle, Julie eventually came to the boxes that held *The Herald's* 1981 newspapers. *It was August, remember? Nearly the same day of the year as the old slip-and-fall in the kitchen.* She heaved out the August container and let it drop to the ground at her

feet. A cloud of dust flew from underneath and gradually dissipated into the already stuffy air. Julie lifted the top from the box and knelt down over it.

The papers were wedged between the box's cardboard walls in such a way that Julie had to use all her strength to pull them out. She stacked them into three separate piles and began the process of going through each one.

Near the bottom of her first stack, she came across the August 9<sup>th</sup> edition, and she soon found the three-sentence article she had read before, the one announcing GranBelle Jenny's untimely death. From there, she examined each page of every paper closely, careful not to miss anything else that may have been written about her. As she turned the last page on the August 31<sup>st</sup> newspaper, Julie felt a surge of exasperation. She knew that September and October and so on would be the same – void of any updated information on the murder of Martha Jennings.

*Time to call it a day, Jules.*

She put her hands around one stack of papers and squeezed, lifting it over the box. As she did, the same chill from the night before ran across the back of her neck again. It startled her, much more this time, and she dropped the papers into a loose mess at the bottom of the container.

"Ok, that was too much," she said as she shook her shoulders, trying to rid her body of the cold *feeling*.

She looked back down to the box, to the newspapers scattered below her. In the middle of the messy pile was a single section of *The Herald*, folded over one too many times.

*Well, isn't that strange?*

She reached into the box slowly, deliberately, as if the piece of paper were a trapped animal that might bite her if she moved too fast. With a delicate grasp, she picked it up and unfolded it. On the top right corner, the date read "August 14, 1981."

*Five days later.*

There were multiple articles on the page, but one headline in the center jumped out – it stirred Julie’s sixth sense, as did the story that followed:

*Sheriff’s Department Closes Case on Woman’s Death*

*Sheriff Wayne Crook announced yesterday that the death of Mrs. Martha Jennings, as reported in last week’s paper, has been ruled accidental. The body of Mrs. Jennings, better known as GranBelle Jenny, was found in her home on Grayson Lane Tuesday. An autopsy has revealed that Mrs. Jennings died as a result of asphyxiation due to drowning.*

*“We have determined,” Sheriff Crook stated, “that Mrs. Jennings must have woken in the middle of the night, gone to her kitchen for a glass of water, and in her half-awake state, drunk it too quick. She died on the spot, right where we found her.”*

*Mrs. Jennings had no immediate family. Dr. and Mrs. William Persall, her longtime employers, had no comment.*

As Julie read the article, the other words on the paper disappeared. “...asphyxiation due to drowning.” She was transfixed, the stale archive room frozen in time around her.

Without warning, a vicious smell reached into her nose and nearly snatched her breath away. Julie winced, closing her eyes as they teared up. It was the same stink from days earlier at her house, with the two dead girls on her mind. *The two girls who had drowned, Jules.* It was the smell of death – this time more specific, mildewy and decayed – and it was GranBelle Jenny who had forced it on her.

Julie gulped down a huge breath of the noxious air, fighting to hold it in her resistant lungs. A hurtling wave of nausea rolled across her stomach, but she pushed it back. She folded the piece of paper in her hand – the paper that Jenny had guided her to – and stuck it in her back pocket. Still holding her breath, sucking in short gasps every few seconds, she cleaned up the papers and secured them back in their box. As she slid the box flush into its space on the shelf, the stink grew stronger, permeating Julie’s nose, invading her eyes and ears and skin, enveloping her whole body.

She turned and ran down the long, dark aisle, the sickening odor following her all the way, until she broke free from the dingy archives room. On the other side of the door, as she leaned against the giant printing press, the stink finally faded away. Julie sucked in the fresher air and wiped her eyes. She had thought she wasn’t scared of GranBelle Jenny anymore, but the wet and rotten smell of death had frightened her beyond her understanding, even though she knew exactly what it was.

*Can’t you see what GranBelle Jenny’s trying to tell you? The deaths are connected, Jules, and it’s up to you to find out how.*

## Chapter 14

That Sunday night's featured baseball game pitted Chuck Danner's beloved Cardinals against their longtime rival Cubs. Julie was all too aware of the ramifications of the matchup. Chuck would be in no mood for conversation once the game began. So she decided she would get to her dad's early that Sunday, allowing herself plenty of time for discussion on unsolved murders beforehand.

"Dad!" she yelled as she came through the kitchen door. "Sorry, I know I'm early, but I come bearing gifts!" Along with an extra-large meat-lover's from Margot's Pizzeria, she had brought her dad a special edition six-pack of Budweiser, its cans adorned with the baseball logos of every team in the majors.

When Chuck didn't answer her call, she set the pizza and beer on the counter and yelled again, this time with concern.

"Dad?!?"

From around the corner, Rocko the mutt came trotting toward her with his nose in the air, sniffing the smell of hot food. Julie bent down and scooped him up in her arms.

"Where's the old man, Rocko? Back there on his computer?"

The dog barked once and licked her cheek. Grabbing two cans from the six-pack, Julie walked through the den toward her dad's downstairs bedroom. Just as she had predicted, she found him sitting intently at his computer, headphones covering his ears, studying an online document that she was sure was related to a cold case he was trying to solve. She flicked the light switch off and back on, causing his head to whip around.

"Julie-bean! You're early."

"You know that anyone could break in here and take anything they want when you've got those things on, don't you?"

Her dad raised an eyebrow. "If they dare."

She walked over and handed him one of the beers. "I thought you only needed headphones to block out Mother's sewing."

"I thought so too. Got used to the damn things. Now I can't work without 'em." He studied the special can of Budweiser and smirked before he popped it open and took a swig.

"Speaking of work," Julie said, plopping down on her dad's bed, "I got here early to ask you some questions."

"Is that right?"

"It is. I'm working on a story for the paper – about a case from the eighties that's still unsolved. Local connection and all that..."

"Pam Russett," Chuck blurted out.

"How'd you know?"

He rolled his wheelchair back from the computer and took another pull from his beer. "That goddam case has bothered me since the first time I heard about it."

"Which was when?"

"Well, let's see. It would've been when I first moved here, when I went to work for the Birmingham Police Department. So that would've been nineteen eighty-eight."

"Five years after it happened."

"That's right. Even then, the detectives would bring it up from time to time. It was one of those cases that got under everybody's skin. That some sonofabitch could've gotten away with something like that."

Julie drank from her own beer before she pressed on. "So I guess I was wondering if you'd like to help me solve it."

"Solve it?"

"Yeah. That's what you do now, right? Solve the unsolvable mysteries of the world?"

Chuck laughed. "I suppose I do. But this one – it's no good, Julie-bean."

“And why’s that?”

“It’s too close to home.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, let it go. This is a case that needs no second look.”

Julie was appalled. “Bullshit, Dad. This is the one you should be working on. The girl was from Hopes Ridge, for God’s sakes.”

“And what if we can’t get any further than the cops did back then? You’re gonna stir up a bunch of shit here in town that doesn’t need to be stirred up again. Some things are better left alone, Julie.”

“I’ll handle the girl’s family, Dad. This isn’t about creating false hope. It’s about a story that’s been lost to history. Pam’s killer may still be out there.”

The conversation had taken an unusually agitated turn. Chuck stared at his daughter, recognizing her resolve. “Ok. I’ll see what I can turn up. But from what I remember, those boys worked every angle they could.”

“I understand. Who knows? Maybe they missed something. Isn’t that what you always say about these cold cases?”

“Yeah, Julie-bean, I guess I do.”

Julie thought hard before she continued. Her dad’s resistance had surprised her. She wasn’t sure if she should bring up the questions surrounding GranBelle Jenny’s death or not. She treaded carefully.

“One more thing, Dad. Something else you may be able to help me with.”

“Aw hell, what is it? You know we got the damn Cubs tonight.”

Her sixth sense welled up inside her, telling her to slow down. She gauged her father’s demeanor once more before she spoke again.

“Forget it, old man. Let’s go watch some baseball.”

“Thank God.”

The next morning, Julie began the search for Pam Russett's parents, with hopes they still lived nearby. She had been an only child, so her parents were the best shot Julie had at a family connection. A search for their names turned up a new residence. They had moved at some point after their daughter's murder, to a small town on the Florida Gulf Coast called Mexico Beach. *Of course they did, Jules – they probably couldn't get far enough away.* Julie called the number listed, and a young woman with a thick Southern accent answered the phone.

"Russett residence."

"Yes, hello, my name is Julie Danner. I'm looking for either Ronald or Marilyn Russett, please?"

"And what's the reason for your call?"

Julie hesitated, but knew she couldn't lie. "I'm a reporter from their hometown. Just had a few questions."

"Well, I'm afraid they won't be able to answer your questions, honey."

"Why's that?"

"Mr. Russett has got Alzheimer's, poor thing. I'm his daytime caretaker, you see. He couldn't even tell you his own name most of the time."

"And Marilyn?"

"Mrs. Russett passed away last year." The woman paused. "She was a sweetheart of a lady."

*And she died without ever knowing who killed her daughter. What a shame.*

Julie thanked the young caretaker and hung up, another roadblock placed in her path.

*What about the other girl, Natalie Nix? The one with no family? Might be worth a shot.*

Julie perked up. She knew better than to trust old newspapers and dated police reports

when it came to locating family members. A little digging, and who knew what she might find.

Her hunt went nowhere fast. Everywhere she looked online, she found nothing. Natalie had no relatives anywhere, living or dead. On the verge of giving up, her intuition came out of nowhere and spoke to her, guiding her to one last search: overseas birth records for members of the military. *Now that sure is specific, Jules. And probably pointless.* She did it anyway, and with a few quick keystrokes, she had uncovered a list of birth certificates from the year Natalie was born, narrowed down to U.S. military parents stationed out of the country at the time. A quick scroll, and there she was, born in 1960 to father Frederick and mother Beverly, in Okinawa, Japan. *Bingo.*

With her parents' names in hand, Julie discovered that Frederick had been dishonorably discharged from the Navy when Natalie was five, and he died back in the states not long after. Records on Beverly were sparse before Frederick's death, and nonexistent after. But Julie wasn't interested in Natalie's parents for long, because she had uncovered something else, a boy named Leonard who just so happened to be young Natalie's older brother. And to top it all off, he was still alive, and just up the highway from Hopes Ridge.

A quick Google map search placed Leonard Nix's residence on the east side of Birmingham, a short drive for Julie through green Alabama countryside. As she neared the address, she noticed a change. Each turn led her past smaller and increasingly dilapidated houses. Leonard Nix's street was among the most depressing and disheveled in the neighborhood. Many of the houses had overgrown yards and boarded-up windows, giving them an abandoned look. She pulled to the curb and surveyed the house. She could barely see through the unkempt bushes to the front door. *Maybe this isn't such a good idea, Jules.*

It was like an episode of *The Twilight Zone* – she and her dad had watched late-night reruns of the black-and-white series religiously after his shooting. There was no traffic on the street. No kids outside, no one mowing their grass, not even a TV blaring from somewhere in the distance. All she needed was for the zombie-like neighbors to come out and greet her. *Here you are trying to figure out how two girls got murdered, Jules, and you might just get your own self killed.*

She stared at Leonard Nix's dark green front door, so worn that bare wood was showing through, as she worked up the nerve to walk toward it. When she did, her feet were heavy, like they were encased in concrete blocks.

It took three persistent pushes on the doorbell before Julie heard a noise coming from inside. Standing back on the stoop, she could see the windows behind the thicket of bushes, but she couldn't see through them – there were dark metal blinds shut tight behind each pane of glass. The noise inside the house grew louder. Someone was coming to the door.

Julie instinctively took another step backward as the door opened. A man in paint-splattered gray sweatpants and a faded red tank-top squinted at her. His mass of curly black hair was disheveled, his face unshaven and smudgy. A trail of cigarette smoke curled from his hand, obscuring him in a haze.

"What do you want?" he asked lazily, scratching the side of his neck.

"Are you Leonard Nix?"

"Who wants to know?"

"My name is Julie Danner. I'm an investigative journalist. I'm looking into..."

The man cut her off. "Goddammit. The last thing I need is some woman asking me stupid questions."

He started to shut the door, but Julie put the palm of her hand against it and held it open.

"This isn't about you, Leonard – it's about your sister."

Without breaking his squinted stare, the man pulled the cigarette to his mouth and took a long and considerate drag from it. "What you wanna know about Natalie? How she died? How my mama basically died with her? How some fucked-up monster got away with murder?"

Holding the door stiff, Julie answered him. "Yeah. That's exactly what I want to know."

The man eased his grip and let the door open wider. He took another drag from his cigarette and turned sideways in the opening. "I thought I'd heard the last about Natalie years ago. Well, you might as well come in."

As Julie crossed the front door's threshold, she could see that the house's exterior betrayed what lay inside. The interior was immaculate, the few pieces of furniture organized and clean. The undecorated walls were light blue, the carpet a smooth beige. If not for the subtle scent of cigarette smoke, almost masked by the thick smell of house paint hanging in the air, Julie might have considered Leonard Nix's home one of the most pristine places she had ever entered.

The sound of the door closing behind her made her jump. Leonard chuckled.

"An investigative journalist, huh? For who, exactly?" He came around her and sat on the couch, crossing his legs at the knee, his back straight. The man and his house were a study in contradictions. The way he held himself, his posture, was in total opposition to his appearance. His demeanor at the front door had been all for show.

"I work for *The Hopes Ridge Herald*."

"Oh, the big time," he said derisively, lighting another cigarette with the one he was about to stub out. "Mama parked us in Hopes Ridge for a time. She drug us through just about everywhere in Alabama at some point, I suppose. Smoke?" he offered.

"No, I'm good, Leonard," Julie answered. She sat down in a chair across from him.

"Call me Leo – everybody always has." *Leo – now why does that sound so familiar?* "So, you've got questions about Natalie?"

"I do." She pulled out her phone. "Mind if I record our conversation?"

"Oh, come on now – let's just talk. Besides, I don't have any answers for you."

"I'm just hoping you know more than I do. I'm trying to figure out what happened to her. Her and Pam."

Leo took a deep pull from his second cigarette. "No recording."

Julie stuck her phone back in her pocket.

"I'll tell you what I think happened. If you give a shit about theories."

"Sure, Leo. What's your theory?"

He placed his cigarette delicately in an oversized ashtray on a side table – the ashtray looked just like her mother's, the one that sat next to her sewing machine all those years. Leo stood and sidled up next to her, where he stopped and leaned into her ear. Julie's muscles trembled, but she held her body stiff.

"It was somebody Natalie knew," he whispered. "Pam too."

She heard him walking again behind her.

"Can I get you a glass of tea?" he asked from at least two rooms away.

"Please," Julie answered, attempting to maintain an air of calm. She peered over her shoulder, but she couldn't see where he went. Instead, she saw another immaculate room, with a polished antique dining table. Placed as a centerpiece on the table was a large glass bowl, with a collection of items inside it that took Julie's breath away. The bowl held a mishmash of old wooden spools, some with thread and others bare. *First the ashtray, now this. Keep it together, Jules.* She stammered through her next question.

"W-why do you think the killer knew them?"

"Because, they both let him inside," he said as he returned, handing her a tall glass of iced tea. "You alright?"

Julie pulled her eyes from the bowl and the spools it held. "I'm fine." She took a sip of tea, recovering. "But I thought there was a struggle – in each apartment."

"There was. *After* they let him in. There was no forced entry in either apartment. And those signs of struggle? Only in the bedrooms – for both girls."

*So he came into the apartments, got the girls to their bedrooms, then attacked them.*

"How do you know these details?"

He lifted his cigarette from the ashtray, an almost indistinguishable smile on his pursed lips. "My turn for a question – why are you out here resurrecting the fucking past?" He was squinting at her again, masking a glare.

She didn't know the best way to answer, to keep him talking. She tried not to shift in her chair, but had to. The way he was looking at her had gotten under her skin.

*Suck it up, Jules. He's not going to hurt you. Or is he?*

"I have a thing for cold cases. Always have. My dad's a cop."

"Is that right?" He raised an eyebrow. "Did he work on Natalie's case?"

"No. But he is now."

He eased his gaze at her. "Oh, do continue then."

"Where were you when all this happened?"

"And just like that, I feel like I'm being interrogated again. Only this time by a fucking cop's daughter." He leaned toward her. "Feels like I'm right back in nineteen eighty-three. Worst year of my fucking miserable life."

"Where were you, Leo?"

"Birmingham, not even a mile from Natalie's apartment."

*Wait. Why hadn't the newspaper mentioned this? The articles had said Natalie was "a loner," remember?*

Leo turned his face away from Julie. "I was only a year older. I thought I could keep an eye on her, since I was so close. Guess I didn't do a very good job, did I?"

For just a second, Julie thought she saw the smile cross his lips again. She pressed on, before he decided to stop talking.

"There's one thing I still don't know, Leo, and I almost hate to ask."

“What? Was she raped?”

“Well, yeah.”

He reached for a third cigarette. “*The Hopes Ridge Herald*, huh? Now that doesn’t make much sense to me. You seem better than that.” He spoke with an accusatory tone.

“It’s temporary.” Julie didn’t know why she answered so quickly.

“Life is temporary, Julie Danner. Something I learned long ago.”

“Was there any other evidence?”

He took a gulp of iced tea before answering. “Just the ligature marks. On their wrists and ankles. They had been tied up for a long time. Long enough that some of the skin was gone. They said that Natalie’s wrists had been worn to the bone.” He described the injuries without inflection, like a doctor might.

“I’m sorry, Leo.” It was all Julie knew to say, in spite of her growing suspicion.

“I think you should go,” he said bluntly, a dazed look coming over his face. “Now.”

A chill ran through Julie’s body, not unlike the cold *feeling*. She stood and moved toward the front door, taking one last glance at the bowl of spools on the dining room table. On top of the collection sat an upright spool wrapped in thread. *Red thread, Jules*. From the chair, Julie hadn’t been able to see it, but now it was obvious. Almost intentionally obvious.

“Strange, isn’t it?” Leo asked. “A man with a bunch of old spools for decoration. They were my mama’s – she was a seamstress.”

“That’s funny,” Julie heard herself mutter. “Mine was too.”

For an uncomfortable few seconds, neither one of them said anything. Leo broke the silence.

“Don’t come back here, Julie Danner. Understand?”

*Time to go, Jules.*

She opened the door, walking quickly past the overgrown thicket. The blue sky and bright sunshine were like a welcome hug after the sterile house and Leo’s strange

demeanor. She jumped into her Honda, fumbling for her keys. As she started the car, she took one last look at Leo Nix's dreary but pristine residence.

He stood in the front door's opening, the daze replaced by a toothy grin that glinted in the sunlight. Julie shifted her Honda into gear and pushed the accelerator to the floor, speeding away from Leo Nix as fast as she could.

## Chapter 15

Halfway home from Leo Nix's, and still anxious from their disturbing encounter, Julie's stomach took a nauseous turn. She yanked her Honda's steering wheel toward the highway's shoulder and slammed on the brakes, opening her door in the nick of time, just as a spew of vomit forced its way up and out of her mouth. Cars sped by without slowing, their drafts blowing hair into her sweat-drenched face over and over again. *What happened to good old southern Samaritans?* She spat and raised herself back up behind the wheel.

As she closed her car door, she looked into the rearview mirror, wondering why she had thrown up for the second time that day. *It's not like you to get sick, Jules – even from the likes of a guy like Leo Nix.* The ice blue of her eyes was surrounded by jagged veins, glistening from the tears that had come along with her body's purging. She reached for the glovebox, hoping to find a napkin or tissue inside, but something else caught her eye: the stash of tampons she had thrown in a week before, each one unopened and unused, despite Julie's always dependable time of the month.

For fifteen years and four months, the cycle of Julie's monthly menstruation came and went like clockwork. It was a female family trait, which she had learned from her mother in a memorably awkward conversation as she was entering her teenage years. "You are a woman now, Julianna. And just like those cerulean blue eyes you got from me, you can also expect another gift from the long line of Dempsey ladies – a perfectly precise period." Julie hadn't ever known any other Dempsey women, and no Dempsey men for that matter, but she nodded silently in acknowledgement, wanting the embarrassing discussion over as quickly as possible. Elizabeth Danner's misguided effort to reassure her daughter that day had the opposite effect, but the woman had

been right: Julie's periods were always precise, arriving in the first week of each month and lasting an even six days every single time. Except for that July – the July that followed her ten-year high school reunion in June, and her reconnection with Tyler Sexton.

With her stomach's churning at bay, Julie drove straight from her roadside regurgitation to the local Hopes Ridge Walgreens. Her head began to ache as she walked the aisles of the store, hunting for pregnancy tests. *Now you know why there's an entire section devoted to this situation, Jules.* When she found the right aisle, she grabbed two different boxes with two different labels. Her stomach wrenched again as she carried them to the front counter.

Back home, she guzzled down a full glass of water and took Jerry the MouseDog for a walk. Questions swirled through her head with each step she took. *What if you're really pregnant? What are you supposed to do with a kid? How the hell could this have happened?* She sighed at that one. *Come on, Jules – you know how this works.* Jerry kept looking back at her with a concerned look on his little dog face, sensing her anxiety.

"Don't worry, MouseDog," she told him. "Everything is fine – I hope." She picked up her pace, ready to get back home and take the possibly life-altering test.

The toilet seat in her cramped bathroom was freezing cold. The glass of water had not yet done the trick, and she couldn't force anything onto the white thermometer-shaped stick she held underneath her. Even still, she sat, waiting nervously, scenarios of unwanted motherhood winding in and out of her brain. Finally, she felt herself urinating, more a struggle than a relief. She said a little prayer, which was followed by a harsh guilt over what she was praying for.

Then, without warning, something came to her nose, a returning scent that took her breath away – the baby powder smell that was undeniably GranBelle Jenny. It had come out of thin air, just like the night of her rekindling romance with Tyler Sexton.

Julie had not understood the spirit's message that night, but she did now. In fact, it was clear. She no longer needed the tests to confirm what was happening inside her body.

*"You're living in Powder House..."*

She put her face in her hands and cried.

Allison was silent on the other end of the phone.

"Come on, Allison," Julie pleaded. "I need a little moral support here."

"Of course, honey. Sorry – it's just that this news is making my fucking head spin."

"You think your head is spinning? I've been dizzy since I found out."

"So, what are you going to do?" Allison asked carefully.

"I don't know." Julie could hear the despair in her own voice. "I mean, I do know. I have no idea how I'll make it work, but I've got to try."

"What about the father?"

"You mean Tyler?"

"Is that who it is?"

"Allison, I can say, unequivocally, without a doubt, that Tyler Sexton is the father. Let's just leave it at that."

"Understood. How are you going to tell him?"

"I haven't quite figured that out yet. Come to think of it, I haven't figured anything out yet."

"You're going to be fine, Julie," her best friend reassured her. "Maybe it's better that you're back in Hopes Ridge for all this. I'm here, your dad's here. You've got help."

"This would have never happened if I weren't back in Hopes Ridge."

Allison didn't respond to Julie's veiled accusation.

"I'll call you later," Julie said. "I don't feel much like talking anymore."

"When you do, you know where I am. Love you, honey."

Julie ended the call and fell back onto her bed, tears forming in her eyes again. Jerry crawled up to her face and licked her cheek. His tongue tickled, and she turned her head away from him. Her eyes refocused on the cardboard box she had placed in her bedroom corner months earlier. Her mind went to the clothes inside it – the baby clothes her mother had sewn for an unknown child. The same clothes that Chuck Danner had refused to talk about.

“I guess I’ve got to tell Dad about all this, Jerry,” she said to the MouseDog. “But it’s time for him to tell me something too.”

Julie wasn’t surprised to find her dad at his computer with his headphones on, where he always seemed to be unless he was watching baseball or asleep. Chuck was obsessed with his cold-case investigations. For a fleeting moment, she hoped that he was trying to uncover a clue in the murders of Pam Russett and Natalie Nix, and a vivid memory of her strange encounter with Leo Nix appeared in her head, gone as quick as it had come. *Not today, Jules. We’ve got more important issues at hand.*

She flipped the light switch to say hello.

“Hey there, Julie-bean. What’re you doing here?”

Without saying a word, she walked over to him and kissed him on the top of his head. “I love you, Dad,” she said, nearly whispering.

“What’s wrong?” Chuck’s intuition was as strong as ever. He rolled out from behind his desk.

“You always told me that when there’s something hard to say, it’s best to just go ahead and say it. Right?”

“Get it out there and deal with the consequences as they come.”

“I’m afraid there’s going to be a lot of consequences with this one.”

“What is it, Julie? Just tell me.”

She backed away from him, avoiding his eyes. "I'm pregnant."

Her dad put a hand on his face and began to rub his cheeks. His voice was muffled when he finally spoke. "Pregnant, huh?"

"Yeah, Dad." Although Julie was twenty-eight years old, she suddenly felt like she was sixteen again.

"Come here," he told her, opening his arms wide.

She hesitated before taking the few steps to get to his wheelchair. She sat in his lap, and he wrapped her in his arms, squeezing her tight.

"It's alright, Julie-bean. I know it might not feel that way now, but it'll be alright."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He was still hugging her, talking in her ear. "Children are a gift, y'know."

Tears were streaming down Julie's cheeks by then. She could hardly speak. "You think so?"

"I know so, Julie-bean."

He loosened his grip, and she stood, wiping her face.

"I just can't believe I let this happen."

"Let me tell you something – there will always be things that happen in this life that are out of our control. Things we'll never comprehend. You understand?"

Julie's intuition perked up. The self-pity she had been wallowing in disappeared. Her dad had gotten serious – even more serious than the situation demanded. Her news had stirred something in him, she could see it on his face. He turned his eyes away from her and began to brood.

"Dad?"

He didn't respond, but instead remained in his trance of contemplation, or maybe it was a remembrance of something else. Like it so often did, Julie's sixth sense told her what to ask next. *The clothes, Jules – it's now or maybe never.*

“Dad, whose clothes were those in Mother’s upstairs room? Who was she sewing for all those years?”

Chuck Danner looked up at his daughter, with tears of his own pooling in his eyes. “Children are a gift, Julie – a gift we can’t take for granted.”

“Who was it?” Julie could feel her heartbeat quicken.

The next words that came from her dad’s mouth seemed to enter her ears in slow-motion, each syllable dragging into the next. “It was your sister, Julie. The clothes were for your sister Charlotte.”

Bewildered by the story she had just heard, Julie left her dad’s in a daze. She drove straight home, to her house on Grayson Lane, where she thought she might vomit before she did anything else. Not quite sure if it was the first stages of so-called “morning sickness” or a delayed reaction to the revelation that she had a sister, all Julie knew was that she felt nauseous. She ran into her house when she got there, past the yapping Jerry, into her tiny bathroom, and promptly threw up. Once her heaving had ended, she laid her head on the toilet seat and thought back to the story her dad had just told, of a family secret that seemed like fantasy.

As it turned out, Julie was Chuck and Elizabeth Danner’s second child. The first, another girl, had been born three years earlier to a much saner Elizabeth. They had named her Charlotte Eve, and the happy start to a new Hopes Ridge family was off and running. Chuck was enamored with his first daughter and namesake – “Much like I am with you,” he had tried to remind Julie. But unlike the crazed mother Julie had grown up with, Elizabeth was also taken with the baby girl, more so than she ever was with her second daughter.

“She was as a mother should be, Julie-bean,” her dad had said. Julie remembered his next words specifically. “Nothing like she was with you.”

Her stomach rolled again. Julie closed her eyes and tightened her throat until it passed.

For the first five years of Charlotte Eve's life, Elizabeth remained a doting mother, even after Julie came along. The family was growing so fast that Chuck began to regret leaving the house every morning for his long work days. His two daughters had captured his heart, and it pained him to spend even a single minute away. "You'll understand soon enough, Julie-bean – only a parent knows how it feels." Her dad had paused at that point in his story, before his tale took a dark and horrid turn.

Julie was not quite two years old when the incident happened, when Chuck's world was turned upside-down. "I remember that night like it was yesterday." He had worked an especially long shift, staking out a suspect's house until nearly midnight. When he was done, he drove home from Birmingham in a stupor, ready to scarf down a quick meal and fall into bed. But he knew something was wrong as soon as he pulled into his driveway. "Every light in the house was on – every goddam one." Inside, the house was dead silent, and Chuck sensed a faded desperation, like he was walking into a homicide scene that had once held hope for a different outcome.

"I called out your mother's name – 'Liz'beth! Liz'beth!' – but she didn't answer, wouldn't answer. Then, I called out Charlotte Eve's name. I'm not sure why."

Chuck moved swiftly through the house and up the stairs, where he suspected they might be. And that's exactly where he found them, his wife sitting on the bathroom floor, five-year-old Charlotte Eve wrapped in a towel in her arms, little Julie quietly sucking her thumb behind the toilet. Elizabeth was rocking her oldest daughter back and forth, singing her a soft, nearly silent, lullaby. Chuck could barely see Charlotte's face from inside the folds of the white towel, but he could tell that her skin was pale. Too pale. And he knew.

Elizabeth looked up at him, her face drawn and wet with teary residue. Her mouth continued to move, but the faint sound of her singing was gone. She continued rocking

the dead child in her arms as steady as the pendulum of a grandfather clock, rhythmic and never ceasing.

“It was only for a minute,” she had told him, once he had pulled the lifeless Charlotte from her hands. “I only left them for a minute.”

Julie couldn't hold the next retch of vomit at bay, and she purged what was left in her stomach, as if she were exorcising the knowledge her dad had just given her. But as her body recovered, it was still there, clear in her mind, yet so hard to believe.

*We're all mad here, Jules...every single person in this God-forsaken family...*

With such a terrible family secret revealed, and another wave of nausea coming over her, a stark realization came to Julie in her tiny bathroom on Grayson Lane that night: that she could never escape the madness in her DNA, and that she was destined to pass it on to the child now growing inside her.

## Chapter 16

Julie Danner had never once experienced a bout of depression. Even with a mother who never loved her – *I guess now we know why, Jules*. Even with a dad who was confined to a wheelchair because of a bullet – *He lost a child, then his wife, then his legs, and you fault him for losing some of his spirit*. And even with a ghost who could scare her stiff with the smell of death – *And to think, we may never know what really happened to GranBelle Jenny in this house after all*. In the end, it must have been the sum of it all, added to the fact that she was bringing a child into a world that seemed more grotesque with each new corner she turned. Without knowing why, and without knowing how to stop it, Julie fell into a weeks-long rut that summer, and only one person would be able to pull her out of it.

Allison was the first to try. Since drinks were off the table, Julie's best friend resorted to other distractions. She showed up at the house on Grayson Lane with movies and junk food, but Julie graciously turned her away. She called every morning before she left for work and every evening on her drive home – when Julie did answer, she always found an excuse to end the conversation quickly. Allison even offered a girls' getaway weekend at a premier spa not far away, her treat. "I don't know," Julie told her. "I just don't feel like I deserve something that nice."

Next was Bruce, who had noticed that when Julie did make it in to the paper, she wasn't doing much work. She was distracted and distant, nothing like she had been when a story was eating at her. He guessed that she had run into an impasse on the Birmingham cold case, so he pushed her to pursue something else. "We all get let down by a lead every now and then, Julie," he told her. "Find another story – you always do." But Julie didn't, and instead remained so somber that Bruce began to worry about her.

Finally, Julie's dad attempted to repair the damage he had so obviously done, but it too was a fruitless endeavor. When she skipped out on the first *Sunday Night Baseball*

game after his confession about her dead sister, he wasn't surprised, but he called her anyway. "It's not you, Dad. I just have some things I need to deal with right now – on my own." Chuck Danner's daughter, the one good thing he still had in his life, had changed. As the days passed, he could sense a disconnect coming from her and it scared him. It was the same disconnect he had felt from his wife all those years. And just like with Elizabeth, there was nothing he could do about it.

And so went Julie's unrelenting depression, just like the "morning"-sickness that attacked her at random hours of the day and night. She assumed that the darkness wouldn't last, yet she couldn't fight her way out of it.

When the early days of August arrived, Julie was still showing no signs of improvement, and in her morose state, she was also distracted – she had forgotten that it marked the first anniversary of her arrival back in Hopes Ridge.

But she was about to be reminded.

Julie didn't look at the clock when the latest round of nausea woke her. Even if she had wanted to see what time it was, she couldn't afford to waste a second – dinner was on its way up and there was no slowing it down. She wobbled hurriedly into her bathroom and jerked the toilet lid up as she vomited. The muscles around her midsection cramped for a few seconds before relaxing as she waited for another heave that never came. *We pay for our sins one way or another, don't we, Jules?* She spit into the toilet and flushed down another meal.

As with every other queasy episode, Julie's mouth turned achingly dry. *Big glass of ice water, then straight back to bed.* She wandered through the dark, from the bathroom toward her kitchen, still drowsy in spite of her violent purge. On the way, she banged the front of her thigh into the corner of her dining room table, rousing her a bit more. *Dammit. That'll leave a mark. Just get to fridge and back to bed, for the love of God.*

Leaning into the kitchen's swinging door, she stepped onto the linoleum floor with her bare feet. *Ooh, that's chilly.* She was even more awake now, the linoleum underneath her an unnatural cold, and with each step she took, closer and closer to the center of the room, it grew even colder. The skin on her legs prickled an instant before the *feeling* overtook her body, causing her to shake uncontrollably. Her sixth sense, dormant and buried beneath the mountain of her recent depression, exploded. Her eyes grew wide as she became fully awake, and she froze in her tracks.

The room was dark except for a sliver of moonlight that shone in from the window. It spread in a cartoonish rectangle across the center of the floor in front of her. In the middle of the light's glare stood a puddle of water, so clear that Julie rubbed her eyes to make sure it was real. As she peered closer, the puddle began to glow, brighter with each second that passed. *Look up, Jules. To the ceiling.* She tilted her head, her eyes reluctant, her curiosity overpowering. *You have to look up!*

There it was, just as she remembered it. The circle of unnaturally white light was like a mirror to the puddle below it, an illumination that seemed to flow from the floor upward. *But that can't be, can it?*

"Is that you, GranBelle Jenny?" Julie pleaded, not expecting an answer. More than anything else, she wanted to break the silent tension of the moment. It worked, but only for a few seconds. The tension, and her palpable fear, returned almost instantly.

The shining light above her seemed so near, closer even than the ceiling surrounding it. *See if you can touch it – see if it's real.* Her curiosity continued to conquer her fear. Julie willed her legs to move, taking two steps toward the puddle and its blinding reflection overhead. A numbness crept into the soles of her feet. The tips of her toes were nearly touching the water when she stopped, and the skin on her legs began to tingle. *Don't be scared, Jules. She's only trying to tell you something.*

She squinted into the light, unable to locate its source. It had the same unexplainable pull on her body as the night of her slip-and-fall one year before. She reached into it

with her right arm, watching her fingers tremble. Just as her hand passed the light's threshold, it vanished, and a cold wet whoosh of wind blew up from the floor across her body. She looked down, and the water was gone. All that was left was the freezing floor, and even that effect was beginning to fade.

"Holy shit," she said, wanting to hear her own voice again.

As she surveyed the room, searching for any lingering clues to the ghost who had left in such a hurry, only one thing stuck out: the digital clock on her coffee maker, its bright green numbers glowing brightly. It was 3:36 in the morning, the exact time she had fallen in the kitchen a year ago.

*Now you know when she died, Jules, down to the very minute it happened.*

And just like that, Julie Danner's period of depression was over, thanks to GranBelle Jenny's ghost.

## Chapter 17

Reinvigorated by her kitchen experience on the August anniversary of GranBelle Jenny's death, Julie was up and out of her Grayson Lane house at first light the next morning, running six miles with a determination that had disappeared from her life a month earlier. Each stride she took felt like a sloughing-off of the cloak of depression she had been wearing. By the time she got back home, with her heart pumping hard, her sense of purpose had been renewed. She needed to find out why GranBelle Jenny was communicating with her, and how the woman's death was connected to Pam Russett and Natalie Nix.

After a quick shower and light breakfast, Julie arrived at *The Herald* before anyone else, ready to game-plan her next investigative move. She started with an internet search for local Persalls, descendants of the doctor and wife who had employed GranBelle Jenny for most of her life. A hunt for any Jennings related to her ghost would be fruitless, as the number of people with that last name would be overwhelming. Plus, the folded-up article she had found hiding in the archives box mentioned that Jenny had no close relatives. If anyone held a history of Mrs. Martha Jennings, it would be a Persall.

From what Julie could gather, the Persalls had raised only one child, a girl, and she had moved from Hopes Ridge at age eighteen, never to return. *Sure can relate to that one, huh Jules?* The daughter had gone to college in Virginia, then disappeared, at least in online records. And other than her, there wasn't a living Hopes Ridge Persall to be found.

Julie arrived at her dead-end just as Bruce came ambling through the building. He stopped short at the bottom of his office stairs and leaned backward, a curious scowl on his face.

"Miss Danner? Is that really you?"

"I'm back, Bruce – in every way. Can we talk?"

"Give me ten minutes," he mumbled. "Coffee before conversation – always."

Ten minutes later, Julie was upstairs and knocking on Bruce's door.

"Come on in!" he yelled. He finished gulping down more coffee from his mug before he spoke again. "So, you're back in action, that right?"

"About time, isn't it?"

"Sure as hell is. I haven't printed an article from you in six weeks."

"Sorry, Bruce. Things got...complicated." She didn't want to tell him about her pregnancy. Not yet.

"Well, I'm glad to see you pulled out of it. I was worried about you, Julie."

"I know. I was worried too."

Bruce plopped down in his roller chair. It let out an audible groan. "Alright, let me have it. What's the next Julie Danner masterpiece going to be?"

Julie leaned against a wall. "Hard to say."

He put his chin to his chest and raised an eyebrow. "Oh shit. Not the fucking ghost again?"

"She's trying to show me something, Bruce. I can't explain why I've got to figure it out, I just do."

His glare eased as a resigned acknowledgement came over his face. "How can I help?"

"You've been in Hopes Ridge a long time, right?"

"Besides my stint in D.C., I've been here my whole life."

"Did you know the Persall family? He was a doctor in town."

"Yeah, I knew the Persalls. Knew them pretty damn well, actually. I dated their daughter for a while. When I was in D.C. and she was in school in Virginia."

"Wait, you know her?"

"Not anymore, I don't. That was over forty years ago. Just a memory from my past."

"But maybe you know where she is? Have you kept up with her?"

Bruce chuckled. "Unlike most single men my age, the whereabouts of my exes does not keep me up at night."

"Do you at least know where she went after college?"

He gave her a long stare. "You really want to talk to this woman, don't you?"

"She's the only link to GranBelle Jenny I can find."

"Let me see what I can do. I think we may still have a mutual friend or two."

Julie couldn't hide the smile from her face. "You're the best, Bruce. But you knew that already."

"Get the hell out of here, Miss Danner," he said, picking up a fresh copy of *The Washington Post* and spreading it out in front of him. "I'll let you know when I've got something."

"You know, you shouldn't read the paper," she said as she left his office. "It only makes you grouchier."

She heard him laugh behind the door as she hopped down the stairs two at a time.

Twenty minutes later, Julie was already exploring another path, digging into the background of Natalie Nix's brother Leo, who had left her with an ominous impression, and a pervasive dread she couldn't shake. She was searching for vehicle registrations in his name, employment records, residence history, engrossed so deep in her work that she didn't notice Bruce until he had strolled past her desk. He dropped one of his business cards in front of her as he went by, his *Herald* contact info listed on the front in raised black lettering. Julie turned it over and recognized the editor's scribbled handwriting on the back: "Vicki Persall Beck 615-555-8246."

A wave of excitement rushed through her as she looked over her shoulder. "Is this who I think it is?"

"The one and only Victoria Persall," Bruce announced without slowing, his back to her. "She even said she'll talk to you."

"Are you serious? Thanks, Bruce!"

He waved a lazy hand in the air in response before disappearing around his giant printing press.

Julie stared at the phone number before dialing it. She had gotten her first GranBelle Jenny lead, now it was time to take advantage of it. As she dialed the phone number for Vicki Persall Beck, her anticipation was almost too much. She crossed her fingers as the phone rang on the other end, hoping that Vicki would answer.

After five rings, Julie expected to hear a voicemail greeting when the receiver clicked in her ear. But instead, a friendly female voice came through.

"Hello? This is Vicki."

Julie's muscles tensed. "Hi, Vicki. My name is Julie Danner. I got your number from Bruce Woods."

"Yes, you did. I was hoping I'd get this call one day."

"Excuse me?"

"Bruce told me what you're investigating – how can I help?"

*Alright, Jules. Here we go.* "I suppose I'd like to get some background – how your family knew Mrs. Jennings, what she did for your parents..."

Vicki cut her off. "Who killed her?"

"Do you know?"

There was a hesitation on the other end of the phone, but Julie soon understood why. "I do not," Vicki said, the frustrated emotion in her words unmistakable.

"That's ok. You can still help. Let's start from the beginning. GranBelle Jenny worked for your parents, right?"

"And my father's parents before that. She was his nanny growing up, on top of everything else she did to keep their house in order. When my father married my

mother, she did the same thing for him, and after I was born, she became my nanny. She was with me for everything, for as long as I can remember. Up until the day I left for college."

"Did she continue working for your parents after that?"

"She kept getting paid, yes. But GranBelle Jenny was much older by then. Besides, it wasn't long after I left..." Her voice trailed off.

"Vicki?"

"She was gone a year after I left Hopes Ridge."

"Did you come back for her funeral?"

"Of course! The woman was like a second mother to me. In some ways, she was like my only mother."

"I can appreciate that." The image of Elizabeth Danner's sewing room, filled with clothes for a dead daughter, flashed through Julie's mind. She pushed it away. "Do you remember any talk at the funeral? Did anybody have any idea what had happened? Any theories?"

"No. Nobody knew a thing. There were rumors, as there always are in small towns."

"What were the rumors?"

"That someone had drowned her," Vicki whispered. "That someone had tortured and drowned her."

Julie could hear Vicki disconnect from what she was saying, like she believed it but didn't want to, even now, decades later.

"Did they think that someone had broken into her house?"

"No, I don't think so." She paused. "From what I remember, there was no evidence of a break-in."

On a yellow pad, Julie jotted notes as they talked. She wrote *Rumor - torture/drowning - NO break-in* before she continued.

"Let's go back to your childhood."

“Well, like I said, GranBelle Jenny was like a mother to me. And she was everyone else’s grandmother, especially for children who didn’t have one. At night, after she left our house, she would watch all kinds of children. You know she never had any of her own?”

“I gathered that. Did she ever watch other kids when you were around?”

The other end of the phone got quiet – Vicki was thinking back. “That’s an interesting question, only because the answer is yes. Why do you ask?”

“Just trying to get all the information I possibly can. In my business, you never know where a clue will come from.”

“There was only one time, for a few months, when GranBelle Jenny nannied another family’s children with me. I’m not sure why. Never bothered to ask, I suppose. There were two children – a girl and a boy, twins I think. The boy was an awful kid, especially to GranBelle Jenny. But she would give it right back to him. It was a shock to see a child act that way to an adult. I’d been brought up to respect me elders. But those two were different. There was something off about them. I haven’t thought about those children in years.”

“You said they were only around for a little while. What happened?”

“I have no idea. One day, my father told me they wouldn’t be coming over anymore. I never saw them again.”

“Do you remember their names by chance?”

“Oh goodness, I’m not sure. It’s been so many years, and we couldn’t have been more than twelve or thirteen. They were gone nearly as fast as they came – something I think both GranBelle Jenny and I were quite happy about.”

“Try to think, Vicki.”

A slow silence overtook the conversation. Julie waited, trying not to rush Vicki, sensing the pressure of each second as it ticked by.

“Can you remember?”

"I'm so sorry, Julie, it's not coming to me."

Julie didn't want to muddy up the water in Vicki Persall's mind, but she asked anyway. "What about the names Natalie and Leonard? Or maybe just Leo...?"

"Hmm. There is something familiar about those names. But I couldn't say for sure."

"That's ok," Julie said, despite her disappointment. "You've been a huge help. Will you give me a call if you happen to remember the names or anything else?"

"I will, Julie. I sure hope you can find out who killed her. It was an injustice, what happened to my GranBelle."

"I'm doing everything I can, Vicki."

A brush of chilled air ran across the back of Julie's neck as she hung up the phone.

"I know, GranBelle Jenny. I hope my everything is good enough too."

## Chapter 18

The one way that Chuck Danner thought he might be able to pull his daughter out of her strange but lasting depression was by solving the cold case she was fascinated with. Or at the very least, by finding a clue that may have been missed in the initial investigation. After the night he had told Julie about her secret sister Charlotte Eve, he decided to put all his other cases aside and work solely on the mysterious murders of Pam and Natalie – even though it was the one case he had promised to never pursue.

Chuck had moved from Missouri to Alabama soon after his twenty-third birthday. He had been a beat cop in St. Louis for three years by then, but more than anything else in life, Chuck wanted to be a homicide detective, something that may have taken him twenty years or more back home. Birmingham, on the other hand, was aggressively growing its police force at the time, and recruiting officers from larger cities across the country, with the promise of fast promotion for those who had the talent. Now Chuck Danner wasn't necessarily cocky, but he knew one thing about himself: he had a nose for investigation. He took a chance and moved across two states, and the Birmingham Police Department quickly became his professional home.

It was during his first week on the new job that he heard about Pam Russett and Natalie Nix. The case was nearly five years old, but somehow remained a water-cooler topic around the station. Chuck eavesdropped the first few times he heard it mentioned, letting his intuition build. Eventually, he had to ask. He ventured his question to one of the older detectives.

“Why so much interest in those girls after all this time?”

“You really wanna know, rook?” the surly detective asked. “It’s because we had him. Or at least we thought we did. For one day, he was in our hands – but he slipped

right through, and we lost track of him, just like that. But he's still out there. I guarantee it."

The way the old cop had said it was almost sinister, like the suspect was roaming the world, still acting on his macabre fantasies in faraway places. Chuck couldn't contain his curiosity.

"What happened? How did he get away?"

"No more questions, rook. This isn't a road you want to travel – I promise you that."

Chuck obeyed his elder, but his fascination with the case grew. Once he had made detective, he felt justified enough to dig deeper, albeit on his own. With access to the archived case files, he pulled everything the department had collected on Natalie and Pam and their killer – two banker boxes full of photos, interviews, and officer notes. Not one for personal pursuits on company time, Chuck carried the files home and studied them after hours.

The detectives working the case had done diligent work, and just like the old cop had said, they almost got their man. But the suspect had found a way to elude them. The rumor around the department was the killer had been tipped off, which could have only come from someone on the inside.

"That's why he told me to leave it alone," Chuck said to himself late one night as he was poring over the lead detective's notes. "Somebody on the inside helped him."

"Helped who?" a young and pregnant Elizabeth asked from over his shoulder, startling him. She had snuck into his downstairs study without a sound, and she was looking at the case files he had spread out on his desk.

"Hey, honey. Nobody, nothing – just work stuff."

"I remember these poor girls." She picked up a crime scene photo – a picture of both young women sprawled awkwardly along the edge of the riverbank, naked and partially submerged, like a pair of some little girl's Barbies that had been left outside in

a rainstorm. Elizabeth held the photograph tightly, glaring at the horrific image. When she let it go, it drifted like a feather from her hand down to Chuck's desk.

Chuck looked up, his eyes moving past his wife's protruded belly, to her suddenly sullen face. "You really shouldn't be looking at this stuff, hon."

With an unblinking stare at some distant invisible object, she said, "Promise me you won't dig into this case, Chuck. Please."

"I'm already digging."

Refocused, she turned her eyes on him, their ice-blue color boring holes into his own. "Well, stop."

"Did you know one of the girls, Liz'beth?"

"No, I just find it all terribly upsetting. Just promise me."

Her harsh words got to him. Maybe his wife was right. He certainly had better things to do with his off-time now that the baby was on the way, like putting together a crib and painting the nursery. And maybe he didn't want to know the whole story, after all, despite his intuition that kept telling him he was on to something. Like the old detective had first told him, maybe this wasn't a road he wanted to travel.

"I promise, Liz'beth," he told her, already gathering up the papers on his desk into neat little stacks that would fit back into the banker boxes with ease.

And with that, Chuck Danner had put the murders of Pam Russett and Natalie Nix out of his mind. The water-cooler discussions had still come up every now and then, but Chuck would always find a way out of them. Eventually, the unsolved mystery faded away, like they always tend to do. That is, until Julie brought it back to light, and practically forced her father to face a demon he had tried to avoid since that night in his study, when his pregnant wife had made him promise to let it lie.

There was no extra clue for Chuck to find in the original case files. No misplaced fingerprint, no insightful neighbor who never got interviewed, no nothing. But there was a similarity, and Chuck had learned from experience that similarities between cases, no matter how minor, could sometimes yield big answers.

The similarity that Chuck uncovered lay in the same crime scene photo that Elizabeth Danner had been holding the fateful night at his desk. The two young women, dead from drowning in the Cahaba River according to their autopsy reports, had drifted to the exact same spot along the river's bank. Chuck had known this was unusual from the beginning, as bodies thrown into a river wouldn't typically float the same path, and would most likely end up in drastically different areas. But Natalie and Pam hadn't – just like two other women in a cold case he had studied a few years earlier.

Chuck went back through the folders on his computer, each one labeled by name and state. He didn't remember the victims' names, but he remembered that the murders had occurred in Colorado. Before long, he was back in their file, refamiliarizing himself with the other case, searching for the crime scene photo that he knew he had seen – and that looked so similar. When he found it, he shuddered at the sight.

"My God, it's identical," he said to his little mutt Rocko, who was cozied in his lap.

The women from Colorado, both in their early twenties like Natalie and Pam, had been discovered by a hunter on the western bank of the Snake River, and the picture on Chuck's computer screen had captured them as they were found – sprawled out naked in shallow water, amongst a tangle of tree limbs and dirty brush, *together*. It was exactly the same as the Birmingham bodies, and just as unlikely.

"They didn't float there, Rocko," he said, matter-of-factly. "They were *placed* there, already dead and gone from this earth."

## Chapter 19

Julie threw up three times in a row next to the front wheel of her Honda, the August heat in *The Herald's* parking lot doing a number on her. Her renewed sense of determination had obviously not deterred her body's relentless and random attacks of pregnancy-induced nausea.

"Dammit," she cursed through strings of drool and teary eyes. "This I can do without."

She wiped her face with the palm of her hand and stood up straight, stretching her neck. Her conversation with Vicki Persall had given her something to go on, though vague and mysterious. If not for her intuition, she may have ignored it. But her sixth sense had perked up at Vicki's mention of the brother and sister, the ones who had been in GranBelle Jenny's care with her for a short time. Could they have been Natalie and Leo? Was that the connection?

As the rush of post-purge endorphins charged her brain, she realized who she needed to see before she did anything else – Madam Angeline, who had a direct line to the ghost of GranBelle Jenny. She pulled up Allison's name on her cell phone, but the call went straight to voicemail. Julie sent her best friend a text message instead: **Call me ASAP.**

A vicious hunger had replaced her nausea from a few minutes earlier, so she drove to the nearest fast-food restaurant she could find and ordered two bacon, egg, and cheese biscuits and the largest coffee on the menu. She wondered while she ate in the parking lot if the meal would even stay down. *You did this, Jules. You've only got yourself to blame.* With the last bit of biscuit in her mouth, she rebuffed her own inner voice. *Hey, it takes two to tango. Speaking of, it might be time to let Tyler know about all this.* The sigh she began to release was abruptly replaced by a loud and uncontrollable belch.

"Nice," she said with disgust.

Her phone vibrated in the seat next to her. She grabbed for it impulsively and looked at the name, both expecting and hoping to see Allison's. But it wasn't her friend calling – it was Tyler Sexton himself, out of the clear and distant blue.

Julie gathered her senses before she answered. "Hello, Tyler."

"Hey, there, my beautiful memory."

"Your ears burning?"

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just surprised to hear from you like this."

"I know, I know. I'm a pro when it comes to unexpected appearances. What are you up to today?"

The phone call had jarred Julie, but the question threw her even more. She stammered before she answered. "Nothing, I guess. Why?"

"I'm driving from Nashville right now. Got a gig in New Orleans tomorrow night. Thought I might stop by, say hello."

Julie knew exactly what "stop by and say hello" meant. *Boy, Jules, are you gonna ruin his day or what?* "I'd actually really like to see you. What time will you be coming through?"

"A couple hours. Meet at your house?"

"Yeah, Grayson Lane – you remember where it is?"

She could almost see his boyishly charming smile through the phone. "How could I forget?"

Allison had still not called Julie back by the time Tyler pulled up to her house. She wasn't worried, just frustrated, even though the day was pretty much shot with the unwitting father of her baby making a surprise visit. Madam Angeline would have to wait for the time being.

Tyler was leaning against the door jamb in well-worn plaid shirt, tight-legged jeans, and boots when Julie opened the door. This look was even better than his reunion suit, which she hadn't been able to resist. Julie felt a familiar heat course through her stomach and then below. *You gotta be kidding me. You're pregnant, remember?*

"Hey, Julie." There was that smile, the one that had gotten to her in high school, and again ten years later.

"Tyler, we've got to talk."

The smile dropped slowly from his mouth, a look of concern overtaking his brow.

"Everything ok?"

"Of course – everything's great." She didn't want to scare him off, to send him running for his truck, never to be heard from again. "Come on in, sit down. Would you like something to drink? Water, Coke, beer?" She offered the last item with a slight push, like an upselling waitress – with the news she had, he might need it.

"Nah, I'm good," he answered, to both sitting and drinking. His hands fidgeted until he stuck them in his pockets. "What's on your mind?"

"This is a bit hard, so I'm just going to say it. And, by the way, I'm sorry I haven't called you."

"Julie, what the fuck? Just tell me."

"Ok, here's the thing. We weren't very careful the night after the reunion. We weren't careful at all."

Julie watched as the wheels turned in Tyler's head. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

*No man wants to hear this, not this way. Just spit it out, Jules. "I'm pregnant, Tyler. I'm so sorry."*

He looked away from her, to the floor, shaking his head. "It's mine? You know that for sure?"

*Not the reaction we were wishing for, but a valid question nonetheless. "It is. I do."*

“Shit, Julie, are you kidding me? Are you not on the fucking pill?”

“I am. I don’t know how it happened.” She started to cry. To bawl, really – an uncontrollable girlie sob, something so unlike her. Her pregnancy hormones had turned a hundred and eighty degrees. “You don’t need to feel any obligation. This is all my fault.”

“Well, that’s bullshit and you know it. How could I not feel obligated?” He started to walk around the room, haphazardly. “I can’t believe this is happening. Julie, this isn’t something that I can do, not now, maybe not ever.”

Her crying subsided a bit as Tyler’s last comment got under her skin. “It’s not actually convenient for me either, y’know.”

He looked at her for the first time since she had made her big announcement. “So what are you gonna do about it? I mean, what should we do about it?”

His intention was clear.

“I’m keeping the baby, Tyler. I’ve already decided.”

“Without talking to me?”

Julie wiped her eyes with resolve – it was mind-boggling how quickly her emotions could change lately, like there was a switch in her brain operated by some mad scientist with only mood experimentation on his mind. “Yeah, without talking to you about it. It is my body, after all. My body, my choice.”

“Are you fucking serious? I don’t get a say?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Have you even considered getting an abortion, Julie?”

It was the one thing she didn’t want him to say. She had hoped to avoid the word completely, as if it wasn’t a part of the human vocabulary. But now it was out there, never to be unsaid. She had already faced the choice alone, and now he wanted to take it away from her. She was incensed, so much so that she didn’t even notice the stink that had come over the room until Tyler put his hand to his nose and mouth.

“What the hell is that smell?” he asked, doubling over.

Julie barely reacted to the rank odor, the smell of death, all wet and grimy and awful. She knew exactly what it was and where it had come from. “I’m sorry, Tyler, I really am. I think you should go now. Call me when you’re ready to talk about this like an adult.”

Tyler had hidden his face in the crook of his arm, only his eyes showing. “Good God, can you not smell that?”

She could, and it was just as terrible as before. But she knew that GranBelle Jenny was sending a message in her only way – to Tyler and his lethal idea of how Julie’s pregnancy should be handled. Julie stood in her den and withstood the odor with a face of stone, while Tyler Sexton began to dry heave.

“I’m keeping the baby, Tyler. There is no other choice.”

He looked at her through watery eyes, unable to control his coughing. After only a few seconds, he ran from the house, jumping into his old Tahoe and speeding away.

As he left, Julie broke down, the stink too much, as it always was. She just made it to her front yard, where the two bacon, egg, and cheese biscuits came right up the same path they had gone down earlier. But this time, Julie couldn’t blame her morning-sickness. This time, it was all Tyler Sexton’s fault.

Outside in her front yard, Julie relaxed in the grass, allowing time for GranBelle Jenny’s odor inside the house to dissipate. The sun was no longer bearing down, as light gray clouds had drifted across the sky to conceal it, precursors to what was sure to be a stormy summer afternoon. Jerry the MouseDog had followed Julie out, and he sat just inches from her face, panting loudly.

“That smell too much for you too, huh?” she asked him.

He kept on panting, his expression unchanged.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You tried to warn me a year ago. Guess what, MouseDog? I should’ve listened.”

A vibration from her backside broke up the one-sided conversation. Reaching for the cell phone, she was reminded of her conversation with Vicki Persall. *Please be Allison. We could use the distraction.* Sure enough, the screen displayed her best friend’s name in bold white letters.

“Hey,” Julie said with as much voice as she could muster.

“What’s wrong?” Allison asked with instant concern.

“I just saw Tyler – it didn’t go well.”

“Fuck.” Her go-to word said it all.

“At least I know where he stands on the baby.”

“I’m sorry, honey. What do you need? I’ve been tied up all morning, but I’m here for you now.”

Julie sat up, the move requiring more effort than it would have just a week before. “Best thing you could do is get me in touch with that medium of yours again. Madam Angeline. I need to talk to her.”

“That’s funny,” Allison said strangely.

“Funny how?”

“It’s just weird, that’s all.” Allison hesitated. “I got three voicemails this morning from the madam herself – it just so happens that she’s looking for you too.”

## Chapter 20

Angeline Rose LaChapelle had been gifted the power of supernatural communication at birth, but she didn't recognize it until the night of her ninth birthday. She had been inconsolable that day, despite her father's best efforts to bring back some happiness to their house.

"Let's try not to think about Mama today, Angel," he told her that morning when she woke up. "If only for a little while."

But her mother had died just ten days earlier, and no matter how hard she tried, Angeline couldn't do it. The image of her dead Mama in a pine-box casket came to her every time she closed her eyes.

That night, in bed and finally falling asleep, her mother came to her. Not the casket mother, all puffy and caked with parlor makeup. No, it was her real mother, smiling and standing and looking over young Angeline again. Only she wasn't alive at all – that much the nine-year-old could understand.

Yanking her blanket up to her chin, Angeline cowered at first, scared of the vivid but transparent image next to her. "Mama, is that really you?" Her words wavered as they left her mouth.

"It's me, Angel." Without a doubt, it was her mother's voice, thick with its island Creole accent, a mishmash of French and Haitian and deep-south Cajun. "I came to say that I'm alright. Stop your worryin, baby girl. I'll always be with you."

Nine-year-old Angeline's fear vanished as her mother spoke to her, as she recognized what was happening in her bedroom that birthday night. A door had been opened in her mind, her heart, her spirit. Little Angeline had seen the other side.

From there on, the spirits came to visit her, but rarely as clear as her mother had been. At first, it was other family members: her grandmother on her father's side, who had lived to be a hundred and two; her uncle Pierre, a ship captain who had died

somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico; even her little brother, whose life had been cut short by a random but vicious New Orleans outbreak of whooping cough. Most times, it was just a presence, with a simple name that would be whispered, and Angeline would know. But sometimes the spirits would stay with her, showing her the way they had died, or the way they wished they had lived.

As a teenager, with her paranormal door wide open, Angeline sought out a distant cousin, a woman she had only met once, who was working as a medium along a French Quarter alleyway. She wondered if her ability might run in the family, and if her cousin might be able to give her some insight into how she could use her gift. The woman did just that, but she also passed on a warning.

“Now that you’ve opened the door, sweet cousin, you must understand – it’s open for anything, and anyone.” Angeline nodded, not knowing how else to respond. “And one more thing – it can never be closed. You are forever a vessel.”

It would be another five years before Angeline fully understood her cousin’s words and the warning they held. During a private reading for a stranger, a man who had hired her through a friend, Angeline felt a new kind of visitor come through her door, a different presence that frightened her. There was no name given, and no words spoken. No images of death, and no vision of a life once lived. Instead, it was a shapeless void of existence, a malevolent force that Angeline couldn’t decipher. And when it appeared, all the other spirits vanished.

“I’m sorry,” she told her client that day. “I have to stop. No charge.”

The man left in a disappointed huff, but Angeline didn’t care. She had wanted the experience to end from the moment it started.

Over the years, the evil presence only visited at distant intervals, each time putting a scare into Angeline that would last with her for days. It was like a transient no-name stranger who carried a sinister threat but never acted on it. Fortunately, it never stayed long – except for the last time, right after her visit to the Hopes Ridge house on Grayson

Lane. Since then, the void had stayed with her, leaving her no choice but to seek out the young woman whose life she felt was in imminent danger.

The light haze of clouds from earlier had turned a menacing gray, steadily piling on top of one another as Julie drove east out of Birmingham on Interstate 20. Madam Angeline's address was listed as inside the city limits, but Julie wondered how accurate that might be the further her GPS guided her. A growling roll of thunder shook the Honda. Julie's eyes darted to the spool of red thread she had brought with her. It was sitting in the middle of the car's dashboard, and it wobbled with the thunderous vibration. She eyed the spool warily – her sixth sense had pushed her to bring it, but she kept her distance.

The GPS instructed Julie to take the next exit, then turn north. From there, the two-lane highway bent back around the city. Oversized blobs of rain began to burst across her windshield. Julie drove past a blurred blend of open fields and woods, with the occasional rickety house or worn-down gas station along the way. After four miles, she came to Madam Angeline's mailbox, perched on a wooden post at the end of a hidden driveway that disappeared into dense woods after just a few feet.

Julie stopped her car at the opening. The clouds were finally unleashing their full fury, with sheets of rain cutting across the highway like ocean waves. She closed her eyes and listened to the roar of raindrops on the roof of her car. Like finding her mother dead in the bathtub that night so long ago, Julie knew that her meeting that day with the madam would change her – she wasn't sure how, she just knew. The storm grew even louder. Julie opened her eyes and turned her Honda into the driveway.

Madam Angeline's house had a deceiving look to it, both large and small at the same time. One story but wide, it was made of horizontal wood slats, painted stark white, with a pointed green roof that rose to form a perfect triangle above the front door. It gave off the impression of a church, albeit concealed from any passersby on the distant highway below. *A church of her own making, for only herself. The Church of St. Angeline.*

The driveway curled around in a circle that looped in front of the house, and the madam's lengthy white Cadillac sat parked in the center of it. Julie pulled behind the bigger car and turned off the Honda's ignition. The spool of red thread, still perched on the dashboard, caught her eye. She grabbed it and pushed it deep into her jeans pocket before she made a dash through the rain toward Madam Angeline's front door. The madam opened it wide as Julie approached.

"Get in here, dear child. What'd you do, bring these storm clouds with you?"

Julie stopped short after she came through the door, careful not to get the madam's white carpeted floors any wetter than she already had. Looking around, she noticed how pristine the interior of the home was. Not elaborately decorated. Definitely not fancy. Just pristine. *Kinda like Leo Nix's, huh, Jules?* The space was vast and airy, with few walls. Julie looked up and saw where the point of the roof formed, at least twenty feet above her head.

"Take this." Madam Angeline handed her a towel.

She took the towel and dried her face first. "I don't want to get anything wet," she said without moving an inch.

"Just take off your shoes, dear. Don't worry about anything else." The madam, barefooted herself, walked gingerly across the open room and turned left, where Julie could see a bright kitchen, gleaming despite the dark skies outside its windows. The older woman moved easier than she had at Julie's house, and without the aid of her cane. "I've made some tea," the madam offered over her shoulder. "Come have a cup."

Julie eased out of her slip-on sneakers. The plush carpet swallowed up her bare feet like beach sand. She followed the madam, surveying her surroundings as she walked. The back wall of the house was one giant bookcase, filled from floor to ceiling. In the space between, set up in separate alcoves, sat an array of chairs: high-back leathers, deep-set velvets, slouchy loungers. Some sat by themselves, others across from each other, awaiting a cozy conversation. *The hours somebody could spend in this room. Days even.*

“Sugar?” Madam Angeline asked from the kitchen.

“No, thank you. Just tea is fine.”

“I figured as much.” The madam handed Julie a cup and saucer. “You like to keep things simple, don’t you, dear?”

“Most things in life are simple – it’s people that complicate them.”

Madam Angeline nodded her agreement, but Julie assumed it was some sort of approval too. “Come sit, dear.” She walked to a pair of tan suede chairs, with a round glass table between them. “I know how tiring it can be to carry a baby.” There was a hint of *“I told you so”* in the way she said it.

“How did you know – even before I did?”

“Some things just come to me. Like a whispered secret in my ear.”

“Do you have children, Madam Angeline?” Julie took a sip of her tea. It gently warmed her rain-dampened body from the inside out.

“I do – three. All grown and moved away.”

“It’s just you in this big house?”

The madam nodded once, smiling.

“Do you ever get lonely?”

A laugh, from deep in the pit of Madam Angeline’s gut, filled the room, echoing across the open space. “With the visitors I’ve got? Never.” She paused and her tone turned serious. “You’ve got visitors too, don’t you, dear?”

The madam asked her question with the same assuming nature as back at Julie's house, the day they first met, when she had already known Julie was pregnant.

"Besides GranBelle Jenny? No."

"Oh, but I think you do." Madam Angeline drank from her teacup, taking her time, allowing Julie to consider her statement. "Just know this – when someone with the gift, like me, first discovers it, it's usually through sleep. The visions, and the visitors, first come to us when our mind is at its most vulnerable, and our own spirit is most open to the unknown. Didn't Jenny first come to you in the middle of the night?"

"Well, yes, but I think there's another reason for that." She set her tea on the table. "And that brings to me to why I came here today. I need to know more about a name you mentioned, back at my house."

"Theo," the madam said.

"That's right. Who is he?"

Madam Angeline placed her hand on Julie's wrist. "I wish I knew, dear, but that's not the way this works. You see, most times, I only get bits and pieces from the other side. It's like putting a puzzle together. A name here, an image there. I see what I see, and I can only hope that my clients know what it all means."

"Who showed you the name?"

"I assume it was your friend GranBelle Jenny. She must have unfinished business with him, whoever he may be."

Julie sat back in her chair, pondering before she spoke. "Forgive me for the question, but..."

"My gift has been questioned ever since I discovered it. Ask me anything, dear."

"Well, it's about the name. How sure are you that it was 'Theo' and not something else? Something close?"

The madam squinted at Julie. "It's possible – sometimes things on the other side get blurry, like I'm looking through a rain-streaked window." A gust of wind blew outside, hurtling raindrops against the madam's house. "Did you have someone in mind?"

"Maybe." Julie paused. "Could the name have been 'Leo' instead?"

*And now it's out there – let's see where it leads.*

Madam Angeline closed her eyes and leaned back. Abruptly, she dropped her head and shook it vigorously back and forth. "No, no, no!"

"What's wrong, Madam? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, dear," she said, still shaking her head. "It's just that I can't see anything right now. That's why I brought you here – I can't see because of you."

*This is the moment, Jules. This is when everything changes.* Julie shifted in her chair, and the spool of thread in her pocket dug into the top of her thigh.

"I've only experienced evil spirits a handful of times in my life," the madam went on, her face wrinkling. "And when they've come to me, it was never for long. Until recently, that is. I've got a visitor, Julie, who won't leave me alone. I think it's because they're trying to get to you."

"Who is it?"

"I'm not sure if it's a who or not, dear. When these things make themselves known, it's hard to define them. It's more like a blackness that eats up everything around it, leaving no room for anything else – leaving no room for good."

Julie swallowed a lump that had formed in her throat. She thought back to the black hole in her mother's bathroom ceiling the night of her suicide.

*We're all mad here...we're all mad here...*

"I don't hide anything from my clients, Julie. I want you to understand that. Fear is a natural feeling – it's instinct. Sometimes we are supposed to be afraid." The madam let the words of wisdom sink in. "You need to understand, this presence is not here *because* of you – it's here *for* you."

A rumble of thunder rolled across the sky above, and Julie wondered if the evil blackness was trying to communicate with them.

“No, dear, that’s just Mother Nature.” Madam Angeline smirked, tilting her head to the ceiling, reading Julie’s mind.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

The madam stood and walked to the kitchen. “That’s the big question, isn’t it? And ultimately, only you can answer it. You have to decide if you are willing to face the darkness, because the road you are traveling will most certainly take you there.” She brought the teapot back with her and poured more into Julie’s cup. “But know this – the darkness, the black presence that has come to me because of you, holds the truth. They are one and the same. You have to make the choice – how much do you really want to know? How far are you willing to go to find the truth?”

Julie felt herself shivering, despite the hot tea. “Are you scared, Madam Angeline?”

“I have seen the other side nearly my whole life, Julie. I do not fear what comes next, and I never have. But the presence with me now, that refuses to leave, has got a power like I’ve never known. And it is growing. I’m not telling you what to do, dear. Just know that if you continue on your quest for the truth, there will be consequences. For you, and the people you love.”

“Can you help me?” Julie asked, unable to hide her desperation.

The madam dropped her eyes to the floor and smiled. “I was told long ago, dear, that I am only a vessel. I can tell others what I see, what is shown to me, but nothing more.”

“And what you’re being shown now – it’s only a warning? That’s it?”

Madam Angeline raised her head and stared deeply into Julie’s deep blue eyes. “Spirits are not like us, Julie. They have a way of keeping things very simple. Their messages are not complicated. Love, apologies, reminders – those are typical. Warnings

are rare." She took Julie's hands in her own, giving them a good hard squeeze. "Take heed, dear. You have been warned."

## Chapter 21

Julie drove back to Hopes Ridge with the radio off, listening instead to the rainfall pounding against the roof of her car. The skies had lightened, but the rain was steady, and Julie's head was a mess. In only a year's time, she'd gone from a no-nonsense journalist grounded in reality to living in a haunted house, believing in ghosts, enamored with a psychic's supernatural abilities. *She's not a psychic, Jules – she's a medium. There's a difference.* Sometimes she wished her inner voice had an off switch.

The day had been a long one, coupled with a near-sleepless night caused by the return of GranBelle Jenny. Even so, Julie was wired, her mind feeding off the warning from Madam Angeline. She'd known immediately what she would do, and she figured that the madam had known too. There was no way she could stop her investigation now – the black presence, as menacing as it sounded, had only strengthened her resolve to find out what had really happened to Jenny and the two Birmingham girls.

As she entered the Hopes Ridge city limits, she veered her car in the direction of her dad's house. Julie had fallen into her depression just after his revelation about her sister Charlotte Eve, and she knew he was still kicking himself. It was time to relieve him of some of his guilt, and see if he had made any cold-case progress while she had been wallowing in her self-imposed pity.

She found him just where she always did, hunched over his computer's keyboard, staring at the monitor in front of him. She flicked the light switch off and on, something she hadn't done in weeks. Chuck Danner turned his head slowly, a broad grin already on his face, and took off his headphones.

"Are you back, Julie-bean?" Such a basic question, that meant so much.

"I'm back, Dad." She walked over to him and kissed him on his forehead.

"I knew you'd be alright. I'm sorry – about everything."

"I just wish I had known. You should have told me sooner."

“Yeah, I should’ve. Just never felt like the time was right.”

Julie didn’t say anything more. A far-off glaze came over her dad’s eyes. She hugged him tight.

“I’ve got some news for you,” he said as she let go. There was an upturn in his voice, and he raised his right eyebrow into a high arch.

“The cold case?”

“Yep.”

“What’d you find?”

“I’ve tracked him, Julie-bean. I don’t know who he is yet, but I’ve tracked him. Across the whole goddam country – north, south, east, and west. This guy’s been everywhere.”

“How do you know it’s him?”

“Trust me, I know. Let me show you.”

Chuck wheeled himself over to a long folding table he had set up against another wall. On it were eight organized stacks of papers and file folders. On top of each stack was a white sheet of paper with only one word written in black marker. There was Alabama, Colorado, Oregon, Michigan, Arizona, Florida, West Virginia, and Texas. Julie looked to the wall. Hanging waist-high next to the table was a large map of the United States, with colored thumbtacks scattered across it. Each thumbtack was connected to the next by a length of yarn – yarn that was pulled taut and rigid, and a color so similar to her mother’s left-behind red thread that it gave Julie a chill. The yarn was crisscrossing the country like the beginnings of some spider’s oblong web. Her dad really was tracking a killer.

“Is this for real?”

“I’ve worked on nothing else for a month, Julie-bean.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said, a hand on his shoulder.

“Enough with the back-slappin’ already – let’s get into it.”

With the rain continuing to pour outside, Chuck spent the next few hours walking Julie through everything he had uncovered. All told, he'd managed to link sixteen murders together so far, spread across eight different states and spanning two and a half decades.

"Best I can tell, he started in Birmingham," he told her, "with Pam Russett and Natalie Nix."

*It actually started before that, didn't it, Jules? Started right there on your kitchen floor.* She held back from telling her dad about her GranBelle Jenny theory – that part she still wanted to keep to herself.

Chuck continued. "And he hasn't let up. He's kept the murders spread out, over time and distance, making them nearly impossible to connect. I think I found his last one –two years ago over in Dallas."

Julie glanced to the middle of the map and saw a yellow thumbtack plugged into the east side of Texas. From the tack hung the remainder of red yarn, dangling with anticipation, waiting to be pulled to yet another cold-case victim, another young woman's dead body.

"What's the connection?" Julie asked. "How did you figure it out?"

Her dad reached for a folder in the "Alabama" stack, then one in the "Colorado" stack. From each folder, he pulled out a picture. Julie could see what they were immediately, and the similarities between the two crime scenes were clear.

"Two girls." Chuck pointed to the pictures. "And in both cases, the victims were found on the riverbank – *together*. What are the odds? It's damn near impossible, Julie-bean."

"So the killer made it look like they drowned in the river, but they didn't?"

"That's right. I may have never noticed it if he hadn't killed two girls in both these places. Every other case has just the one victim. But there's more to it than just dead girls in rivers."

“Like what?”

He opened two other folders with pictures, one from West Virginia, the other from Oregon. “See how the bodies are laying? Not even halfway submerged. And always right on the edge of the river. He wanted his victims to be found.”

Julie didn’t say anything, couldn’t say anything. She had seen plenty of crime scene photos in her time, but the riverbank bodies had started to turn her stomach. *Or maybe you’re just hungry, Jules.* She realized she hadn’t eaten in hours, and her pregnant body was famished.

“This is amazing, Dad. Flat-out amazing. But I think I need a dinner break.”

“One more thing.” Chuck’s face lit up. Even though her head felt light, Julie let him finish. “This is the part that put it over the top.”

Pulling from the same four stacks of cold-case files as before, he retrieved four more photos. They were all close-ups, each one a picture of the victim’s left hand, pasty white except for streaks of mud and river muck. But it was their absence of color, their lack of life, that actually revealed something else.

“Do you see it?” her dad asked, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Julie leaned in closer to make sure her eyes weren’t fooling her. What she was seeing was really there, faint but distinct, and consistent in all four pictures. Around each girl’s fourth finger, there was a thin band of brownish red, exactly where a wedding ring would appear. *Like a red thread, Jules.*

Without warning, and just like every time before, GranBelle Jenny’s stink of wet death assaulted her nose. The pictures in front of her blurred, and a clammy sweat broke out across her body out of nowhere. As the room went black around her, she could hear her dad’s voice, distant and fading with each word he said.

“What in the Good Lord’s creation is that smell?”

A heavy veil obscured Julie's vision when she opened her eyes. The damp hand towel Chuck had used to help revive her was soothing despite its blinding effect.

"Julie, you alright? Julie, can you hear me?"

Rocko's high-pitched yap, right beside her left ear, nearly drowned him out. She raised her hand to calm the mutt before she managed to say anything.

"Oh, thank God," Chuck said from above her, still in his wheelchair. "Hell, you put a scare in me, Julie-bean. Are you ok?"

She pulled the towel off her face. "I'm fine – but I need to eat."

"Oh, right, of course you do. I'll be right back."

Rocko licked the top of her hand as soon as she stopped petting him. His tongue was rough and barely wet, and when it touched the skin on her ring finger, the image of the dead girls' hands came back to her, clicking into place.

*It's a ring, Jules. He imprinted a frickin wedding ring on their fingers before he killed them. A red wedding ring.*

Her head began to swim again.

"Nothing like crackers and peanut butter for an iffy stomach," Chuck announced as he rolled back into the room. He slathered one of the crackers with peanut butter and handed it to her. "You sure you're ok?"

She devoured the cracker. It calmed her stomach instantly.

"I'll be ok. I didn't know a person could be this sick all the time. Whatever happened to *just* morning sickness?"

"Well, that stink didn't help any. I nearly retched myself." He scrunched up his face as Julie scarfed down another peanut butter cracker.

"You smelled that too?" she mumbled through crumbs.

Chuck eyed her with concern and curiosity. "What the hell *was* that, Julie-bean?"

It's time, Jules. Go ahead and tell him.

She swallowed hard so that her words would be clear. "That was my ghost, Dad. The one I told you about before. She has a way of letting me know when she's around."

"You can say that again. That's the most God-awful stink I've ever smelled."

"Yeah, it is." Julie hesitated.

"What's going on here, Julie? You telling me everything?"

Here goes nothing.

Sitting on her dad's floor eating saltines and peanut butter, Julie spilled the rest of her ghost story, from the first time she had experienced GranBelle Jenny's smell of death to Madam Angeline's warning earlier that afternoon. Her dad had surprised her with his own paranormal experience, but she wasn't sure how he might react to this. When he spoke, the curious detective in him was gone.

"I want you out of that house, Julie. Not tomorrow, not next week. Now."

"Dad, I'm not in danger, if that's what you're thinking."

"Goddammit, Julie, this isn't a debate. Things have changed. You got a baby in your belly to worry about – *my* grandchild. I'm not gonna allow you to put yourself or that baby in harm's way!"

"Listen, Dad, as crazy as this sounds, I feel like I've got an obligation to fulfill. I can't leave GranBelle Jenny now."

Chuck blew out a huff and shook his head. "This has gotten completely out of hand. I can't believe I didn't see this coming. Here you are, sick all the time. And for the last month, you've been like a damn ghost yourself! I want you outta there, you hear me?"

Pushing herself up with her hands, Julie rose above her dad. "I'm not leaving. I'm sorry, but I'm not."

Chuck stared at his daughter, just as determined. "The place isn't healthy, Julie-bean, and you know it."

The tremble and emotion in his voice surprised her. She bent down and gave him a hug. "I'll be alright, Dad, I promise. You raised me strong, and you raised me smart."

“Too smart for your own damn good, maybe.”

“Maybe,” she said, wiping a tear from his cheek. “Thanks for the peanut butter – it did the trick. What I think I need now is a good night’s rest.”

Chuck raised his head. “Don’t forget – you want outta that house, just say the word.”

“I will, Dad. I swear to you, I will.”

## Chapter 22

The Honda's windshield wipers kept a steady beat with the heavy rain, nearly lulling Julie into a mindless sleep. She was ready to be home in bed.

*Keep your eyes open, Jules, you don't have far to go. It's no wonder you're exhausted – you stuffed enough drama for a year into one day.*

Starting with the late-night return of GranBelle Jenny that shook her from her long depression, followed by her disappointing conversation with Vicki Persall and the confrontation with baby-denier Tyler Sexton, coupled with Madam Angeline's warning and her father's mind-boggling cold-case discovery, she felt like she'd spent the day binging on Netflix – only this wasn't a show, this was her *life*.

The house was dark when Julie sloshed her way to the front door. A yapping and bouncing Jerry was eager to get outside, but when she opened the back door, he stuck his nose out and sniffed before easing his way back indoors, away from the rain.

"Still afraid to get wet, MouseDog? She really didn't mean to scare you."

He barked once in sturdy defiance.

"Well, let's get you some food then."

When Julie opened the lower cabinet that held Jerry's bag of dog food, she noticed three bottles of red wine stowed in the back. She hadn't come close to craving alcohol during her pregnancy. *But a glass of wine sounds awful good right now, doesn't it?*

She flipped on a counter lamp and pulled out a glass, filling it nearly full. Jerry gave her a quizzical look as he finished his dinner.

"One glass won't hurt, Jerry. It's a proven fact." He twisted his head. "Come on – I could use the company."

The dim glow coming from the kitchen gave her just enough light to find her way back to the den, where she grabbed the old album, the one with no label. *Why not?* The sounds of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's warning of never-ending mystery flowed from the

console's speakers, filling the room. Julie sat on the couch with her glass of wine and put her feet up, the day's events washing over her. Jerry jumped onto her lap, nearly knocking the wine from her hand.

"Hey, careful, MouseDog."

He whimpered before settling himself against her stomach. His little body was warm, and it reminded Julie of the new life, tiny and helpless, that was growing inside her. Her emotions started to settle, her logic taking control again. She understood her dad's concern. Maybe living in this house *was* unhealthy. Maybe it was time to end the investigation she had been goaded into by a ghost. Who could blame her? Her world had been spinning out of control ever since she slipped and hit her head. Maybe she really should leave it all behind.

Jerry shifted his weight, and Julie felt a sharp pain in her upper thigh.

"Ow," she mouthed, reaching to the spot, just at her jeans' left pocket. It was the spool of red thread that had been there ever since Madam Angeline's. *You can't just ignore the signs, Jules. You know you can't.*

"Oh yes, I can." She dug the spool of thread out of her pocket and threw it across the room, where it ricocheted off her front door with a hollow bang and disappeared somewhere on the darkened hardwood floor. "For tonight, I'm ignoring everything."

She took a deep pull from her wine and closed her eyes. Within seconds, she was sound asleep.

*Wake up, Jules. You're wet. Jules! You're soaking wet!*

She was in the deep end of a swimming pool, underneath the water. Black-tiled lines ran along its bottom and a buoyed rope divided the shallow end from the diving well. Julie could see the rope when she looked up, floating above her, but it was so far away –

it offered her no help. Her chest tightened. Panic had not yet gotten hold of her, but she could sense its claws, its grimy fingers tickling her toes.

*You're not drowning, Jules! Just wake up!*

Maybe that wasn't panic at her feet. She turned her head downward, toward the rusty grate below her, and realized that the tickle was something else. The pool's drain was sucking her down, holding her underwater, deep below the surface. She tried swimming, kicking furiously with her legs, but her efforts were fruitless. The drain was too strong.

*It's not real, Jules. None of this is real.*

Refusing to give in, she kicked harder, and slowly began to inch up. The surface was so close, the drain drifting further away with each stroke. One last surge and she felt air on her face. Instinctively, she gulped in as much as her lungs would hold.

Her eyes opened. She was no longer in the pool. She was somewhere very different. But she was still wet.

*It's really time to wake up, Jules. Can't you hear Jerry? Can't you hear him barking?*

A painfully bright light hurt her eyes. She turned her head to block what she thought was the sun and saw people dressed in white from head to toe. They were all around her, prodding at her, frantically working on her body. It was a hospital room. No, worse than that – it was an operating room, but she was alert, aware. There was no anesthesia.

She raised her head and looked down at her body, still so wet. At the end of the metal gurney, just at her feet, stood a woman, her face free from the surgical masks that everyone else wore. A look of pure joy radiated from the woman's face, whose body was otherwise draped in an empty and ebbing black. It was her mother, happier than Julie had ever known her to be.

*WAKE UP!!!*

Julie struggled to wake, caught between reality and dreamscape, drunk on sleep. When she opened her eyes, the hospital room, the doctors and nurses, and her mother were gone. She was back in her den at the house on Grayson Lane. Everything in the room was exactly the same as when she'd fallen asleep. But one thing from the dream lingered – she was wet.

Jerry the MouseDog growled from the other end of the sofa. He was standing away from her, on edge, with canine wariness.

“What’s wrong, Jerry?” she asked, still trying to shake the dreamy cobwebs from her head. He barked in response, holding his defensive position.

She started to sit up, the wetness shifting to her lap. She looked down and saw a dark red puddle soaking her jeans. *Jeez, Jules, did you fall asleep and spill wine all over yourself?* But before she could get any further, a sharp pain ran through her abdomen, below her waist, powerful enough that she doubled over in sudden agony. Another wave followed right after, even stronger, and she couldn’t stop herself from rolling off the couch and onto the den’s hardwood floor.

“Oh my God!” she screamed out. “What is happening to me?”

As the question left her shriveling throat, Julie already knew the answer. The baby was gone, the life inside her ceasing to exist. She opened her eyes, just like in her dream, but this time she wasn’t in a hospital room, with her smiling mother at the end of her bed. This time, all she could see was the spool of red thread, rolling back and forth on its edges, just inches from her face.

## PART THREE

### Chapter 23

Julie should have listened to her father and gotten out of the house on Grayson Lane sooner. It had been too much for her – too much for both her body and spirit. Following her miscarriage, still in the silent grip of lonely maternal grief, Julie decided that it was time to move on. She convinced herself that she'd read too much into the smells, that the white light from the ceiling and the freezing cold floor were just the imagined side-effects of her fall, and that the ghost was nothing more than a simple haunt. Sure GranBelle Jenny *had* died in a way that remained a mystery, but Julie had taken on the ghost's messages as a personal mission, and look at the results.

Chuck took her in without question. "Stay as long as you need to, Julie-bean. This house is too big for me anyway."

Initially, she had reservations about moving into her childhood room on the second floor, the memories of her mother still lingering in the upstairs air. But she caught herself. *You've already made one ghost into something more than it ever was, Jules. Consider that a life lesson learned.* She accepted her dad's offer – the time had come to leave the house on Grayson Lane behind.

When it came to packing, Julie stuck to the basics. Clothes and bathroom essentials, Jerry the MouseDog's bowl and toys, and her one prized possession: the pawnshop record player, which she moved using her dad's converted pickup. Everything else, she left in place. "I'll have Allison start looking for a buyer," her dad told her. "Who knows? Maybe a good offer will come along."

She made one last walk through the house, musing over the changes from the last year. She wandered through the den, with its strange and random music, and the memories of Tyler Sexton, both good and bad. In the kitchen, she stood in the spot

where Jerry had first alerted her to GranBelle Jenny, and where she had learned that ghosts really do exist. In her bedroom, she wiped her foot across the floor, erasing the outline of dust that remained where the box of Charlotte Eve's baby clothes had sat – she had thrown the box away after the miscarriage, in a fit of confused envy and thoughts of a shattered future. *Time to move on from all this, Jules – the past is exactly where it should be.*

Reconciled, Julie made her way back through the house. GranBelle Jenny must have sensed her resolve. There were no smells and no chills. Only peace and quiet. Just as she was pulling the door shut, a mere few inches keeping her from the next chapter in her life, something under the coffee table caught her eye. *The spool of red thread.* Julie had forgotten all about it, her mind blocking it out in her post-traumatic period of grief.

She got down on one knee, reaching under the table. She stared at the spool in her hand. Before GranBelle Jenny's deathly stink, before the unsolved murders of Pam Russett and Natalie Nix, and before the black spirit had chased off Madam Angeline's other visitors, there had been the red thread, her mother's macabre suicide clue that she still didn't understand. But maybe it was all connected – her move home, her mother's suicide, this house, GranBelle Jenny, the baby – even though she couldn't see it.

"It ends right here, right now," Julie said to the spool, and to her mother.

She set the spool down on the coffee table, standing it upright on one end. A bit of the red thread had unraveled, tracing a short and curvy line across the table's wood grain, like a dead-end road on some backwoods map. Julie turned and walked to the front door, swinging it wide, then slamming it closed behind her. There was nothing more inside the house on Grayson Lane that she wanted to see.

His daughter's miscarriage had almost been too much for Chuck Danner to handle. Even though Julie's pregnancy was still in its early stages, he had already become

attached to the idea of being a grandfather – and to the visions of a happy baby in his life again. His sadness was profound, more than he would have ever imagined it could be. When Julie called and asked if she could move back home, he was relieved. After he hung up, he broke down and cried.

Chuck had continued to work on the serial killer he was tracking across the country, despite Julie's understandable disinterest. He needed the distraction. Having developed solid connections between the crimes, he reached out to the investigating departments in each case, from Florida to Oregon. He had learned over the years that most law enforcement agencies wouldn't take him seriously without compelling evidence, in spite of his police officer past. "Let me guess. Another retired cop turned cold case expert. Am I right?" the desk cops would say to him. "I'll let the detective on the case know you called." *Click.*

Chuck knew better than to take it personally, and he'd keep calling until he wore down their skepticism. Occasionally, he'd find an investigator so vested in a cold case they'd take any lead they could get. And that was what happened when he called Hubert Rainey, the sheriff of Wayne County, Michigan, which bordered the Detroit River.

"Everybody up here calls me Hugh." Chuck liked him immediately.

He and Hugh Rainey had talked for hours, sharing information, evidence, and theories. The victim in Hugh's jurisdiction had been the daughter of a close friend.

"I think about that case every day of my life, Chuck," he said at one point. "Every damn day."

The sheriff's words were heavy, and Chuck knew he had found a dedicated partner in his hunt for the evasive murderer, who they dubbed "The Riverbank Drowner."

On the Sunday that Julie moved in, Chuck tabled his investigation. He didn't want to talk murdered girls on her first night home. Instead, he ordered pizza and turned on

*Sunday Night Baseball*. When Julie came in, worn down from her day of packing up, Chuck was on a mission to help her relax and ease her transition.

“Grab a beer and come sit, Julie-bean. The stuff in your car can wait ‘til tomorrow. We’ve got pizza and baseball – and it just so happens the Cards are on tonight. I call that a good omen.”

He could see his daughter’s shoulders drop in relief. She fell into the den sofa in a heap, like she had done as a teenager. He handed her a Budweiser, and her simple response gave him all the satisfaction he could have asked for.

“Perfect, Dad. Absolutely perfect.”

Sales of *The Herald* had started to slack over the summer, and Bruce had no doubt why – his star reporter had not submitted a story in over two months. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what was distracting her, or better yet, how to get her writing again. With his paper on the ropes, he found himself going through desk-drawer pints of Jack Daniel’s faster than ever before.

Bruce had been sure that Julie was ready to dig back in the morning he’d given her Vicki Persall’s phone number. She seemed like her old self that day, and then she was gone again. The whole thing was confounding, and on top of his increasing bourbon intake, he was losing sleep trying to figure out how to help Julie get back on track.

Then, one morning, there she was, the proverbial prodigal daughter back at her desk sporting her faded St. Louis ball cap, badgering some poor soul on the phone to put her through to someone “with authority.”

“What do I mean by ‘authority’? I mean someone who can actually answer my questions, for the love of God.”

She pointed a finger in the air, signaling Bruce to give her a minute. He gladly did, eager to hear what she had to say, and why she was backing yet again – if she indeed was.

“They actually thought sending me to voicemail would work!” She slammed her phone on the desk.

He chuckled. “Clearly they don’t know who they’re dealing with, Miss Danner, whoever *they* are. Coffee?”

“Always.”

“Follow me,” he instructed, heading up the stairs to his second-floor sanctuary.

Julie closed the door as she came through and leaned against the office’s oversized glass window, the paper’s giant printing press humming behind her.

“Where you been this time, Miss Danner?” Bruce turned his back to her as he prepped his coffee maker for a full pot, trying to conceal his emotions. Watching her work a potential source on the phone had made him giddy – his prized journalist was ready to work again.

“I’m going to be straight with you, Bruce. No bullshit.”

“I’d appreciate that.” His tone followed Julie’s, serious and firm.

“I was pregnant. But I’m not anymore.”

Bruce opened his mouth, and then thought better of it.

“I suppose it was Mother Nature’s way of telling me I wasn’t ready for that part of life just yet.”

“How you feeling?”

“Much better. Ready to write.”

The coffee maker was only halfway done with its job, but Bruce yanked out the pot anyway and poured them each a cup. He knew better than to dwell on Julie’s misfortune – she hadn’t come up to his office to seek sympathy.

“Good,” he said as he handed her a full Styrofoam cup. “What’s the story?”

“Still working my angles – but I’m on to something.”

“Something you’re not gonna tell me about?”

“Sometimes, Bruce, the less you know, the better.” She was already on her way to the door as she said it.

“Hey, one more thing.” Bruce couldn’t help his own curiosity. “Whatever happened with Vicki Persall?”

Julie stopped and looked at the office’s linoleum floor, smudged and grimy from years of Bruce’s pacing.

“Nothing, Bruce. Nothing at all.”

Life slowly began to return to ghost-free normalcy. The story she was working on for *The Herald*, an exposé on fiscal corruption within the Alabama prison system, was moving along at a productive pace, with plenty of research and interviews lined up to keep her busy for days. She and Chuck fell into an easy pattern at home. Cereal together in the mornings, and beers when Julie arrived from work every night. Their Cardinals were leading a late-season title run, filling their evenings with hours of entertainment, just like when Julie was a kid. Even Jerry the MouseDog and Rocko the mutt seemed happier, two pack animals who finally had themselves a pack.

The only thing out of sync was her relationship with Allison. Her best friend simply wasn’t around. Sure, they had talked, and Allison had been happy to offer her distraction services after Julie’s miscarriage – “When you’re ready to get good and drunk, you know I’m here for you.” But in the last few weeks, Allison seemed distant. Julie knew how easily Allison could be distracted by a shiny object—a potential new guy, the promise of a big sale. And Julie also knew she had been about as much fun to be with lately as a wet rag. So when Allison finally called, Julie answered on the first ring.

"Hello, stranger."

"Where are you, Julie?" Allison demanded.

"Driving – why?" Julie had landed her first interview with an official prison warden. She was on her way to the Bibb Correctional Facility a few miles outside of town.

"I'm sorry, but I just found out. It's Madam Angeline..."

Julie's old Honda seemed to slow and turn around on its own as Allison told her what had happened. Instinct took over, her arms and legs disconnected from her brain, guiding the car back toward Birmingham on their own.

"Thanks for calling, Allison," she said as she hung up.

After that, everything was a blur, except for one thought: she had to get to Madam Angeline as soon as possible, because there might not be much time left.

## Chapter 24

There was a small group of people gathered in the hallway outside Madam Angeline's hospital room when Julie arrived. She only recognized one of them: the madam's driver, who she had encountered only the one time at her house on Grayson Lane. *The rest must be family. She has three grown kids, right?* The driver saw her as she approached, and he broke away from the others.

"Julie," he said quietly, sticking out his right hand. "I'm Rufus."

"I remember."

"How'd you hear?"

"From my friend – the one who put me in touch with her the first time. How is she?"

Rufus thought before he spoke. "Don't know. Doctors don't either. She's alive, but she's not. It's like her spirit got stolen from her, like somethin' snatched it out of her body, and all we can do is wait to see if she gets it back."

Julie began to whisper. "It was the darkness, wasn't it?"

With barely any movement, Rufus nodded. "We need to find a place to talk."

The hospital's third-floor lounge was empty, allowing Julie and Rufus the freedom to speak about Madam Angeline in peace. Julie got them each a vending-machine coffee and they sat. Rufus, a stocky man despite his lack of height, was struggling to hide his distress.

"Somethin' was bad wrong, Miss Julie. She told me all about it."

"Yeah, she mentioned it to me too. What happened?"

"Well, it all started after you came to see her that stormy afternoon. She called me to her house that day, right after you left, said she was worried 'bout you. Wanted me to

keep an eye on you. But I've known that woman all my life, and I could see she was worried 'bout herself too."

A rush of guilt ran through Julie, causing her stomach to clench. "I didn't mean to..."

Rufus cut her off. "No, no, Miss Julie. It wadn't your fault. You can't look at it that way."

"Ok, Rufus. Then tell me about the darkness...what did she say about it?"

He leaned forward in his chair, hunching his body over the steaming cup of coffee in front of him. He stared at it, his face diverted from her as he spoke.

"It kept growin', inside her. She said it wouldn't stop, wouldn't give her no relief. Every day, it spread even further. She was scared, Miss Julie – and the madam ain't one to be scared of nothin'."

"I can see that. She's a strong woman. She's going to be alright."

"I don't know, 'specially after the way I found her, all soakin' wet like she was."

"What? Soaking wet?"

Julie's question hung in the sterile hospital air like a raincloud, ready to unleash its liquid fury. She thought back to the water on her kitchen floor.

Rufus took a long drink from his coffee before he raised his eyes. "It was yesterday mornin'. I found her in bed..."

The shapeless black spirit had been gradually engulfing Madam Angeline's mind since the day she walked through Julie's house. It kept every other spirit away and slowly seeped into every part of Angeline's life. She would see the black spirit in both her waking hours and her dreams. And as much as she tried to push it away, or to summon her most familiar supernatural visitors forward, the darkness only grew bigger, consuming the entirety of Madam Angeline's connection to the other side.

Two months passed with no change. Madam Angeline focused on her prayer books and her mantras and her belief in the power of positive energy, but nothing slowed the darkness from its perpetual growth. Even so, the madam couldn't have predicted what would happen next, because she had never known just how powerful the other side really was.

She was asleep the night the black spirit attacked, resting peacefully for the first time in days. It was a sleep without dreams, so deep that even her subconscious couldn't disturb her. When she woke, she knew only that it was still dark outside. She heard the crickets still chirping and another sound: water pouring, like from a pitcher into a large metal basin, plinking and splattering as it filled. Next to her bed, her old white-faced clock showed a number that seemed familiar, but she had no idea why: 2:54.

Without warning, the madam's eyes were masked, as if a shroud had been lowered over them from above her head. Her nose was next, followed by her mouth. She struggled to move, but there was weight on top of her, her sheet and blanket growing tight around her body. It was the black spirit, come for her in a way that she thought it never could. And before the darkness had taken her away completely, she heard a voice, a decrepit croak of a whisper in her ear.

*"Watch, brother – let me show you how much I love you..."*

"I thought she was dead, Miss Julie, sure as the world is round. She was in her bed, soaked from head to toe, the sheets and mattress too, and I coulda sworn she wadn't breathin'. I leaned over her, careful as I could, and saw her chest come up and then back down, jus' barely. That's when I called the ambulance."

Julie could see how painful it was for Rufus to relive the experience, but she sensed a cathartic side to his telling too – after all, she was the only other one who knew about the black spirit like him.

"I'm so sorry, Rufus." She took his hand. "That sounds awful."

"They say she's in some kind of coma. Everything's fine – her heart and lungs and kidneys – all workin' like they should. They can't explain what's goin' on, but I know. And you do too."

"I need to see her – if that darkness is here because of me, I need to help. If I can."

He nodded at her, wiping his eyes. "You should meet her family first."

Rufus led Julie to the four people who were still standing stoically in a circle outside the madam's room. He cleared his throat to get their attention.

"Ever'body, I'd like you to meet someone – one of your mama's closest friends. This here is Julie."

That was a strange thing to say – you two weren't that close.

Rufus went around the circle, introducing the madam's daughter and two sons. The fourth in the group was the daughter's husband, who Julie found out was the only in-law in the family. They were gracious and thankful and painfully sad. When Julie asked if she might see their mother, they obliged without hesitation.

Julie entered the hospital room carefully. She was immediately reminded of the day after her father's shooting so many years before, her timid walk into his room, his body so still, her whole world turned upside-down. The madam didn't look as helpless as her father had – she didn't have the tubes coming from her mouth and nose, taped to her face, or the swollen body from post-operative trauma. Instead, she looked completely at peace, like she was sleeping late on a Sunday morning. Julie could even see a slight smile on her face. Or maybe that was just the shape of Madam Angeline's mouth – the soft edges turned up at the corners, instantly putting people at ease, gifted at birth like her ability to communicate with the other side.

Julie sat in a green vinyl chair at the madam's bedside. She took Madam Angeline's hand and held it. The hand was cold, its veins raised and thick under the skin, giving Julie little hope or comfort.

As the minutes ticked by, an emptiness spread over her. It settled across her insides like a dead weight. She felt sick, but this was a sickness she'd never experienced before. *This can't be good, Jules.* Her thoughts thickened and slowed. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, hoping to clear it, but the feeling of dread and despair continued to coarsen more powerfully through her. Her last coherent thought was that this darkness, this black and evil spirit, was trying to kill her.

An alarm from one of the madam's monitors screamed out – a high-pitched warning that pierced Julie's fog. She jumped up, dropping Madam Angeline's hand just as two nurses rushed into the room. A doctor ran in after them. Frozen, Julie watched in shock as they went to work despite the deafening alarm. *Save her. Please save her.*

"She's crashing," one of the nurses said with urgency, pushing Julie aside.

The instant that Madam Angeline's hand left Julie's grasp, the emptiness and despair left her too. She knew what the madam was battling, but she had no idea how to help her. She only hoped that the doctor, who had two electronic paddles in his hand, preparing them for Madam Angeline's newly-bare chest, could help her hang on long enough for Julie to figure it out.

"Clear!" he yelled before sending a shock of electric current into the madam's torso. For a moment, the room stood still, until the deafening alarm went silent, and the quieter monitors resumed their rhythmic beeps. With his patient's heart beating again, the doctor looked at Julie intently. "What happened in here?"

Julie couldn't speak, the muscles of her throat paralyzed.

"Ma'am?" the doctor pressed. "What happened?"

"I-I don't know," Julie stammered, the words coming out slow. "One minute she was fine, the next she wasn't."

The doctor stared her down, not pleased with her answer. He turned to the family, who had come into the room without Julie noticing. "I wish I could tell you this won't

happen again, but I just don't know. That's why we're keeping such a close eye on her. She's stable – for now."

Rufus slid over to Julie as the madam's sons began to ask questions. "I think you best be leavin' now."

Her body refused to move.

Tugging slightly at her arm, Rufus insisted. "For your own good, girl, you need to go."

"Yeah," she said, finding her legs. "Yeah, I think I do."

She snuck out of the room, avoiding eye contact with the nurses and the madam's family, and ran down the hall, slamming into the stairwell door and down the stairs. Outside in the cool air, she felt no relief – and she knew that ignoring GranBelle Jenny's signs was no longer an option.

*There's no running from it, Jules. The darkness is here for you, and you're going to have to face it head-on.*

## Chapter 25

The flicker of light and dark startled Chuck Danner. He spun his wheelchair around and saw Julie resting against the doorway. Her cheeks were flushed a bright pink.

“What’s wrong, Julie-bean?”

She sat down in the center of the room, crossing her legs Indian-style and leaning back on her hands. “You still investigating those cases? The girls who drowned?”

Chuck’s heart jumped – his daughter’s interest in their joint investigation had returned. “Matter of fact, I am. I’m chasing the rabbit, but every time I get close, I realize how much further I’ve got to go. This guy was smart, eerie smart – putting the girls in water left virtually no physical evidence. And I haven’t gotten anywhere on the red ring he gave each of his victims.”

Julie raised a hand to cut him off. “I may know who did it, Dad.”

“The hell you say.”

“Is there anything in the police files about Natalie Nix’s brother?”

Chuck considered the question before answering. “Yeah, he lived in Birmingham at the time, but he had a strong alibi. Why?”

“Because I met with him a while back, and something about the guy didn’t sit right with me. At first, I thought he was just damaged by the loss of his sister and his mother soon after, but now I think there’s more to him than that. And Madam Angeline, the medium I met, she gave me a name. But at the time, I didn’t put it together with the brother because it wasn’t an exact match.”

“A name?”

“Yeah. She said Theo, but the brother’s name is Leo. Too close to ignore, right?”

“Maybe, but it’s pretty thin.”

"It all adds up, Dad. She saw the words 'Theo' and 'brother' – Natalie had an older brother and his name is Leo. He was living just a few blocks from her apartment, right?"

"No forced entry," Chuck thought out loud. He raised an eyebrow. "What about Pam?"

"Haven't gotten that far yet."

"That's ok – it might be worth pursuing. Hell, it's the only lead we got. How much you know about this guy?"

"Nothing, really. No employment records, no social media. His footprint is dust. All I have is an address."

Chuck turned back to his computer. "Give it to me."

As Julie read from the stored contacts on her phone, Chuck typed.

"Leonard Andrew Nix," he read aloud from a search result. "He's owned that house over thirty years."

"How the hell did you find that so quick?"

"This old dog can still hunt."

"You should see his place, Dad. It makes no sense. Falling apart on the outside, a picture of perfection on the inside. It's like the outer appearance is intentional."

"Kinda like his own little hideout, huh?" Chuck typed a few more entries. "You're right – there's nothing else on him. We got ourselves a ghost." He hesitated, thinking. "Wait a minute – is there a connection with this guy and that woman who died in your house?" He turned in his chair and eyed her with the old cop glare he could still pull out at a moment's notice.

"I think it has *everything* to do with her. GranBelle Jenny led me to Natalie and Pam, and Madam Angeline."

"Ok. So we have a potential suspect and we have that..." He pointed to Natalie Nix's ring finger in the crime scene photo. "Why the ligature marks, on their fingers?"

Julie thought about the red rings, squeezed so deep into the skin around the dead girls' fingers. "That's the answer...isn't it?"

Her dad smiled. "It's his signature, Julie-bean. We figure out why he marks them with a red wedding ring, and we'll know if Leo's our man for sure."

"Well, let's get to it."

"Not so fast."

Julie looked at him quizzically.

"Go grab us a couple beers – huntin' down a killer makes for damn thirsty work."

The statement took Julie back to her first meeting with Madam Angeline, when the medium had explored her house on Grayson Lane. "Dead people can be so dehydrating," the madam had said that day.

*Don't you dare die, Madam Angeline – just hold on until we figure this out.*

Julie's eyes followed the red yarn's path along the map hanging on the wall. If Leo Nix was the mysterious serial killer her dad had been tracking, he had been winding around the United States like a snake on a patient and meticulous hunt. From Alabama, he had gone to Florida, where two young women had been killed in separate instances, three years apart. After that was West Virginia, where three victims met their fate over a span of five years. Next came Michigan, her dad's most recent discovery – only one killing there. From there, the red yarn made its longest stretch, from a white thumbtack just outside Detroit all the way to Oregon. There had been two unsolved cases in that state, one on either side. Arizona, Colorado, and Texas completed the killer's home stretch, with his last murder only eighteen months old.

"He's making his way back here, to Alabama," Julie announced after studying the map. "I think that's what GranBelle Jenny has been trying to tell me."

Her dad let the words sink in. "Let's say it is this Leo Nix fella – why's he doing the traveling salesman thing? Does he run back home every time he kills another girl, satisfied 'til he gets the taste for another one?"

Julie kept her eyes focused on the map while her mind went back to her meeting with Leo and the paint-splattered sweatpants he was wearing. "I don't think so. You said he's owned that house for thirty years. But that doesn't mean he's been *living* there this whole time. Maybe he just got back."

"Maybe," Chuck said quietly. "It's a decent theory, but without something concrete, we couldn't even get a search warrant. We need more, Julie-bean. Otherwise, it's just a theory."

Julie looked down at a photo from one of the many crime scenes. The young woman in the picture, her mouth agape and her eyes open, her naked body unnaturally white, lay in a tangle of branches and limbs from a fallen tree, just as dead and lifeless as she was. Julie wondered how difficult finding the break they needed would be, like searching for a piece of red thread in a tangled mess of brush and mud and broken tree limbs.

"How many times have you been through this stuff?" she asked.

"Too many to count," he answered, rubbing his eyes.

"Let me go through it – each case, one by one. You take a break. Go watch some baseball. I need to get up to speed, and I might see something you missed."

Chuck didn't resist. "Alright. I've got another partner, by the way. Man named Hugh Rainey. Sheriff in Michigan. We'll give him a call tomorrow, let the two of you meet." He rolled himself toward the den.

"Sounds good, Dad," Julie said, distracted. She was already combing through Chuck's files, her intuition guiding her, as it always did.

Julie worked most of the night, carrying some of the files with her upstairs when her back started to ache from sitting on the floor in her dad's bedroom office. When she woke the next morning, she found herself surrounded by police reports and crime scene photos. *You sure know how to set yourself up for nightmares, Jules.* The thought was fleeting – dreams had never scared her until she'd moved back home. But the black spirit haunting Madam Angeline sure did, and that's why there was no time to waste on figuring out Leo Nix.

As she put her feet on the carpeted floor of her bedroom, she heard her dad's voice, bellowing up the stairs and reverberating around the hallway.

"Julie-bean! Up and at 'em! We got work to do!"

"Be down in a minute!"

She stretched her back until she felt a satisfying pop. Still in her jeans and t-shirt from the day before, she threw on a ball cap and hurried downstairs, Jerry the MouseDog bouncing behind her. There was a mug of steaming coffee waiting on the kitchen counter.

"Get in here!" Chuck shouted from his bedroom. "I gotta show you something."

She grabbed the coffee and followed her dad's instructions.

"How far'd you get last night?" he asked as she came through the door.

Julie thought for a moment. "Michigan – I was working through Michigan."

"Good! I'm waiting on a call from my Yankee buddy Hugh right now. He'll fill you in on everything about their case. Including this..."

Chuck wheeled himself backward, away from his desk. With his head out of the way, Julie could see what was displayed on his computer monitor: a handwritten report in scribbly cursive that was nearly illegible. Julie moved closer to the screen, squinting her eyes to make out the messy words.

"It's a witness statement," her dad told her. "From the night the killer dumped his victim's body at the river up there. Just got it by email. Supposed to be a sketch attached to the damn thing, but it isn't there. This witness actually saw him, up close."

Julie skimmed over the statement. "...middle of the night..." – "...dragging something..." – "...right to the edge of the river..." A cold chill, almost like the cold *feeling* from the house on Grayson Lane, ran up her arms, goosebumping her skin. A sketch would confirm Leo Nix's identity, leaving no doubt to her theory.

Her dad's cell phone, with its police siren ringtone, screamed out. Julie jumped, nearly dropping her mug of coffee.

Chuck smirked at her and touched the cell phone's screen. "Hugh!" he shouted, holding the singular long vowel sound of the sheriff's name an extra beat. "How you been, my friend?"

Looking back to the computer screen, Julie tried to finish the witness's account, all the while listening to her dad's side of the phone conversation.

"Lost it?" Chuck said, unable to hide the disgust in his voice. "I know, I know, shit happens. You keep looking, you hear me? I wanna see that damn sketch."

After that, another long pause. Julie felt him nudging her arm with his fist.

"Here, Julie-bean. You and Hugh get to know each other."

She took the phone from her dad. "Hello?"

"Hey there, Julie. Hugh Rainey here. I've heard a lot about ya. Nice to finally meet and put a voice on ya. Me and your dad have struck up quite the partnership. Helluva guy, that Chuck."

There was a staccato cadence to the way Hugh spoke, his words and syllables quick and punchy. Nothing like her dad's slow southern drag of words and sentences. Hugh was a northerner no doubt, but Julie could already tell that he and Chuck were tight.

"I just hate to think about how his career got cut short like it did," Hugh continued. "He coulda put away a lotta bad guys."

"I know what you mean." Julie looked at her dad in his wheelchair and smiled.

"Maybe we can help him get one more before he's done."

"Sounds good to me. So you read the statement?"

"Yeah, we did. You actually had a witness?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Julie. Chuck says you're a little behind, so I'll start from the beginning." The northern sheriff cleared his throat. "Call comes in about a body on the bank of the Detroit River. It was early spring, March twenty-ninth, nineteen-ninety-eight to be exact. Now keep in mind, Michigan in March is still colder than a penguin's pecker. Everything but the river itself was frozen. You might think that would make working a crime scene easier, but it's just the opposite..."

Julie could see why her dad and Hugh had talked so much over the past two weeks, because when it came to police work, they both loved to talk. She took her coffee to the den and settled in on the couch – she could tell Hugh wasn't a short-and-sweet kind of guy.

Especially when it came to the case of The Riverbank Drowner.

## Chapter 26

The young woman who had been found murdered on the bank of the Detroit River was Hugh Rainey's goddaughter, which made the crime the most personal of his career. He had uncovered everything he could about the man who had done it. "I dedicated myself to this case. Worked it 24/7 for months. But other than the witness and the sketch, we had next to nothing to go on."

The sketch had led the sheriff to the suspect's landlord, who had called a hotline when he'd seen the man's face on the news. The suspect's name was Ted Dorning – they ran a check and found nothing. It was a completely bogus ID. He had been renting a furnished apartment in the city for ten months. From what Hugh could find, Dorning had no job, no registered vehicle, no driver's license.

"We dusted the apartment top-to-bottom for fingerprints, but somehow, even that came up empty – the man didn't leave a single print behind. It's like he wore gloves when he was home. Or he was a phantom. The only things left were the clothes in his closet."

"But you knew what he looked like?" Julie said to Hugh as he finished his story. "That's something. Did you send his sketch to the FBI?"

The sheriff cackled, his laugh like his talk, rapid and sharp. "Julie, your dad is the first one to put all these murders together. Did you know that? If you think the FBI woulda given a damn about my little murder, just outside crime capital Detroit, you've popped your damn cork."

Hugh was right. With her dad being the first to put it all together, it was no wonder these cases, separated by time and geography, had gone cold.

"Well, I think that's the whole kit and kaboodle, Julie. I've been thinking about this case a lot lately. Now you know what I know. Any questions?"

*Lots of questions, Hugh – but none that you can answer.*

“Nothing specific right now, Sheriff Rainey. Let me stew on it a bit.”

“When you do, I’m a phone call away. Day or night, rain or shine. I’d like nothing better in life than to see this sonofabitch caught. And tell your dad I’ll keep poking around for that sketch. Damn thing’s got to be around here somewhere.”

“Hang on a second, Sheriff.”

“What is it?”

An idea was brewing in her head, something risky, but a move that might accomplish more than one goal. “What if I got a picture to you, of the man who maybe did it? Would you still recognize him?”

“It’s been twenty years, Julie...”

“I know, I know.”

“Hold the phone there, let me finish. It’s been twenty years, but that sketch is seared in my memory bank. I memorized every feature, every curve, of that man’s face. You get me a picture, and I’ll tell ya if it’s a match.”

“That’s what I needed to know, Sheriff. I’ll be in touch.”

Julie took the phone from her ear and considered her options. She could spend days studying the cases like her dad, hoping for a clue that might not be there. Or she could go back to Leo Nix’s house and nose around some more, maybe even snap a photo of him.

Julie was torn. She needed to follow her gut, but she knew Chuck would stop her. If there was even a small possibility Nix was their man, there was no way Chuck would let her confront him, especially on her own. *But you know that’s the only way he’ll talk, Jules – if you’re all by yourself. And he may not even talk then.* In the end, she left her dad in the dark, going back to Leo’s alone.

Taking the same route as before, Julie guided her old Honda through the outskirts of Birmingham until she reached the worn-down neighborhood where Leo Nix had supposedly been living for the past thirty years. Her reporter instincts were kicking in. She smelled a story. She may not have connected all the dots, or figured out Nix's motive, or even linked Leo to GranBelle Jenny, but her dependable sixth sense was telling her Nix had a secret – and Julie was determined to find out what it was.

*Leo, the brother – the name is too close not to be right.*

The house was the same. Overgrown bushes blocked the view from the street. The front door was still faded and in need of fresh paint. All around her, the neighborhood was eerily quiet, just like the time before.

In an effort to inspire some much-needed self-confidence, Julie flexed her biceps as she walked toward the house. On the way there, she formulated a plan. She knew exactly what she needed to ask him, and how she would lead the conversation. All she had to do now was pull it off.

A crack ran along the front concrete steps Julie hadn't noticed on her first visit. It traced a deep, dark jagged line from the bottom step to the bricks underneath the door, severing the mortar between two of the ruddy rectangles, like a black finger pointing up and into the house. Julie squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out any thought of the black spirit she had sensed inside Madam Angeline. She couldn't focus on Nix if she was pulled back into the emptiness and evil she'd felt at the madam's bedside. She opened her eyes and rang the doorbell.

No answer. She rang the bell again, and again. There was no sound coming from inside the house. *Maybe he's gone on another killing spree, Jules. Maybe you're too late.*

She put her hand on the doorknob, a grimy brass fixture that had lost all its shine. *And what are you going to do if it's unlocked?* She twisted it and pushed on the door. There was no resistance. *Well ok, here we go.* It swung open, the knob slipping from Julie's hand. A smell poured out from inside, so awful that it knocked her backward, down the

concrete steps, filling the air around her. It was a death stink, but not like GranBelle Jenny's. Not like wet rot, the way the dead girls in the rivers had been found. This was a different kind of death. The decay was there, but it was dry and musty, as if the rotting had started weeks before.

Her senses recovered, Julie climbed the steps and peered into the doorway. Everything inside looked the same. Tidy and pristine, just as she remembered it. The couch against the wall, the chair she had sat in – and the glass she had drunk her iced tea from, on the table where she had left it, half full of a light brown liquid. *What the hell is that still doing there? It's been weeks since you were here.* Her eyes traveled to the table beside the couch, where next to Leo's oversized porcelain ashtray sat his own glass of tea, nearly empty.

*Something's wrong here, Jules. Something's very wrong.*

She reached into her back pocket for her phone, ready to call the police, to let them handle whatever lay inside Leo's house. As she looked down, she noticed a white envelope, on the floor just inside the doorway, a word written across it in perfect cursive, facing her. Her heartbeat quickened.

She crouched toward the envelope, the smell of human decay so powerful that she had to cover her mouth and nose with her arm. As she got closer, she could see the word was her name: *Julie*. Without a second thought, she picked it up.

Backing away from the door, she carried the envelope in her fingertips with caution. Inside her car, with the A/C on full blast and her windows shut tight, she slid her finger under the sealed flap and pulled a single sheet of white paper from inside, the same intricate cursive written across it. The script reminded Julie of a century-old love note, an elegance to the connected letters that modern-day society had forgotten.

*Julie*

*I knew you'd come back. It was only a matter of time before your curiosity brought you around again. I wanted to thank you for showing me that, try as I have, the past will never stay in the past. Everything I've done to cleanse myself of the guilt and shame of my sister's death has been a waste. I've tried to scrub the past clean, but there are some things that can never be erased, no matter how hard we try. I could have stop what happened, but I didn't. That is a guilt I've lived with all these years.*

*Your visit gave me the push I've needed. It set me free. The guilt is now yours to bear.*

*Leo*

Julie read the note three times. Is this Nix's confession? If so, where is he? And who could be dead inside his house? Her head spun.

We're all mad here...we're all mad here...

Following her first instinct, she grabbed her phone to call the police. But first, she stuck Leo's note inside her glove box.

The detective who questioned her at the scene didn't give a damn that her dad was a former cop. Julie had seen the type, and she couldn't fault him too much. The circumstances of her discovery were strange, suspicious even.

"So you're telling me you just go opening people's doors when they don't answer?"

"No, it wasn't like that. I know the guy who lives here...in a way."

"Oh yeah? How do you know him?"

"I'm working on a story, and he's a source."

She glanced over the detective's shoulder, where the crime scene unit was coming and going through Leo Nix's front door, wearing hazmat suits. Julie's skin prickled. What were they going to find in there? Or better yet, *who* were they going to find?

“He’s a source, huh? What’s the story you’re working on?”

Julie spoke carefully. “He had a sister who died, back in the eighties.”

“Doesn’t sound too interesting to me.”

“Well, actually, she was murdered...”

At this, the detective tilted his head and squinted his eyes. She had gotten his attention. “Murdered, huh? By who?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Ok, let me get this straight. You’re out here, in this neighborhood, trying to solve a thirty-year-old cold case, vigilante-style.” He looked her up and down. “Girl like you could get yourself in trouble real quick.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you.”

“Miss Danner, you want to tell me what we’re about to find in that house?”

Julie stared down the condescending cop, focusing her ice-blue eyes on his from underneath her Cardinals cap. “I didn’t go inside, if that’s you’re implying. And for the record...”

One of the crime scene officers yelled from Leo’s open front door, cutting her off.

“Hey! We got a body!”

The detective pointed a finger in her face. “You stay right here, Miss Danner. Understand?”

She nodded rapidly, her heart racing. *Who did you kill this time, Leo?*

The detective stayed inside for fifteen minutes while Julie paced Leo’s front lawn. When he came back out, his demeanor had changed.

“Miss Danner, I’ve got some bad news.”

“What is it?” she pleaded.

“It’s Mr. Nix. I’m afraid he’s dead.”

“Mr. Nix? Leo? He’s the one inside?”

“Yes, ma’am. Appears to be a suicide. I’m sorry.”

Julie should have felt relieved, but she didn't. The announcement, while better than the alternative, was confounding. *So the note was a suicide note...and he wrote it to you, Jules.*

"Listen, I know this is tough, but we've got you here, and you knew who he was."

"You want me to identify him?"

"Unless you know of a relative close by. Looks to me like he didn't have much contact with the outside world."

*Nope, detective. No relatives. None still alive, that is.*

"Sure, I can identify him for you." She needed to satisfy her curiosity anyway, in case Leo had set up an elaborate death hoax.

"Thanks – they'll be bringing him out shortly."

Julie waited in her Honda, her eyes closed and the music turned up loud. When the detective knocked on her window, she jumped.

"We're ready for you, Miss Danner!" he shouted through the glass.

At the bottom of the cracked concrete stoop stood two men and one woman, all in dark gray suits, their arms crossed. In front of them, stretched longways on a metal gurney, sat a black body bag.

"Now, listen, Miss Danner," the detective told her as they walked toward the house. "He's been in there a while. He hung himself, in the basement, and unfortunately, animals got to him. It's not a pretty sight – I just want to warn you."

"This isn't my first dead body, detective."

"Mine either, by a longshot, but this guy made even me retch when I saw him. Hopefully you can tell if it's him or not."

The body bag was zipped up tight. A man who the detective introduced as the coroner leaned over and whispered to him before he unzipped it.

"She'll be alright," the detective said. "Won't you, Miss Danner?"

"Yes." *You need to see this, Jules – steady yourself.*

The coroner leaned over the black bag, unzipping it swiftly. A near-visible odor came from the opening, the same deathly stink Julie had smelled when she opened the front door. As the coroner pulled the bag apart so she could see the body, Julie's stomach began to roll.

Leo was a hideous sight. What was left of the skin on his face was a bloaty orange, stretched to its limits with sickening elasticity, while his neck was drawn thin and tight, freakishly long because of the time his body had spent hanging from a noose. The paint-splattered shirt and sweatpants he had been wearing the day of their only meeting were torn to shreds but recognizable. His eye sockets were empty, his mouth agape, the edges of each facial hole ripped and nibbled at. The rats and other basement-dwellers had gotten to him, just like the detective had described, climbing up his decaying body to feast.

Julie turned away from the bag and gagged, garnering a snicker from the detective. She somehow kept the contents of her stomach in place.

"I warned you," he said. "What do you think – is it him?"

"Yeah." Julie stood up straight, her senses regained. "That's Leo Nix, alright."

She hadn't stopped The Riverbank Drowner – he had stopped himself.

## Chapter 27

On the drive from Leo Nix's house back to Hopes Ridge, Julie tried to clear her head and wipe her mind of the sickening images of his half-eaten corpse. Death had a distinctive smell – dry and decayed for Leo, wet and rotten for GranBelle Jenny. Was Leo now trying to tell her something, just like GranBelle Jenny? The ghost of Grayson Lane had always been sure to let Julie know when she was on to something that was connected to her murder. But now, just when Julie was sure she knew who the serial killer was and who had murdered GranBelle Jenny, her ghost was silent. *Maybe she's not hiding, Jules. Maybe she hasn't shown up for a reason. Maybe Madam Angeline has the answers.*

She dialed Rufus as she drove. He answered immediately.

"How is she?" Julie asked, hopeful that since she'd discovered the killer, the darkness had lifted from the madam.

"The same. Ain't no better at all."

"I'll come see her again...soon."

There was a pause before Rufus spoke. "Don't come 'round here no more, Julie. The family don't want you here. None of us do."

"Rufus, you've got to understand. That wasn't me. I didn't do anything."

"Not on purpose, you didn't. But it's all because of you."

As the last word left his mouth, she heard the phone click, and Rufus was gone.

Chuck was furious. First off, Julie had gone to see Leo Nix, who was quite possibly a serial killer, on her own, by herself, with no protection. But then, she'd taken evidence from a crime scene. Like her, he read Leo's suicide note three times. Since it had been addressed to her and potentially held some answers for the murders they were

investigating – murders no one else had managed to solve – he was willing to let it slide. He couldn't believe how reckless she'd been, but he could tell she was still shaken by what she'd discovered. He took it easy on her.

"I've seen my fair share of dead bodies, Julie-bean. It ain't no picnic, especially when they've been lingering a while."

"It's not just that, Dad. It's what he said in his suicide note – that he addressed to me!"

"I think that tells you everything you wanted to know. You found him out, and he knew it. His conscience, or maybe his fear of getting caught, finally got to him. A lot of these assholes would rather go out that way than go to prison, believe me."

Julie considered what he was saying. "There's just something about it that's not right. I can't put my finger on it."

"One of the first things they teach you as a cop, Julie-bean, is this: you can't get too caught up in why things happen. The reason being, some things in this world just don't make sense. They never have, they never will. This Leo character – who knows why he did what he did? Maybe even he didn't know why. Take your wins where you can get 'em."

"I hear you, Dad. But I thought if I could solve this, Madam Angeline would be out of danger. And I still don't know the link between Leo and GranBelle Jenny."

Chuck sighed. "Even solved cases can have loose ends. Goes with the territory. I'll keep prodding Hugh for that witness sketch and see if we can get a match between Nix and his eyewitness. Good enough?"

"I suppose."

But Chuck didn't believe her. He could see a familiar gleam in her eye, a look of curious intent – she wasn't going to let the case go until she had it all tied together. He knew that look, because he'd seen it in the mirror more times than he could count.

Julie spent the next two days hunched over her desk at *The Herald*. She had decided what she would do – tell the story of Pam Russett and Natalie Nix anyway, even though Leo had already written the last chapter. *And who knows? Maybe someone with information on GranBelle Jenny will come forward now that Nix is gone.*

She wrote a sharp and provocative story about the two women, whose lives had been cut short decades ago, leaving behind a grieving family on one side, and a mysterious brother who recently may have confessed to their murders before hanging himself. When she presented the article to Bruce, he was hesitant, but not for long. The idea behind the story was good, if not a tad salacious, and he knew it would sell papers, something he desperately needed.

“Does this have anything to do with that ghost of yours?” he asked when she dropped the draft on his desk.

“What if it does?”

“What did you want with Vicki Persall anyway?”

Julie didn’t answer, instead staring him down.

“Alright, if this gets you the hell away from that ghost, I’ll print it. I feel like you’ve forgotten all about that boy in D.C., the one who ‘walked the walls.’ There are some things out there, Julie, that are best left alone.”

“I’ll be fine, Bruce.” She hardened her stance, speaking firmly. “Now back to the story. You know it’ll sell some papers, lots and lots of papers.”

Bruce’s face softened. “I could use the sales.”

He looked down at her draft and read the headline out loud. “*Unraveling a Murder Mystery: Why Does the Drowning of Two Birmingham Women Remain Unsolved Decades Later?*” He raised his discerning eyes to her. “This better be fucking Pulitzer-worthy stuff, got it?”

As she left him alone with her story, she said over her shoulder, “Come on, Bruce – do I ever disappoint?”

Bruce published the cold-case article on the second Sunday in September. Julie's story touched on her theory about Leo, but she was careful to say that police were still investigating. She described the crime scene of the murders in detail, and gave her dad credit for discovering that the girls had been placed there *after* they had died, and for his finding the link to the other murders. She included interviews with the retired Birmingham detectives who had worked the case, who still believed that a tip from inside the D.A.'s office had led to the killer's escape, even though they had no evidence. In her last paragraph, she made a plea to the public, to anyone who might remember something, no matter how insignificant it may seem, to come forward. Her dad's number was the one she listed as the information hotline.

*The Birmingham News* picked up Julie's story and ran it the next weekend, followed by *The Washington Post* – Bruce had forwarded it to one of his old buddies at the capital city paper. After that, it fanned out across the AP wire and went viral.

Julie's name was famous yet again, just like her brief moment of recognition back in high school. But she didn't care about the fame. All she wanted was more answers. She wanted to know why – why Natalie and Pam and GranBelle Jenny had died. And *if* Leo was the murderer, why was the black spirit still torturing Madam Angeline?

In the days after her story exploded, Julie had hoped her hotline would do the same. But there was no outpouring of public help, no new witnesses like the one in Michigan, nobody who had seen Leo Nix doing anything suspicious over the past thirty or so years. Chuck's phone remained disappointingly quiet.

Up north, Sheriff Hugh Rainey kept searching for his missing police sketch, but was starting to give up hope he would ever find it. Whether Leo Nix of Alabama and Ted Dorning of Michigan were the same man remained a mystery. Both men were still

phantoms, at least in Julie's mind. She needed something to break soon or she needed to move on.

*If only someone would call. Anyone.*

Eventually a phone call did come, but it wasn't a call to the makeshift tip-line that promised a distraction from ghosts and murders and potential suspects. It was a call from her best friend Allison, who had remained off the grid for a long while. She had a proposal.

"So, hey," Allison ventured, catching Julie off guard, "what would you and your dad think about renting the house on Grayson Lane?"

## Chapter 28

Julie and Allison agreed to meet for drinks that night at The Blue Camel, Allison's go-to happy hour spot.

"Fancy seeing you here," Allison said as they ran into each other at the bar's entrance.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Julie joked.

"Very fucking funny. I know I've been a shitty friend lately, ok? I'm sorry."

"You're lucky I'm in a forgiving mood. But you've got to tell me where you've been – and with who."

A smile crept across Allison's face. "What can I say? I'm in love!"

Julie took a step back. "I think we need to find a table, quick."

"And a couple of drinks," Allison said eagerly. She looked as if she might burst from excitement.

"How many?" the hostess asked.

"Two." Allison held up her fingers in a V. "Patio, please."

The hostess led them to a table on the outdoor sidewalk. The sun was not yet setting, and the lingering summer heat was still thick even though fall was closing in fast.

"Maybe we should drink champagne," Allison wondered as their waiter approached.

"Wait, are you getting married?"

"Not yet," she said coyly.

"Alright, fill me in. Who is this mystery man who has so obviously swept you off your feet?"

"Well, where do I start?"

"How about a name?"

“Todd.” She said it like it was unique, like he was the only man who had ever had the name in the history of the world.

“And how did you meet *Todd*?”

“He’s into real estate, just like me. Well, more like neighborhood development. He buys up old houses, renovates them, resells them. Has investments all over the country – and apparently, he does *very, very* well.”

“So he’s a flipper,” Julie said. “And I suppose you sold him a house or two?”

“Not exactly. He’s in between projects right now. He’s looking for a new area to invest in. That’s what brought him here. We met at a showing. He says of all the places he’s been considering, Hopes Ridge is the perfect place to do what he does, and he wants to start in your neighborhood. Well, your old neighborhood, I should say.”

“That’s why he wants to rent the house on Grayson Lane.”

“It can be his home-slash-headquarters.” Allison smiled again.

“How well do you know this guy, Allison? Like where he’s from? Who’s his family?”

Allison groaned, “Aren’t we a little old for the ‘Who’s your daddy, who are your people’ questions? Trust me, Julie, I’ve gotten to know him *very* well.”

“I’m sure you have, but what do you *really* know about him, other than his, um, pant size.”

“Fuck you. And touché. I know I don’t have a track record for getting to know the men I date, but this is different, Julie. He’s a great guy. Smart, considerate, wealthy, and yes, handsome. I can’t wait for you to meet him. And wouldn’t it be nice for your dad to have some extra income from the house?”

“Yes, the money would be great. But...that house, Allison...it’s got issues.”

“I know. I told Todd about it and he isn’t at all worried. I promise.”

Julie rolled her eyes. “That’s because he hasn’t smelled what I’ve smelled.”

“Come on, Julie. It’s a win for all of us.”

“Let me talk to Dad about it. No promises. And what do you mean a win for all of us?”

“No more driving to and from Birmingham every night. My man will practically be right around the corner.”

*Typical Allison. A win for everybody indeed.*

Chuck Danner liked the idea immediately. The extra money would help, but there was another more intriguing benefit too, at least in his eyes. It would get Julie’s mind off the house on Grayson Lane, and that damn ghost. While he didn’t blame GranBelle Jenny directly for Julie’s miscarriage, he still believed that the house and everything that came with it had been too much for her, and the stress had cost him a grandchild and a chance to make things right. When she’d moved in with him, he wanted to sell the place and be done with it, but Julie had begged him to wait. A renter was a perfect temporary solution.

Allison didn’t waste any time setting up a meeting with her new beau once she learned Chuck was interested.

“This fella alright?” he asked.

Allison assured Chuck he was more than alright, personally vouching for Todd. They agreed to meet the next day for a walk-through.

“I’m killing two birds with one stone, Julie-bean,” Chuck told her when he got off the phone. “After what you said, I wanna make sure this guy isn’t too good to be true or some crazy kook that Allison’s got herself mixed up with. You come too – you’ve always had good radar for assholes.”

Chuck wanted to get to the house before Allison and Todd arrived. He hadn’t been there in months and wanted to make sure he could justify the steep rent he wanted to charge. It was neat and tidy, just the way Julie had left it. He wheeled himself into each

room, turning on all the lights, reaching up to brush away imaginary dust from the counter in the kitchen.

“Looks good to me,” Chuck declared from the kitchen when he was done. “Wonder if he’ll need the furniture.”

Julie came to the kitchen’s doorway and turned her head to the ceiling in the center of the room. She didn’t say a thing.

“Everything alright, Julie-bean?”

“Yeah,” she said thoughtfully, without taking her eyes from an invisible spot just above his head. “Everything’s fine. Your call on the furniture, Dad. It’s mostly your old stuff anyway.”

If it worked out, this would be a good decision, Chuck thought. The house still had an effect on Julie – he could see it. She would hardly step foot in the kitchen, and she kept staring at the ceiling like she expected something to swoop down and grab them. A wave of relief hit him when the doorbell rang, announcing his prospective tenant’s arrival.

“Hey, Chuck!” Allison shouted as he opened the door.

Julie watched from across the room as her best friend glided into the house with her signature smile in place. Behind her stood her new boyfriend. But the prefix “boy” didn’t match his image. The man who followed Allison into the house was much older than Julie had imagined. And yet, he had maintained the handsome exterior of a younger, fitter man. “Hello, Mr. Danner,” he said to her dad, extending his hand. “I can’t thank you enough for considering this. It would be ideal for my business.”

Julie eased into the den, closer so she could see him better.

“And this is my best friend in the whole world.” Allison swept her arm toward Julie and added in a staged whisper, “Julie, this is him!”

He stepped toward her and reached out his hand, a subtle smile on his lips. "The famous best friend Julie. Allison's already told me so much. I look forward to getting to know you better." He wore his age like his expensive clothes, stylish and proud. His thick brown hair was neatly trimmed, his strong-set jaw clean-shaven.

"That's funny," Julie replied, gripping his hand tightly. "She hasn't mentioned you but once."

Allison shot her a "*Play nice, Julie!*" warning look.

"Well, I have to admit, I'm not surprised. I have been distracting her for some time now."

Most men would have turned to their girlfriend as they said something like that, a sideways glance of affection, but Todd didn't move an inch, the barely-there smile held firmly in place, his eyes locked on Julie's. And there was something about those eyes. A familiar reflection maybe, just for a moment. She waited for her sixth sense to rise up and give her some guidance, but it didn't.

Julie returned his slight smile. "It's nice to meet you too, Todd..." She let the greeting hang, realizing she didn't even know his last name.

"Dylan," he said, shifting his attention back to her dad. "Todd Dylan."

"Hey, that I can remember." Chuck started singing. "*The answer my friend...is blowin in the wind...*"

Todd laughed. "Yes! I've been claiming to be Bob's long-lost cousin for years! Still haven't seen a royalty check, though."

Chuck leaned forward in his wheelchair. "I like you, Todd Dylan. Lemme show you around the house – she ain't big, but she's got room in all the right places."

Julie saw Todd give her dad a wink. "I think we may have the same taste in...houses, Mr. Danner."

"Call me Chuck."

The two men left the den, and Julie could hear her dad dive into his sales pitch. She sidled up next to Allison. They listened for a minute before Julie spoke.

"So you love him, huh?"

"I think I kinda do."

"He seems alright to me."

"Alright?" Allison said with a smirk. "You'll see. He'll have you eating out of his hand once you get to know him. Just remember – he's all mine."

"Don't worry. After this summer, another guy is the last thing on my mind."

Allison nudged her shoulder into Julie's arm. "Missed you, by the way."

"Yeah, yeah. Missed you too."

Chuck was showing Todd Julie's old bedroom, and the memory of Jerry the MouseDog waking her up that first week rushed into her mind. She turned her head to the space in the den's corner where her old record player had sat, the notes of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's old song echoing in her ears. Something sitting on the coffee table caught her eye, just barely.

*The spool of thread, Jules.*

Just as she noticed it, the house's cold *feeling* crept up her legs and her back, as if it was clawing its way from the crawlspace beneath the floor. Julie's heart began to race, her cheeks filled with heat. She grabbed the spool with her left hand.

"What's that?" Allison asked.

"Oh, nothing." Julie looked around the room, desperate for a place to hide the thread, but there was nowhere to put it. The *feeling* spread to her neck, down her arms.

"Thirsty?" she asked Allison abruptly. "I think I'll get some water."

"No, I'm good. You ok?"

"I'm fine," Julie said as she hurried toward the back of the house. "I just need something to drink."

When she got to the kitchen, her muscles hesitated, her body acting instinctively.

*It's alright, Jules. You left it here, remember?*

She forced her legs forward, across the kitchen floor – *jeez, that linoleum is freezing, even through your shoes* – until she reached the cabinet underneath the sink. The spool of red thread had grown hot and heavy in her hand.

*Just get rid of it. Once and for all.*

She opened the cabinet beneath the sink and dropped the wooden spool into the trash can. It landed with a deep thump against the empty bottom. Julie slammed the cabinet door shut. The cold *feeling* remained, covering her entire body, reminding her how much power the house had over her.

She found a glass and filled it with water, gulping it down in three swallows, hoping it would calm her nerves. Looking up to the spot in the ceiling, where she had seen the white light so clearly on those nights long ago, she whispered a simple message for the ghost who was still trying to speak to her.

“I’m sorry, GranBelle Jenny. I’ve done all I know to do. I can’t live here anymore. I just can’t.”

As if the spirit had heard her, the cold *feeling* vanished from Julie’s body in an instant, and the pace of her heart eased.

*It had to be done, Jules.*

She put down her glass and returned to the den, where Chuck Danner and Todd Dylan were sealing their rental deal with a hearty handshake.

## Chapter 29

If there was a worse torture in the world, Madam Angeline couldn't imagine it. The black spirit, a shapeless and unrecognizable entity, had paralyzed her body and trapped her mind. While the madam could hear everything happening around her, she was powerless to react or respond. There were the doctors and nurses who couldn't help. There was her family, her children keeping vigil at her bedside with prayers and tears. There was Rufus, her faithful companion, his loyalty to her stronger than ever before, because he knew what the darkness was doing. And then there was Julie, who had only come to visit her the one time, but that had been enough. The girl couldn't see how in tune with the other side she herself really was. And Madam Angeline, confined to a bed and unable to move, didn't know how to guide her any more than she already had.

As the days went by and the black spirit's hold on the madam tightened, it soon began a new campaign of terror, by showing her things from far outside the four walls of her hospital room. Awful things. Horrifying things. Scenes from the past that she would never be able to unsee. She saw the name "Theo" again and again, each letter clear now, and she could see exactly who he was, as the darkness showed her each of his heinous crimes. She was forced to watch how he charmed his victims, luring them into a sense of security, gaining their trust and affection. She watched how he stole them away when they were least expecting it, confused and weakened as his personality morphed into the monster he really was. She witnessed his tying them up, binding their wrists and ankles so tight that the rope dug through their skin, sometimes to the bone. How he wound a simple thread, always red, around the girl's ring finger, just on her left hand, tightening it with precision until it drew blood. And the worst, the part that would remain with Madame Angeline forever, how he killed them, spending hours and hours with a long and drawn-out drowning, keeping them barely alive and on the edge of awareness, allowing them to periodically fill their lungs with air and

hope, only to push them back under the water where they choked and sputtered again and again, until the moment when each young woman's will gave out, and she breathed no more.

The visions of Theo were pure evil. He murdered with purpose – the black spirit made sure that Madam Angeline understood that. “He does it for me,” the darkness would tell her, in that same whispery croak as before. “All of it, for me.” The madam could sense a perverted pride in the spirit's craggy voice, a sickening satisfaction that made the killings even more unbearable.

She didn't quite understand why the darkness was revealing so much of Theo to her at first, only that she was being forced to endure a specific kind of madness, watching a man who had been killing his entire adult life. But what did any of that have to do with Julie? When the answer became clear, the paralyzed madam felt an urgency like nothing she had ever experienced before, and she struggled to connect with her new young friend, to warn her of the certain and impending danger she faced.

But there was no way Madam Angeline could get through – not with the darkness holding her body and mind hostage.

Todd Dylan moved into the house on Grayson Lane just two days after reaching an agreement with Chuck. He did need the furniture after all, so Chuck raised the rent a bit to compensate. For Allison's sake, Julie didn't want Todd blindsided by the house the way she had been. She decided she needed to disclose her own experience with GranBelle Jenny, at least to warn him so he could be prepared. On the day Todd moved in, she dropped by, where she found Allison helping him unpack.

“Knock, knock!” she yelled as she pushed open the cracked front door.

“We're back here!” she heard Allison yell back.

The two of them were on the floor of her old bedroom, each of them digging through an open box.

"Settling in, I see," Julie commented.

"Home sweet home," Todd said, giving Julie the same half-smile as he had the night they met.

"Isn't this fun?" Allison popped up to her feet to give Julie a hug. "I can't believe you guys are actually going to get to know each other. We should go out tonight and have dinner to celebrate Todd's move!"

"Sounds good to me," he said. "You guys can give me the tour of the local nightlife."

"Hey, it's not as bad as you might think," Allison said defensively. "What do you say, Julie?"

"Yeah, maybe. Listen, I came by to make sure you knew everything about the house, Todd. I feel obligated to tell you."

"Is this about your ghost?" he asked, fake-shivering and grimacing sarcastically.

"Scary stuff."

"Don't worry, Julie," Allison broke in. "I told him all about it."

"Fine, I just want to make sure he hears it from the person who actually lived through it. Todd, it was all very real. At least it was for me."

He put his hands up in surrender. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make fun. Allison tells me you went through a lot in this place. Rest assured, though, I'm not afraid of ghosts."

"Good," Julie said. "I just thought you needed to know."

"Thanks for that, truly." He put a hand over his heart. "Now, back to dinner. What time should we pick you up?"

Julie was relieved at how well Todd seemed to take her warning. "I don't know. Seven o'clock?"

"Seven it is," he said.

She shifted her eyes to Allison, who was beaming with delight.

“My new man and my oldest friend. This is going to be great!”

It was nearly two in the morning by the time Todd and Allison dropped Julie off at her dad’s house. Following a lengthy dinner at Upper Crust, one of Hopes Ridge’s only white-tablecloth restaurants, the two young women had tested the older man’s stamina. Three bars and four hours later, Todd was still going strong. “I predicted I’d be driving you two home,” he had said, ushering them into his Range Rover at the end of the night. “I stopped drinking after the second round.” Allison had responded with a loud and drunken “Boooooo” at his declaration of responsibility, and Julie couldn’t help but cackle from the backseat hysterically.

At home and inside, Julie was grateful for the night of mindless distraction, despite the next day’s inevitable hangover. *Boy, did you ever need that, Jules.* She grabbed a bag of chips and filled a giant tumbler with water, chasing down a couple of Advil first. In the den, she clicked on the television as she fell into the couch. It wasn’t long before she heard her dad’s voice from his bedroom.

“Julie-bean, that you?”

*Shit. You woke up the old man.*

“Yeah, Dad! It’s me!”

“Y’all have fun?”

“We did! Now go back to sleep – I’ll turn down the TV!”

“Alright, then. Don’t stay up all night – you’ll be worthless tomorrow.”

*No stopping that now, Dad.*

“Yessir! Good night!”

With the television’s volume lowered, Julie watched baseball highlights, scarfing down potato chips. The playoffs had just begun, and the Cardinals were streaking at

exactly the right time – they had beaten the Dodgers earlier that night three to one. She'd be hearing all about that game tomorrow.

When Julie felt her eyelids getting heavy, she willed herself up off the couch and upstairs, desperately longing for her bed, an island refuge in a sea of weariness. She was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The next morning, still lost in the foggy haze of deep slumber, Julie heard a voice. She recognized it immediately, even in her dream-state – Madam Angeline, speaking as strongly as she ever had, no longer silenced by the darkness that had overcome her.

*“My dear Julie. Theo is coming. I don't know how, I don't know when, but he's coming. For you. Please take heed, please...”*

The madam's voice faded as Julie's conscious mind took over, waking her despite her resistance. There was the name again, and she had spoken it with such clarity: *Theo is coming.*

With the light coming through her bedroom window already bright, Julie squinted as she raised her aching head. Her mouth was thick with dehydration, the hangover already wreaking havoc on her body.

She rolled onto her side and reached her hand out to the nightstand for her glass of water. The muscles in her arm froze. The water was gone and something else sat in its place, on the corner of the bedside table, just inches away from her. Her eyes opened wide, her mind firing, trying to comprehend how the thing had gotten there. Fear shot through her arm and moved to her chest. She grabbed the thing off the table, and the cold *feeling* came over her body like a rush of frigid wind.

*It's the spool of red thread, Jules. Somehow, it's the frickin spool of red thread.*

## Chapter 30

At twenty-eight, it was about time Allison had fallen in love. There were moments in her past when she thought she was, first with her college sweetheart Patrick, and later during a fast and torrid romance with a Birmingham surgeon named Stuart. But those relationships weren't anything like what she had with Todd – he had been different from the others from the start, stealing her heart before she even knew it.

They'd met at a crowded Sunday open house. He was milling around in the big kitchen when her brown eyes met his, so blue and clear that they rippled like a mountain stream. He was handsome and sophisticated, but there was more to him than that. He was also mischievous and a bit aloof. Allison had always had a thing for men she couldn't quite figure out. From the moment he spoke, she was charmed right off her feet.

"I do believe you're the most beautiful model I've ever seen," he said to her, quietly so none of the wandering house-hunters could hear him.

"Excuse me?" she tried to be snarky, despite being flattered. "Model?"

"Surely you're part of the staging, here to make the house shine. It's working by the way."

"I'm actually the selling agent, Mr..."

"Dylan. Todd Dylan. And of course you are." He said it with confidence, a signal that he had known it all along. "But you could be a model, and you know it."

He lingered at the house that day, swapping glances with Allison as she showed its interior distractedly. When the last of the potential buyers was gone, she acted on impulse, locking the front door and leading him to the master bedroom.

"I shouldn't be doing this. It's a big no-no in my business."

He had his arms around her, his lips on her neck. "But you're going to anyway, aren't you?"

“Oh, God yes.”

Since that day and their dangerous tryst in her client’s bedroom, Allison and Todd had been inseparable, sharing passionate mystery and fast romance. She was in love, and she just knew he was too.

“Do you know how much I love you?” she slurred from the passenger seat as Todd pulled away from Julie’s dad’s house. His reaction wasn’t what she expected, and even in her haze of intoxication, she noticed what she thought was pity in his response.

“You really do, don’t you?” he said.

No, it couldn’t be pity. That didn’t even make sense. “Yes, I really fucking do, asshole!” She punched him playfully on his thick shoulder. “Did you have fun with us girls tonight or what?”

He thought for a moment before he answered. Or maybe the alcohol blur was slowing everything down. “I did. I like your friend Julie. She’s different.”

“Always has been.” Allison lolled her head toward the passenger window. “Ever since we were kids, Julie goes one way, I go the other. But we stick together when we have to – I’m there for her when she needs me, and she’s there for me.”

“I sure hope so,” he said quietly.

She wasn’t so drunk that she missed the strange comment. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying...you hear that a lot. About friends doing anything for one another.” His words were long and dragging. “I sometimes wonder how true that is.”

“With us, it’s as true as it can fucking be. We got each other’s backs, no matter what.”

Todd pulled his Range Rover into the gravel drive at his new house on Grayson Lane. “Maybe you do, and maybe you don’t.” He turned off the SUV.

“Enough already.” She rolled her head back toward him. “I guess you want me to stay the night?”

“Only if you want,” he answered, his eyes flickering with the same mischief she had seen the day she met him.

With her right hand, she reached over the console and into his lap, grabbing his crotch with a firm grip. “But what in the world will we do?” she asked, trying her best to sound sexy through her drunken stupor.

She could just make out what she thought was a crafty grin on his face. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll think of something.”

Allison woke up the next morning, her head throbbing and every muscle in her body aching. She had been seriously drunk the night before, and she’d expected a hangover, but this was worse than any morning-after she could remember. Maybe she was coming down with something. The pain was everywhere, deep in her bones, forcing her eyes open – but she couldn't see anything.

Maybe her darkened vision was another symptom that would fade away. Maybe she really was sick. Slowly, like everything else in her head, another awareness came to her, in spite of her dulled senses – something, maybe a sheet or a blanket, was covering her head. Or was it a blindfold?

Her panic was instantaneous. Todd had been playful and even more adventurous than Allison’s previous lovers, but he’d never suggested that he was into...she struggled to find the right word...bondage. Was this a game? She went for the blindfold, to rip it from her eyes, but her arms wouldn’t move – they refused to obey her simple and second-nature command.

For a moment, she feared she was paralyzed, until she realized her arms wouldn’t move because they were restrained, behind her back, her sweaty wrists smushed

together by some sort of tight binding. She flexed and struggled to separate them, but as she moved, the ropes tightened, digging painfully into the skin around her wrists.

She'd had enough. A little play was one thing, but this wasn't fun and it definitely wasn't sexy. She tried to speak, to call out to Todd and tell him to untie her now. That she wasn't into whatever this was. But like her sight, her voice was gone too. A bitter metallic taste clung to her tongue. When she screamed, only a hiss escaped from her throat, gripping her in deep and primal fear.

She tried to calm herself, to regain control. The rest of the picture was becoming woefully clear. She wasn't in Todd's bed. She was sitting up on a cold and hard wooden chair, naked from neck to toe, somewhere inside the house on Grayson Lane – she didn't need her eyes to know this part, because the smell of GranBelle Jenny's soaking wet death was all around her.

## Chapter 31

It was the same spool of thread. As Julie rolled it back and forth between her fingers, she had no doubt about it. The old-style wood, the frayed thread. *It's the same one, Jules. The one you threw in the trash at your old house the other night.*

The cold *feeling* had lasted with her, but this time she welcomed it. She knew that, just like GranBelle Jenny's smells, the *feeling* was a message – or maybe a warning. But how could the spool have gotten inside her dad's house, inside her bedroom, onto the nightstand? No ghost could do that. *Or could it?*

She thought about her mother's suicide and finding the thread on her sewing machine. And then it clicked. How had she not seen it before?

She jumped out of bed and threw on a t-shirt and jeans. Jerry the MouseDog, still slumbering, lifted his little brown head and barked at her.

"I don't know, Jerry," she said to him, slipping on a pair of sneakers and her Cardinals cap. "But it's time to get to the bottom of it. And I know just where to start."

As Julie pounded on the door of the house on Grayson Lane, waiting for Todd to answer, she thought about GranBelle Jenny and Madam Angeline, and the power of spirits. She remembered Bruce's story from his Washington, D.C. days, about the boy who "walked up the walls." No matter how hard she pounded, there was only silence on the other side of the door.

Todd's Range Rover was parked in the driveway. *Now where could our mystery man be?* She heard something, a distant and faint sound, rhythmic and steady. It wasn't coming from inside the house, but instead from somewhere up the street, and it grew louder with each second that passed. *Thud-ump, thud-ump.* Todd was running toward her, finishing up a late morning jog.

“Hey there, Julie,” he said as he approached, his words clipped, his shirt wet with perspiration.

“Hello, Todd. Getting in a workout, huh?” Julie tried to force herself to make small talk.

“Yeah, at my age, you can never be too careful with the old ticker.” He jabbed a finger at the center of his chest. “She’s liable to go at a moment’s notice, but not if I can help it.” Todd’s small talk was natural and uninhibited. When Julie didn’t respond he asked, “You a runner?”

Julie recognized a presumption in his question, like he already knew that she was, and he expected her to share his enthusiasm. “I try to, when I can find the time.”

“No better exercise, in my opinion. All you need is a comfortable pair of shoes.” He went to the railing along the front porch and stretched his calves. “So what can I do for you this morning? I’m surprised you’re not still sleeping, after the night you and Allison had.”

Julie feigned a laugh even though she was in no mood for jokes. “No, I’m wide awake actually. Have been ever since I saw this.” She opened her hand so he could see the spool of red thread.

“What’s that? Sewing thread?”

“It is.”

“That’s what brought you here so early?” He looked at her as if she were temporarily deranged.

“I’m only going to ask you this once, Todd. Do you know anything about this?” *Now watch and listen, Jules. Watch his body language and listen to his words.*

He stopped stretching and stood up straight, his hands on his hips. He was a tall man, imposing if he wanted to be. And dressed in his running attire, Julie could see how muscular he was in spite of his lean frame.

“Do I know anything about what? A spool of thread?”

“That’s what I’m asking, Todd.”

He dropped his hands from his sides and chuckled, a near-silent laugh while he looked away from her. “Does this have something to do with your haunted house?” he asked, his voice taking on the tone someone would use with a small child.

*Time to push, Jules.* “Would you mind if I take a look at your kitchen trash?”

“Now there’s a question you don’t hear every day.” He walked to the front door and opened it wide. “Be my guest.”

The house was quiet inside, serene even. Julie walked through the den, waiting for the cold *feeling* to return, or maybe even GranBelle Jenny’s stink of death, but the ghost was quiet. The door to her old bedroom was open, as were the doors to the bathroom and second bedroom.

“Did Allison stay over last night?”

“You mean, did she pass out on the couch as soon as we walked in the house? The answer to that is a resounding yes. She had a showing this morning, so I ran her home a little while ago. Said she’d be tied up all day.”

“Hmph,” Julie muttered. She could sense Todd a few steps behind her, following her all the way to the kitchen, where he watched her cross the room to the sink. She opened the low cabinet door and pulled out the trash can. It was empty, completely and utterly empty.

“What the hell, Todd?”

“What do you mean? I took it out this morning.”

“Yeah, you could have told me that, saved me the trouble.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “We both know you wanted an excuse to come inside the house, Julie. You’re checking up on me, like any good friend would do. So what do you think – am I a nice guy?”

To anyone else, Todd would have appeared congenial and tolerant of Julie's suspicions. But Julie was sure he was toying with her, she just didn't know why. She moved closer to him, holding the spool of red thread so he could see it.

"There's only one way this could have gotten inside my dad's house, Todd. And there's only one person who could have..."

She wanted to say more, but couldn't. Instead, she stopped short in the middle of the kitchen floor, frozen by an odor invading her nose like so many times before.

"What the fuck is that?" Todd said, grimacing. "Holy shit, that's awful."

Julie looked up to ceiling, but there was nothing there. No circle of blinding light. The only sign of GranBelle Jenny was her stink, growing stronger than ever before.

"I've got to get out of here," he shouted through the sweat-drenched neck of his shirt, pulled up over his mouth and nose. He turned and trotted back through the house, to the open front door and then outside.

Julie couldn't bear the smell either, but at least she knew what it was and where it had come from. The red thread had brought only the cold *feeling* at first. Now it had brought the stink that Julie knew all too well. *Keep talking, GranBelle Jenny.* She strode through the house deliberately, without fear, glancing again to the open bedroom doors, a twinge of her sixth sense tickling her brain. She ignored it, focused instead on the man outside. When she reached the front porch, she saw Todd in the grass, doubled over and coughing.

"How could you stand that in there?" he asked in between hacks.

As Julie walked past him on the way to her car, she answered with a taunting smile.

"I've gotten used to it. Welcome to Powder House, Todd."

When Allison woke for the second time that morning, she heard voices, muffled but familiar. She had mercifully fallen asleep somehow. Pain and fear could be a powerful

narcotic, she guessed. Before she had blacked out again, and after the rotten stink had dissipated, she'd calmed down enough to figure out where she was. She had leaned the chair she was tied to this way then that, until she had touched her cramped surroundings on all sides. She was in a small closet. Someone had blindfolded her and bound her up inside a closet in her boyfriend's new house. But who? Was Todd involved in something shady? She realized how little she knew about him, just like Julie had wondered. Was he a drug dealer? A human trafficker? Was he planning to sell her into slavery? A fresh kind of fear came flooding over her, and a violent, uncontrollable trembling with it.

She concentrated on the voices, so close, the conversation occurring just on the other side of the door that was keeping her hidden. It was Julie. Thank God for Julie, she'd known how to find her. The fear faded, but only for a moment, until she recognized the other voice – Todd.

Allison opened her mouth and tried to scream again. But just like before, nothing came out. No shriek, no howl, no high-pitched "JULIE!!!" Her voice had been silenced. She couldn't even manage a squeak.

"Oh God," she whispered, but even that was barely audible. "What has he done to me? What is he planning to do?"

The awful stink, a signal Julie's ghost was nearby, invaded the closet again. She heard someone run through the house, gasping, trying to escape the smell, followed by a slower, more confident walk.

And then the noises were gone.

## Chapter 32

As soon as she had left Todd at the house, Julie tried to reach Allison. She'd been calling all day, and she kept getting Allison's annoyingly perky voice message over and over: *"This is Allison Hargrave with Hargrave Realty. So sorry I missed your call – I'm either selling a house or getting ready to! Leave me a message, and I promise I'll get back with you as soon as I can. Have a fantastic day, and remember – life is what you make it!"* Julie texted after her last call, upset that Allison hadn't acknowledged the obvious urgency: **Call me the second you get this. We need to talk. It's important.**

GranBelle Jenny had been trying to tell her something that morning. And until Julie figured out what, she wanted Allison to steer clear of Todd. She knew it would take a lot of convincing. Allison was so impulsive, always going all-in on relationships too quickly. Todd had been no different, but Julie feared he was more than an infatuation or one of Allison's flings. She just might be in love with him.

Worse than that, there was the spool of thread. How did it get from Todd's house to her nightstand? *Right next to your sleeping head, Jules. Don't you dare forget that.* And why had he acted so strangely when she confronted him? Did she detect a bit of defensiveness? Or was she just projecting all her unanswered questions onto him?

*Enough about Todd. Time to come clean with the old man about the thread – and get some answers about the night your dear old mother died.*

Chuck had not been able to concentrate that morning. He had heard Julie leave in a rush, without even a simple good-bye, and it worried him. He tried studying The Riverbank Drowner cold case documents for distraction, but soon gave up and wheeled himself out to his back porch with a cup of coffee. He sat there, the cool wind of an

early October day blowing across his cheeks, and waited for his daughter to come home.

The screech of Julie's car in the driveway out front was the first indication that she was back – he could tell the sound of her old Honda every time he heard it. Chuck rolled himself inside. Julie stopped short when she saw him.

"Where you been, Julie-bean?"

Without a word, she pulled a small spool of thread from her pocket and set it on the counter.

"What's that?" he asked, nodding his head toward the object.

She cut her eyes to the spool and picked it up again. When she dropped it into his palm, he felt a nervous tingle run through the top half of his body. He examined it, not sure what Julie was trying to tell him.

"It was Mother's. I found it near her body, on the night she died."

"You *what*?"

"I found it the night she died, and I kept it. I thought maybe she was sending me a message."

"What do you mean, 'near her body'?"

Julie removed her baseball cap and shook loose her dark brown hair. When she looked back to her dad, her piercing blue eyes were wet with tears. Chuck couldn't help but see his dead wife, thirty years younger. He had forgotten just how much Julie looked like her.

"The end of the thread was tied in a knot to her wedding ring," she said quietly.

"From there, it led through her bathroom and bedroom, across the hall, into her sewing room. The spool was sitting on top of her sewing table. It was the only thing there. Everything else – fabric, patterns, even her ashtray – was gone. There was just the thread. What was she trying to tell me, Dad?"

Chuck couldn't fully comprehend what his daughter was saying. He looked back down to the spool in his hand, such a simple and harmless object. But it felt sinister all of a sudden, like a harbinger of evil and death. He couldn't speak.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I was afraid it might hurt you, whatever message it was meant to send. I thought it would be better if you didn't know. But now I'm not sure what to think. That red thread has been following me everywhere I go – I'm afraid it's connected to the other side somehow. When we showed Todd the house, it was there. I threw it away. But this morning, it was sitting on the table beside my bed. So either I'm going crazy..." She hesitated. "...or there's something supernatural at work here."

"Julie, that was goddam evidence!" Chuck burst out. "And you removed it from a possible crime scene, just like with Leo Nix's note. Do you realize what you've done?"

"Yes! Now I do. At the time, all I could think about was protecting you, protecting us from any more of Mother's insanity. But now I think she was trying to tell us something..." Julie's voice faltered.

"But what?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's just for you. Maybe something only you know?"

Chuck studied Julie's face. It was clear she thought he held an answer to his dead wife's final and puzzling gesture. But he didn't. The trail of red thread that had been attached to her wedding ring, like so many things Elizabeth had done in life, was meaningless to him.

Or was it?

"Hang on, Julie-bean," he said, rolling the spool around in his hand. "What about the rings around the fingers on our dead girls? The *red* rings?"

Julie walked to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair, a look of deep concentration on her face. "You know, I thought about that already, but I can't see the connection. How in the world would Mother even know about those girls?"

Chuck wheeled himself to the table next to Julie. He placed the spool of thread in front of her and leaned his head in close. "Liz'beth wouldn't have known, Julie-bean. But whoever tied that thread around her wedding ring did."

Julie thought back to the scene she had discovered in her mother's bathroom the year before, the winding red thread leading her to it. The memory was still vivid, like a scene from a movie that she could recall at will. The giant window at the far end of the room, the white porcelain tub beneath it, the slow but steady *drip-drip-drip* of water from the looping chrome faucet. Her mother's body fully submerged, her long dark hair floating loosely above her head. *The empty bottle of sleeping pills.*

Like a flash of blinding light, the image of a dead Leo Nix popped into her head, his body torn to shreds by animals, his eyes eaten out of their sockets so that only gaping black holes remained. And just like that, her mother's own face in the water was back.

"Dad, her eyes were open. They were wide open, underneath the water, like she was staring straight at me."

"But she had swallowed a damn-near full bottle of Trazadone. The coroner even found 'em in her goddam stomach."

"I'm not saying they weren't there. I'm just wondering if something else killed her – before the pills did."

"*Something* else? Or *someone* else?"

Julie rubbed her temples, her hand over her forehead and eyes. When she looked back to her dad, he was doing the same thing. She could also recall how drunk he had been that night, passed out in his recliner, a pile of empty beer cans on the floor next to him. "Dad, I think it's time *you* tell *me* everything that happened that night. And I mean everything."

"So now I'm being interrogated?" She could tell he was only half-joking.

“Hardly. It’s just...you may have seen or heard something that you don’t even remember. If you think hard enough about it, something may come back to you.” Julie laid a hand on her dad’s arm. “Try, Dad.”

Chuck nodded and closed his eyes. “Your mother had become more and more agitated after you moved back home. You remember. She used to never come downstairs, except to eat. She ate standing at the counter, then right back up to her sewing. But after you came back, she started coming downstairs more and actually doing chores. She even sat with me one evening and watched an inning or two. I thought maybe your being home had pulled her out of herself, whatever the reason. That maybe she would stop sealing herself off from the world in that goddam sewing room of hers.

“The day she died she had been downstairs a lot. Wandering in and out of rooms, talking to herself. Asking me if you were back for good, telling me she didn’t need a ‘babysitter.’ She was all pissed off. She accused me of bringing you back to spy on her. Which was kind of true, by the way. Anyway, after a few hours of listening to her rant, I lost it. I said, ‘Listen here, Liz’beth, Julie’s the only damn child you got, and it’s about damn time you found a way to tolerate her. Who knows? You may even learn to love her.’ Well, that did it.

“She started screaming at me, about Charlotte Eve. How I was never home, how it was my fault what happened to her one true baby girl. She had never done that, Julie-bean, never. Something had gotten in her head. I shouldn’t’ve, but I was mad, so I told her the blame lied with her. She should’ve known better than to leave the two of you alone in a bathtub. It was bad. We were finally saying the things we’d been thinking all those years. She blamed me, and I blamed her.”

Julie could see tears in her dad’s eyes, but he pushed on.

“She went back upstairs and started sewing. I went to the fridge and pulled out two six-packs, turned on some music, and got good and drunk. I was probably eight or nine

beers in when you found me. I don't do that often, but she pushed me to it. Just like I pushed her to do what she did, I suppose. And I'll always regret that. Mostly, I regret not keeping my promise to the angel that saved me the night I got shot. I was supposed to watch over your mother and keep her safe."

"Don't kick yourself, Dad. It wasn't your fault – none of it. Do you remember anything else? Anything at all?"

Chuck was quiet, thinking back. He shook his lowered head back and forth. "I don't. I drank those beers fast as I could, and after that, I don't remember a damn thing. At least not 'til the cops got here." He turned his eyes up to her. "You should've told 'em about the thread, Julie."

She squeezed his arm. "That's why we've got to figure this out on our own, Dad. I don't know about you, but I don't think Mother killed herself. Not anymore."

Julie couldn't help but think again of Leo Nix, and the blame she had misplaced on him. He wasn't the killer they were looking for, and yet he was guilty in his own mind for not protecting his only sister. And that guilt had ruled his life ever since, until he took it. *Rest easy, Leo.*

"You realize what this means, don't you?" Chuck said.

Julie refocused. "It means the man who murdered all those girls could also be the one who killed Mother. It means it's all linked, and somehow, to me." The words had barely left her mouth when the cold *feeling* came, covering her body in one giant chill, and the name *Theo* floated like a ghost through her mind.

*It means the killer has come back home, Jules. And if Madam Angeline was right, he's come back for you too.*

## Chapter 33

Julie and her dad were both overwhelmed with the possibility that Elizabeth Dempsey Danner had been murdered instead of committing suicide, but especially Chuck. After all, he was the man who had called her his wife, no matter how crazy she had been.

"I need a break, Julie-bean." Chuck said, heading out of the kitchen.

"Of course, Dad. Take all the time you need."

He wheeled himself to his bedroom and closed the door.

Julie took the opportunity to give Allison another ring – her friend had still not called her back. She went out to the porch and dialed her number. It went straight to voicemail again.

"Shit, Allison, pick up the damn phone," Julie said as she hung up.

Within seconds, her phone vibrated, giving Julie an immediate sense of relief. She turned it over in her hand, expecting to see Allison's name. But instead, the screen read "Rufus" in large white letters.

*Madam Angeline.* Julie's stomach twisted as she answered.

"Rufus. Is everything alright?"

"Um, no, Miss Julie. Everythin' ain't alright."

Julie started pacing the patio. "Tell me."

"It's the madam. She's gotten worse. She ain't breathin' on her own no more."

"What? When did this happen?"

"It happened real fast. She was strugglin' for air all last night. This mornin', the doc said she needed a machine. Y'know, to help her breathe and all."

*It's going to kill her, Jules. The black spirit is getting stronger.*

"I need to come see her, Rufus."

"No way, Miss Julie. Her family ain't gon' let you near her."

Julie brainstormed as she paced. "What time do visiting hours end? At the hospital?"

"Nine o'clock tonight. What you plannin'?"

"Do you really want to know, Rufus?"

"No, ma'am, don't believe I do."

Julie watched the minutes on her dashboard clock slowly click by. She'd been sitting in a dark corner of the Princeton Baptist Medical Center parking lot for nearly half an hour, watching the hospital's visitors slowly disperse for the night. Some lingered in tight pockets, discussing, hugging, a few openly crying. It reminded Julie of the depressing days after her dad's shooting, as he fought to live. He had been here, in the same hospital. She remembered wondering if he'd ever come back home. She had cried in that parking lot too, while her mother sat stoically by her side, shedding no tears for a husband on the verge of death.

Just before ten o'clock, Julie saw Madam Angeline's two sons come from the hospital's front entrance, their heads bowed, neither one talking. The pair walked directly to their shared rental Chevy, climbed inside, and left. It was as simple and uncomplicated a departure as there could have been. The madam's family appeared defeated by the unknown ailment that was gradually killing their matriarch. Julie believed in her heart that she could help, that maybe she was the only one who could save their mother, but she had no idea how.

When the parking lot was nearly empty, Julie pulled her Cardinals cap low on her brow and slipped out of her car. She trotted across the pavement toward the sliding glass doors to the hospital's emergency room. Halfway there, the doors slid open, and two paramedics guiding an empty gurney strolled out. She eased past them, as casually as she could, into the ER, where the admissions nurse and the night guard were

struggling to help an elderly man into a wheelchair. He was refusing, certain they were trying to commit him against his will.

Julie used the diversion to take a quick scan of the sign-in sheet. Near the top of the page, she saw the name *Fred Lester*, his symptoms listed as *Pressure on chest* and *Left shoulder pain* – that would work perfectly.

“May I help you, ma’am?” a voice from behind the glass asked, startling Julie.

“Hi, yes, I’m here to see my uncle, Mr. Lester.” She tried to sound as distraught as she could. “He said he thought he was having a heart attack.”

The nurse behind the glass turned to a white board with gridded lines behind her. “Room 7, just down the hall. They’re waiting on test results now.”

“Thank you so much.” Julie started to put her hand to her mouth but then thought better of it. *Don’t oversell it, Jules. Just go.*

She turned the corner and walked briskly down the hall toward Fred Lester’s room. The hallway was active with nurses and doctors intent on their work. None of them gave Julie a glance as she walked by. Passing Room 7, she picked up her pace until she reached the end of the hall and the stairwell door. She slipped behind it without anyone noticing.

When she got to the third floor, she paused. *It’s not like you’re breaking into Fort Knox, Jules. Just keep on going.* She cracked open the door and peered into the hall. Not a soul was in sight. Half of the lights had been turned off for the night, bathing the corridor in dim quiet. Julie could hear two female voices coming from somewhere in the distance. *Nurses’ station.* The madam’s room was not far, down one hallway and then just around the corner.

She crept along the wall, crouching like a stealthy cat-burglar. If she was caught, she’d have to come up with a good story for being here so late – something she should have worked out ahead of time, but hadn’t. *How about we don’t get caught?* She kept moving until she reached Madam Angeline’s room.

The lighting inside the room was dim like the hallway, lit just enough so that nurses checking in during the night could see. The madam lay unconscious just as before, but now a thick tube ran from her mouth and into a machine next to her bed. The machine made a loud and rhythmic mechanical pumping noise as it breathed for her. The look of peace she'd had on Julie's first visit was gone. Tonight, the madam looked close to death.

Julie hurried to her bedside and took the madam's hand in hers. She wasn't prepared for the cold – her hand was freezing

"It's me, Madam Angeline. It's Julie."

She waited for something to happen. The time before, the emptiness had rolled over her slowly, trying to invade her body just like it had the madam's. But this time, Julie felt nothing other than Madam Angeline's cold skin against her warm hand. The seconds turned to minutes, time moving desperately slow, and still nothing. A thought came to Julie, that maybe the madam had been the one to reveal her visiting spirit, trying to show Julie what it was. Or better yet, *who* it was.

"Madam Angeline," she whispered, leaning her face close to the woman's ear. "It's ok. I can handle it. I need to see it again. I need to try and help you."

With that, the madam's hand tightened. Her grip crushed Julie's hand with a force impossible for a healthy person, much less someone in a coma near death. Julie stood her ground, gripping the madam's hand tight. The sinister darkness doubled its effort, pushing Julie violently, threatening to throw her backwards, but Julie refused to budge. She closed her eyes and opened herself to whatever the madam was willing to show her.

She could suddenly see it so clearly.

Looming over Madam Angeline's soul was the malevolent but shapeless black spirit, slowly blotting out the madam's soul and life force. It was a hopeless presence, causing

Julie's heart to sink and her spirit to fade. But there was something else that lifted her. One small pinpoint of light remained, in the center of total darkness.

*"Is that you, Madam? I feel you. I know you're in there."*

Julie wasn't speaking with her mouth anymore, but she was getting through to the madam, as her body began to tremble, turning cold and weaker. She held on to Madam Angeline's hand with all her strength, planting her sneakered feet to the hospital room's linoleum floor to get even more traction.

*"Tell me what to do – tell me how to help you."*

*"Talk to me, not her,"* another voice demanded. It was a cursed voice, a thousand-year-old witch's voice. It sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a dried-out well. *"Can't you see what I'm doing? I'm not here for her...I'm here for you!"*

The pinpoint of light held, the only thing keeping Julie brave enough to hold on to Madam Angeline's hand. The black spirit shoved harder, and Julie's head began to spin, her consciousness leaving her.

*"Madam Angeline!"* she screamed out in her head. *"It's Julie! Talk to me! Please!"*

She felt the pressure easing, just enough for the pinpoint of light to brighten slightly. It was only a flicker, but it was a ray of life. The familiar sound of Madam Angeline's voice broke through.

*"Find Alice, my dear Julie...Alice has the answers. Look inside...Theo is there..."*

With a final flash, the light was gone, vanished, not even a pinpoint left. An alarm rang out as the pressure against Julie's body rushed back. She opened her eyes and let go of the madam's hand, and the pressure was gone, the black spirit rebuffed. But the alarm continued to blare out – Madam Angeline was flatlining.

Julie heard the squeak of running footsteps. *Hide, Jules. Hide!* She stumbled backward to the nearest corner just as the door to the madam's room flew open. Two nurses ran in and took their positions on either side of the bed. A doctor was only

seconds behind them. Julie stood frozen, invisible to the three people who were now trying to revive the woman, her friend, who she may have pushed too far.

“Paddles!” the doctor yelled out. His voice shook Julie from her daze. “On my count! Three, two, one, clear!”

Julie watched once as the electronic pulse jerked Madam Angeline’s body into a single convulsion. *Get out of here, Jules – before they notice you.*

“She’s not responding,” one of the nurses said without emotion.

As the doctor prepared his defibrillator paddles for another shock, Julie snuck out of the room. She ran down the hall to the stairwell, not caring about the noise she might make – a fast escape was more important. She went out the same way she had come in, through the emergency room hall and waiting room and sliding glass doors. The parking lot was still empty, and the sound of her sprinting steps felt like the sharp bangs of a hammer in her ears.

When she got to her car, she collapsed in the driver seat, exhausted and drenched in sweat. She put her hand to her face and wiped away the wetness. She was sobbing, the watery residue on her face as much tears as it was perspiration. *You had to do it, Jules.* She tried to compose herself, but it was an impossible task, because she knew she may have just snuffed out the only guiding light she had ever known.

As the shocks of electricity coursed through Madam Angeline’s body, the black spirit released its hold and left her.

It was done. Madam Angeline had served her purpose.

## Chapter 34

Julie's emotions gradually eased as she drove back to Hopes Ridge. After a series of exhaustive prayers for Madam Angeline, she tuned into her go-to classic rock station. The strange mix of music that the DJ played that night mirrored what Julie had been going through. The music on her drive went from "Candle in the Wind" to "Let It Be" and "Stairway to Heaven," before ending with "Don't Fear the Reaper," which brought a sour turn to her stomach. *If they somehow kept her alive, Jules, she doesn't have much time left. Remember what she said: 'Find Alice and look inside'...but what could that mean?*

Her dad was asleep by the time she got home, his snores audible through his closed bedroom door. Their earlier conversation must have left him drained. Julie went to the refrigerator and grabbed a Budweiser. The MouseDog bounced at her feet, his tiny toenails clicking on the kitchen floor.

"Alright, alright," Julie told him. "I could use the fresh air too."

She opened the back door and Jerry sprinted out, across the patio and into the darkness of the yard. Julie sat at the splintering and faded picnic table they hadn't used since her father's last night as a police officer. *Some reminders of our past we just can't get rid of, can we? No matter how much we need to.*

Fall had finally come after a longer summer than usual, and the cool breeze combined with the beer calmed her prickly nerves. She listened to Jerry rustling through the leaves that were carpeting the back yard.

Her mind returned to the madam's puzzle. *"Find Alice...look inside..."*

*Look inside what, Jules? A cabinet? A box? Or maybe...*

She closed her eyes and pictured her bedroom's bookcase, the one that still held the books of her childhood. The bookcase shimmered forward, the rest of her bedroom disappearing in a haze. A subtle light emanated from the center shelf. It was shining from the spine of a book. With her mind's eye, Julie peered closer, trying to distinguish

the sideways words. In faded red script that reminded Julie of the thread that kept haunting her, she was able to read what it said: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

She opened her eyes and sat up straight. Jerry sidled up next to her, staring at her with his ears perked.

"Of course, MouseDog – it's Alice! My favorite book!"

The two of them hurried inside and up the stairs to Julie's bedroom. She ran over to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Looking in the middle first, where her vision had directed her, she tilted her head and scanned the titles. She looked at the shelf above, then the one below. It wasn't there. Her favorite childhood book, the one she had read over and over again, was gone, missing from the middle shelf, and the other shelves too. She checked three times, running the tips of her fingers along the rigid spines, pulling books out to make sure it hadn't been pushed back.

"Where in the world could it be?" she asked Jerry, but he had no answer, just a cock of his head in response.

*"Find Alice...look inside..."*

The words lingered in Julie's head. Madam Angeline had known it wouldn't be in the shelves of Julie's past. *But she didn't have time to tell you where else to look.*

"So the book could be anywhere," she said, throwing her hands in the air. "A lot of good that does me."

She fell to the floor in a heap of frustration. Jerry trotted over and licked the tears that had begun to fall down the side of her face. She closed her eyes, hoping another guiding vision might come to her, but her exhausted mind was a blank. Jerry nuzzled his warm body into the crook of her neck, and she heard him let out a deep dog sigh. He was trying to soothe her in his own way, and it worked – Julie was asleep in a matter of seconds.

It was Jerry the MouseDog's barking that woke her, just like those first nights in her old house on Grayson Lane. Julie was still sprawled on her bedroom floor, the overhead light on, her muscles confused and sore. She sat up, trying to reorient herself. The sound of Jerry's barking persisted, but it wasn't from inside her bedroom. She could tell he was just outside her door, somewhere in the upstairs hallway.

"Jerry!" she shouted in a raised but quiet whisper. It was the middle of the night – she could sense it. He paused for a moment, but went right back to yapping again.

"Dammit, MouseDog, stop that!"

Julie stood and looked at her old bedside clock, and the cold *feeling* ran down her back. It was 2:54 in the morning. GranBelle Jenny's time. The woman's spirit was still following her, and she was speaking even louder. Jerry's barking continued.

*Move your legs, Jules. Go see what he's found.*

She walked to her bedroom's doorway and leaned her head around its corner. Jerry was standing two feet outside her mother's old sewing room, facing its shut door, barking at the door's brass knob. Julie moved carefully into the hallway.

"What's wrong, Jerry? What's behind that door?"

The MouseDog whipped his head around and stared at her, a warning in his big brown eyes.

"It's ok," she whispered, reaching to pet the top of his head as she walked toward the closed door. He whined a muffled whimper. "Don't be scared."

*That goes for you too, Jules.*

She put her hand on the doorknob. Her sixth sense tingled, and she felt her nerves turn edgy. As soon as she cracked the door, she could smell it – the awful stink, GranBelle Jenny's odor of death. Her stomach rolled, and her throat clenched as she gagged.

*You have to go inside, Jules. She's sending you a message, that's all. Nothing to be afraid of, just go.*

Another whimper came from Jerry's throat as he sat and watched her. She flipped on the sewing room's light. It was the same as she and her dad had left it the day they packed up her mother's things. Empty except for the sewing table. "Leave that here," her dad had instructed her. "Who knows? You might want it someday."

Julie knew that day would never come, but she hadn't had the heart to argue with him.

The stink was so powerful in the small room, every breath Julie took was thick with wet and rotten decay. She stood staring at the sewing table, waiting for a sign, looking for something that had changed, but the room was no different than before. There was no spool of thread, like the night her mother had died. The only thing there was her mother's sewing machine, dormant and quiet.

"What is it, GranBelle Jenny?" she asked aloud. "Why are you here, in this room?"

Jerry was sniffing under the table, a low growl coming from his snarling mouth.

"What is it, MouseDog – what's under there that's got you so worked up?" Julie bent down, but there was nothing there. Jerry started barking again.

"I don't see it, Jerry," she said, sitting on the floor to get on his level, covering her mouth and nose with her hand in an attempt to block GranBelle Jenny's pervasive stink. She noticed that he wasn't barking at the floor, but at something above it, something just underneath the table.

She had never looked closely at her mother's workstation, and certainly not underneath it, where it truly showed its age. It could have been an antique, with its grated metal footpump and its dark wood frame. Her mother must have replaced the original sewing machine on top at some point, but everything under here was original, including the trap door for the machine itself. She reached up to the square panel of wood, touching it lightly. It shifted, just a bit, from the pressure of her hand.

*Well, what do we have here, Jules?*

The stink was somehow getting worse, growing stronger. Julie coughed and felt her eyes blurring with salty tears. She stood back up and refocused her vision, surveying the top of the table, sliding her fingers along the gaps that surrounded the sewing machine. There was a separate piece of wood at the front. It gave way when she pulled on it, creating a space where the old machine would have dropped out of view. The stink grew even stronger. She gripped the top of the sewing machine and pulled it forward. It rotated down without resistance, descending into the table's square hole. As it did, Julie caught a glimpse of something in the space behind it. She reached her hand into the narrow opening, but only managed to get her fingertips inside.

*Grab it, Jules! Grab the damn thing!*

Wedging her fingers deeper into the hole, she managed to grab a tip of the object and hold on long enough to pull it out of its hiding space. When she saw what it was, it took her breath away, even though GranBelle Jenny's stink had finally faded to nothing.

In her hand was the book from her childhood, the one missing from her bookcase, the dependable escape into a wonderland she'd read over and over, attempting to make her own mad world disappear.

*It's Alice, Jules. Hidden away like some dark secret, never to be revealed.*

Allison had no idea how long she'd been in the closet when the door opened. As she turned her face toward the creaking sound of the old door's hinges, she felt fingers on her cheek, and her blindfold was gone. She had known in her head who would be standing there – it was the only explanation – but it didn't keep her heart from breaking when she saw him. He looked down at her, his body silhouetted in a glow of artificial light, only a shadow of his tall figure while her eyes adjusted.

"Allison," he said with mocking empathy. "Sweet, sweet Allison. Will you allow me to apologize?"

She opened her mouth to speak, to give him a strong-willed “Fuck you.” But when she did, nothing came out but a hushed breath.

“Still with that mouth of yours,” he replied, reading her lips. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a medical inhaler made of metal and held it up. “Sorry about your voice. You see, I find the screaming unbearable. I call it ‘Brother’s Breath’ – my own concoction of sedative and silence. I’m sure you’ll agree it works perfectly.”

She glared at him, fighting the tears that were building behind her squinting eyes.

“Now, listen, here’s how this is going to go.” He was speaking in measured and soft words, like a grade-school teacher giving classroom instructions. “I’ve got a tub of water, and I’ve got you. What you’re about to experience is a test of wills – your will against nature, against the power of basic water. Water is life, when we drink it. But inhaled, well, it’s death. Funny thing, isn’t it? How something can give life and also take it away. It’s a powerful feeling.”

The wheels of Allison’s faltering mind worked, but she couldn’t comprehend what he was talking about. He was raving, talking in riddles.

“I know,” he said, frowning. “How could you understand? Don’t worry, sweet Allison, you will soon enough.”

He turned her chair around and grabbed the wooden slat just behind her head, pulling her out of the closet. Tilting the chair on its two back legs, he dragged her through the house. As he went from one room to the other, Allison confirmed another thing she already knew: she was in Julie’s old house on Grayson Lane. She wrenched her wrists and thrashed her body, but she could barely move. A length of rope ran just under her bare breasts and around her ribs, another around her legs just above her knees. Both were tied so tightly to the chair that her naked skin chafed as she wriggled.

“Settle down back there,” he commanded over his shoulder.

Unable to hold them back any longer, the dam behind Allison's eyes burst. She knew where he was taking her, to the kitchen where her best friend had first met the house's ghost.

As the legs of her chair bounced onto the linoleum floor, she mumbled a prayer to the spirit, a plea for protection. But she knew it was all in vain, especially when she saw the giant metal washtub filled with water, waiting for her in the middle of the kitchen floor.

## Chapter 35

Julie's worn copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was thicker than it should have been – the spine was buckled and bulging. With GranBelle Jenny's stink now gone, she sat on the floor of her mother's empty sewing room, frantic to look inside the old book. Jerry sat too and rested his head on her knee.

"You've been a guiding light all along, haven't you, MouseDog?" she said, stroking his head.

He sighed with satisfaction.

Julie placed the book on the floor in front of her and opened it carefully. In the top left corner of its hard cover was a handwritten inscription that she had forgotten about, a short and cryptic message she'd always questioned as a child: *CE – You don't have to go far to find your own wonderland. Just look inside your head. – Daddy.*

"I don't know, Julie-bean," her own dad would answer each time she asked whose initials were in the cover of her book. "Maybe it was somebody else's book before it was yours."

As a youngster, she didn't understand the concept of used books, and her curiosity had been relentless. But her dad had been right, no doubt, because she could now see that the inscription wasn't written by him – it wasn't even close to his police officer scribble. She hesitated for a few seconds.

*Turn the page, Jules.*

On the following page, where the book's title was repeated with a painted illustration of Alice peering into a darkened rabbit-hole, another handwritten note appeared. This one she didn't remember. The handwriting was the same as the inscription, but the ink appeared fresher, its black etched into the white page like a brand-new tattoo:

*Welcome to MY wonderland, Julie, where the answers lie, if you can find them. To begin the adventure, turn to page 62. – Theo*

The book suddenly felt hot in her hands, a dark energy radiating from its spine. Julie could now see where the bulges were coming from, like bookmarks separating sections of the story. She could have just gone straight to the first one, then the next, but that's not what Theo had intended. *He wants you to figure it out, Jules. He wants you to find him.*

The killer's puzzle was too intriguing to avoid. She turned to page 62, where she found part of a conversation between a lost Alice and the perplexing Cheshire Cat underlined:

*"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"*

*"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."*

*"I don't much care where..."*

*"Then it doesn't matter which way you go."*

*"...so long as I get somewhere."*

*"Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough."*

*"But I don't want to go among mad people."*

*"Oh, you can't help that..."*

Bile crept from Julie's stomach into her throat as she read the next line, her lifelong mantra that didn't sound so soothing anymore:

*"...we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."*

*"How do you know I'm mad?"*

*"You must be, or you wouldn't have come here."*

At the bottom of the page, another scribbled direction told her where to go next: *Page 115*. Julie flipped through the book, toward the end. When she got to the next underlined passage, she found a newspaper clipping with it, the same article she had discovered back in *The Hopes Ridge Herald* archives room. She needed only to read the headline, announcing that the investigation into GranBelle Jenny's death was over, that her mysterious drowning had been ruled an accident. The cold *feeling* crept across her neck. She put the clipping aside and read the second clue:

*"Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop."*

*You were right all along, Jules. It all started with GranBelle Jenny.*

A new direction appeared above the text: *Page 99*. She quickly pulled the pages backward, her heart now racing. Another of the killer's bookmarks, a single Polaroid photograph, sat between pages 98 and 99. In the photo were Pam Russett and Natalie Nix, a sickening image of them together that hadn't been part of the police evidence. This picture had been taken before their bodies were discovered, when the two young women were still alive. They were next to each other, each naked and bound to a wooden chair, a metal washtub full of water in front of them, a stomach-turning look of fear on their faces. Julie could almost see the two girls trembling through the static film. She turned her eyes to the next set of underlined words:

*"It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."*

Julie paused and looked away from the book, back to her mother's old wooden sewing machine. *What the hell does this have to do with your crazy mother? Why here, hidden inside her only saving grace? Who are you, Theo?* She went back to the book, now

anticipating the next page number, almost hopeful for it. She didn't have far to go once she found it: *Page 93*, and yet another Polaroid of yet another victim, this one alone but naked like Pam and Natalie, and like them, with fear etched on her face. Her eyes were unnaturally wide and pleading, her black hair soaked wet and sticking to her cheeks and forehead like streaks of inky blood. Julie went to lay the photograph aside but felt something underneath it, another picture, stuck to the backside. She peeled them apart, revealing what had to be a close-up shot of the victim's hands tied behind her back, and a length of red thread dangling from a knot around the girl's left ring finger. *The red rings...that's how he did it.* She pulled her eyes to a short, underlined exclamation in the book:

*"What a curious plan!"*

Quickly, she followed the next instruction. At page 59, she discovered the largest bulge: a collection of ten more Polaroids, with girls in various states of distress, nearly all of them with a knowing look in their eyes, a look that said they knew their fate. And more red thread, tied around more left ring fingers. A rush of nausea hit Julie's stomach as she imagined herself on the other side of the camera, sensing the killer's warped feeling of joy, the high he had gotten torturing each of his victims. The text read:

*"You don't know much and that's a fact."*

"Fuck you, Theo!" she yelled, prompting a twitch from Jerry's ears.

She stacked the photos on top of the first two, creating a neat and tidy pile of horrifying inhumanity. Her throat clenched as another heave of sickness threatened to climb from her belly into her mouth.

*Finish it, Jules. It's the only way.*

## Chapter 36

Vicki Persall Beck woke with a jolt. Had she been free-falling from a big-city skyscraper and just managed to save herself inches from the concrete sidewalk below? Or being chased by a ten-foot-tall monster with razor-sharp teeth? She had no idea, because she couldn't remember anything about the terrifying nightmare that had forced her from a deep sleep. Except for two faces from her past. In the moonlight of her bedroom, she could still see them, sinister and foreboding and...evil. And unlike most dreamed images, the faces refused to fade and float away into the darkness. Instead, they lingered in her mind, smiling with a terrible knowledge that Vicki couldn't recall. If her nightmare had shown her anything, it was gone. Nothing remained but the ominous faces that she recognized without any doubt.

Her arm trembled as she reached from under her bed's covers, searching with her fingers for her phone, keeping her eyes focused on the faces in spite of the fear they conjured in her. She brought the phone toward her mouth and gave it a simple command: "Dial Julie Danner."

As soon as the phone began to ring, the faces faded away.

Inside the fold of pages 86 and 87, Julie discovered another Polaroid. The killer had stuck with his dated form of keepsake through the years, even though this photo was only a year old – she knew that as soon as she saw who was in it.

The underlined sentence on this page was perverse in its message, like a warped lesson the mysterious Theo was trying to teach:

*"Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it."*

Julie's face went hot, her neck sweaty. Even Jerry could sense the change. He took his head from her leg and stood. The photograph in her hand burned. She whipped her eyes back and forth, from the passage to the picture, her mind desperate to make the connection that seemed just beyond her grasp.

The vibration from her jeans pocket broke her concentration and shook her from her frustration and anger. She looked at the screen with a brief moment of hope that it was Allison returning her calls at last. Instead, she was bewildered by the name that appeared.

"Vicki," she said flatly. "Is everything ok? It's the middle of the night."

"I know, Julie, but I had to call." Her voice quivered with each word she spoke. "It had to be now. I remember their names. The brother and sister who stayed with me and GranBelle Jenny. The names came to me in my sleep. I know why the name 'Leo' sounded so familiar." Vicki's words were getting faster, gaining traction. "When you mentioned it before. It's so close."

"It's 'Theo,' isn't it?"

"How'd you know?"

"It doesn't matter. And his sister?"

"It was 'Liz,'" Vicki blurted out, relief coating her voice.

Julie looked at the photograph in her hand, its heat seeming supernatural all of a sudden. The raging fog in her brain had dissipated, the answers finally clear. The victim in Theo's last Polaroid had been different from the others: she wasn't tortured or tied up, and she had not died slowly. She was inside a bathtub, completely submerged, her ice-blue eyes still open despite a stomach full of sleeping pills. Just as Julie had found her that fateful night, maybe just moments after he had taken her mother's picture.

"Their names were Theo and Liz Dempsey," Vicki continued. "I know it without a single shred of doubt. Does that help? God, I hope so."

"More than you know. I have to go now, Vicki."

“Julie – are you ok?”

“I will be.”

She hung up the phone just as she noticed a final instruction in the bottom corner of the last page she had turned to.

*One more message – Page 17.*

Julie read her uncle Theo Dempsey’s last clue over and over again, glancing in between each reading at the final Polaroid picture she had found with it:

*“...this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people.”*

*And it drove her mad...*

The last bit had been added in Theo’s hand.

The photograph was dated, the oldest one inside her worn copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The young woman in the picture, caught in midstride, had a wry smile on her face, her frame tall and slender. Her long dark hair and sharp blue eyes cut through the Polaroid’s hazy film. It was Julie’s mother Elizabeth, a teenage version of the woman Julie had only known as a broken adult. She was footloose and carefree, captured on a pleasant fall day. *Liz Dempsey – before the madness.*

What was Theo was trying to tell her?

*Maybe you don’t understand because you don’t have the mind of a sicko, Jules.*

She stood up, her head swimming. Her uncle, a man she didn’t even know existed, was crazy, just like her mother. *Crazier, Jules – the man is a serial killer.* She bent down until the dizziness passed.

When her eyes cleared, Julie saw the *Alice* book open on the floor, to the inscription page. This hadn't been some used book bought somewhere else, as her dad had always insisted.

"CE – this book was my sister's," she said aloud. "It was Charlotte Eve's before it was mine. But that's not Dad's handwriting. That's..."

And just like that, the connections were finally complete.

Julie realized without hesitation what she had to do next. She was out the door and in her old Honda in mere minutes, her *Alice* book on the passenger seat beside her. She didn't have far to drive, and yet her intuition told her she didn't have much time. She backed out into the street and gassed the car toward her destination, the house on Grayson Lane.

## Chapter 37

The front porch light of Julie's old house was on, illuminating the door and the steps and part of the quiet yard. It was the darkest time of night, and Todd Dylan's Range Rover sat parked in the gravel drive. The window next to the front door had thick new blinds that were shut tight against prying eyes. There was no way to tell if anyone was moving inside. Julie stared at the house. It looked so harmless, so welcoming. But now she knew the terrible secrets it held.

*He killed you, GranBelle Jenny, didn't he? Just like he killed all those girls.*

What she didn't know was why. Why had Theo so callously killed the neighborhood grandmother of Hopes Ridge? With his other victims, the reasoning, as sick and perverted as it was, had become obvious. But the murder of GranBelle Jenny didn't fit the profile – it just didn't make any sense.

Julie reached over and grabbed her *Alice* book, cradling it under her arm as she opened the car door. She breathed in the cool October night air, letting its crispness bite into her lungs. The walk to her old front door felt longer than before, her legs in slow-motion, the crackling leaves under her feet the only sound she could hear. The first wooden step of the porch creaked when she put her weight on it, and it caused her muscles to lock up.

*What are you worried about, Jules? That he's going to hear you coming? Isn't that what he's wanted all along?*

She took another step forward, stretching her long legs so that she was right in front of the door. The house felt alive, like it had a vile but vibrant heartbeat, like it might swallow Julie whole when the door opened. With her free hand, she knocked hard three times. The sound of the deadbolt unlocking was immediate. Julie regained control of her body's muscles, flexing them tight, and she gritted her teeth.

"Julie," Todd said sweetly. "Didn't expect to see you back so soon."

He was dressed in business clothes, the sleeves on his white button-down rolled halfway up, his shirt tucked neatly into his dress pants. *Sure is strange attire for this time of night.* There was a thin layer of perspiration on his forehead, but otherwise he appeared calm and relaxed. When Julie glanced at his arms, just before he moved them behind his back, she swore the cuffs on his rolled-up sleeves were wet, soaked even.

With a resolute look, she stared him directly in his eyes – those ice-blue eyes that mirrored her own. “How’d you know it was me?”

He pointed to the peephole on the door. “Camera – had it installed this afternoon. Can’t be too careful, no matter how nice the neighborhood seems.” He tilted his head, eyeing the book under her arm. “What you got there?”

*Gut-check time, Jules. Are you sure you’re ready to go down this road?*

She held up the book so that he could see its faded cover. Watching his face closely, she tried to gauge his response, but he was stoic. “It’s a gift,” she said. “From my uncle.”

Unlike his typical subtle smile, a broad grin formed on Todd’s face. “Would you like to come in, Julie? We’ve got an awful lot to discuss.”

And with that, the stage was set, the answer to all her questions within reach, but with what consequences she could only guess. Once she crossed that threshold, she knew she would lose any control of the situation she might have. She would be in his domain, but also GranBelle Jenny’s. *It’s the only way to get the full story, Jules. To finally know why.*

Todd Dylan took a step back and offered her the opening. Julie walked straight through it, a boldness in her steps that she hoped would conceal the fear that was coursing through her body.

“So where’d you find the book?” Todd asked playfully as he sat across from her. Julie had plopped down casually on the couch as soon as she came in, another attempt to show a confidence that wasn’t completely real.

*Be careful, Jules. The bastard is enjoying himself.*

Her stomach twisted, but she pushed through it, and tried to direct the conversation her way.

“You know what? I always thought this was my book, Todd...oh, wait. What should I call you exactly?”

He stared at her, twisting his head to one side, that now sickening half-smile on his lips. “What’s in a name?”

“Everything, *Theo*.”

His laughter was sudden but quiet, under his breath almost. “And who’s book was it, Julie?”

She opened the front cover and pointed to the inscription. “CE – that’s Charlotte Eve.”

“Look at you, so smart.”

“But it’s the ‘Daddy’ part that’s got me wondering, Theo – did you really believe she was your daughter?”

He held his menacing smile. “We’ll get to that juicy part of the story in due time. Tell me, what else do you know?”

“I know you killed those girls. And I know you think you did it for my mother.”

“Oh, I did do it for your mother, Julie. And she loved every single second of it. Do you know where the pictures came from?”

Julie hesitated. “From you, right?”

“They were my tribute to your mother. Those women were the gifts I gave her to show her my undying love and commitment. Each and every one of them, through the years, were a way to honor her. A sacrifice, if you will. And she kept them, Julie.

Hidden from you and your father, of course. But she kept them, in a little shoebox in the back of her closet. Now ask me how I found them?"

Julie had no doubt how he'd found the pictures. And when. Sometime either before he killed her mother or right after. She could see him ransacking her room, desperate to find proof she'd saved them. But she wasn't about to let him direct the conversation.

"You put the book there, in her sewing table, the night you murdered her," Julie said, just above a whisper.

"And then I led you right to it. I will admit, it was a vague clue – you couldn't have known what the red thread represented, and you probably still don't now. But what's life without a little challenge, right? Honestly, Julie, I'm surprised. I thought you were sharper than most. And yet it's taken a whole year for you to put all this together."

"I wish I'd found everything that night. It would have saved me and my dad so much grief. And Allison would have never laid eyes on you."

"But you didn't, Julie. It was a test, you see? And unfortunately, you failed, even with the help of your miserable father. But we're here now. And you caught me in a talkative mood. Ask me anything – anything at all."

Julie's head was spinning. She couldn't grasp the calm insanity of the man across from her, or that he was actually her uncle.

"C'mon, Julie, fire away. There's got to be something you still don't know."

Her mouth reacted instinctively, blurting out the one thing she had come there to find out. "Why GranBelle Jenny?"

"Of course!" Theo said enthusiastically, standing. "That *is* the big question with no obvious answer. Isn't that right, old GranBelle?" He looked up to the ceiling mockingly. Julie was glued to the sofa, her muscles paralyzed. "There was a reason, Julie. And I'll tell you what it was – I'll tell you why, but first, you have to do something for me."

Julie watched as he reached into his back pocket and retrieved a silver medical inhaler, its finish shimmering in the light. *Wake up, Jules! Time to focus! Time to get the hell*

*out of here!* Her brain cleared a bit. The scenario had turned perilous. Her deranged Uncle Theo was now standing between her and the front door. And there was no way he was going to let her leave.

“You expect me to inhale that, whatever it is?”

“Just a little sedative, that’s all. It’s really the only way.”

“Like hell it is.”

Julie popped up from the couch and put her left foot on the coffee table, using it as leverage. She pushed off and leapt for the front door, spying the doorknob on the other side of Theo’s body. If she could get to it, she might have a chance.

As she flew across the room, she could see that she would reach it, that her quick thinking might actually give her an advantage. Her feet hit the ground just as her hand grabbed the doorknob, her body brushing against his, and then she was by him. For a fleeting moment, she thought she had made it, that her escape was possible.

“Not so fast,” he whispered in her ear, wrapping his arm around her neck.

She felt a burning pain along her jawline, saw a flash of reflective light. With his chokehold firmly in place, he showed her the knife that had grazed her jaw.

“Like I said, Julie, it really is the only way.”

With his other hand, he raised the inhaler to her mouth.

“Don’t you want to know what happened to her? Aren’t you just *dying* to know?”

The inhaler’s smooth metal penetrated her closed lips as she tried to fight back, grabbing at his forearm around her throat. He brought the blade of the knife into her peripheral vision again.

“You wouldn’t be the first girl I’ve had to cut, just so you know.”

Thinking back to the Polaroids, Julie visualized the young women, helplessly afraid, facing their own fragile mortality. She believed him, understood what his depraved mind was capable of. She opened her lips, giving up her resistance, and he slid the oval opening of the inhaler all the way into her mouth. The sound of the spray came first,

before the bitter drug hit the back of her tongue. Her consciousness began to fade fast, and yet she could still hear him as he sprayed again, and again, and again.

## Chapter 38

It was after nine AM by the time Chuck Danner woke up. He was normally an early riser, but his dreams had been full of barking dogs and murdered women and unraveling spools of red thread, sending him back to sleep in search of peace and rest. When he finally did slide from the bed to his wheelchair, he was relieved to be awake.

Rocko the mutt sat up on the bed and barked, but not at him. His attention was on the bedroom's doorway, where Julie's dog Jerry stood, waiting.

"What are you doing, Jerry? You not get your breakfast this morning?"

He barked twice, and one of the dreams, still blurry and vague, came back to Chuck. A chill ran across the nape of his neck, but he shook it off.

"Alright, boys, c'mon. Let's get some grub."

Both dogs followed him out to the kitchen, where he stopped at the table, noticing a note there. He picked it up and read its short message:

*Dad,*

*Had to take care of something. Don't worry if I'm gone a bit. Be back as soon as I can.*

*Love you, old man,*

*Julie*

Chuck put the note back down on the table. He didn't like what it said, no matter how innocuous it seemed, especially after their conversation the day before, and their discovery that Elizabeth's suicide had actually been a murder. Julie could be a maverick, no doubt, and usually she was smart with her actions. But she'd seemed on edge, making him apprehensive about where she might have gone this time, and what she was trying to take care of.

Both dogs barked at him, stirring him from his distraction, and he realized he was still fighting his brain's lingering morning cobwebs.

"Alright, alright. Keep your damn pants on, boys."

He poured them each a bowl of dog food and went straight to the coffeemaker. As the coffee brewed, he wheeled himself back to his study and up to his work desk. The loose papers of a Texas police report were still scattered across his computer's keyboard, left there from the previous day. After he moved the papers out of the way, he clicked on his computer and checked the morning's emails.

A fresh email from his Michigan buddy caught his attention.

"Let's see what you've got for us, Hugh." He clicked open the email.

*Good news, Chuck. I finally found that sketch.*

Chuck stared at the paperclip icon for a good minute before he opened it. When he did, the penciled image loaded onto his monitor's screen slowly, from top to bottom. It was the face of the serial killer he had been hunting – and it was a face he knew.

"It's Todd Dylan," he said to the screen, shocked at his own words. This version of Todd was decades younger, with longer hair and a thick mustache. But there was no mistaking the two men were the same.

But there was something else too. It was in the shape of the jawline and the mouth, the high cheekbones – and most of all, the eyes. Chuck was gripped in horror, seeing the features of his dead wife staring back at him.

"Holy shit. Allison!" he yelled, a frantic helplessness welling up inside him. Chuck Danner was not one to run scared – his cop years had taught him to be fearless. "But here I am with no goddam legs. Dammit, where's Julie when you need her?"

As he said it, his apprehension about the note made sense. His intuition had been on high alert for a reason: Julie was there, already. She had figured it all out on her own, without the sketch.

Chuck grabbed his cell phone and dialed her number, but it went straight to voicemail. After another failed attempt, he called the Hopes Ridge police station. He knew the local cops couldn't do much based on a hunch, but he had to try something. It didn't hurt that he still knew some guys on the force.

"Hopes Ridge Police," a man answered after two rings.

"Detective Sanderson, please," Chuck said, hearing a hint of panic in his own voice. The phone clicked and started ringing again.

"This is Sanderson," a coarse voice announced, his words running together.

"Pete, it's Chuck Danner. Listen, I've got a strange request. I need a house search done – 134 Grayson Lane."

"Chuck, you know I can't do that. Not without good reason. And not without a warrant."

"I own the house, Pete. Got a guy over there renting from me, might be into some drugs and shit. I just want you to check it out. If you would."

There was silence on the other end of the phone before Detective Sanderson relented. "Alright, I'll send a black-and-white over. But if your tenant knows better, he can refuse a search."

"Yeah, Pete, I know that. But maybe he won't." Chuck's voice was quivering.

"You sure it's just drugs we're talking about here, Chuck?"

"Just let me know what you find," he answered, barely getting the words out. "And thanks, Pete. I owe you one."

Chuck hung up the phone and looked over at Hugh Rainey's sketch again. It seemed like the man in the drawing was looking back at him, glaring at him, laughing at him.

He waited nervously for ten minutes, then twenty. Rocko and Jerry the MouseDog had come into the bedroom. They both stood nervously watching him. Chuck couldn't take it any longer.

"Screw this, boys," he said to the dogs.

Grabbing a jacket from the closet as he went out the front door, Chuck wheeled himself around to the garage. Using his arms, he hoisted himself up into the old converted GMC pickup, trying to formulate a plan for when he arrived at Grayson Lane. He disassembled the larger wheels from his chair and loaded the pieces over his body into the passenger seat. The physical exertion forced him to take a moment to catch his breath. His hand shook as he put the key in the ignition.

"Calm down, old boy, just calm down."

With one twist of the key, he knew he was in trouble. The pickup wouldn't crank. He tried again, but it refused.

"Goddammit! Not now!"

He gave it one last turn, and the engine sputtered, but that's all.

"Alright, then. Looks like we're gonna have to do this the hard way."

As Chuck climbed down from his truck, he was resolute – he was going to the house on Grayson Lane even if it meant wheeling himself the whole way.

The knocking, steady and measured, roused Julie. Five solid knocks on a door, somewhere.

She struggled to comprehend it. Her eyelids were too heavy, like they were thick stage curtains, ready to reveal the tragedy's next scene but in need of two strong stagehands to draw them upward. Another round of knocking echoed in her ears, a door creaking open, voices.

"Afternoon. What can I do for you?" The voice was familiar.

"We received a request from your landlord, Mr. Dylan."

*Yes...Todd Dylan...THEO!*

"A request? For what?"

"A quick search of the house, sir. Just a check-in."

*Those are cops, Jules! Dad knows you're here!*

"Am I under investigation?"

Her eyelids were still fighting her, but her ears were wide open, and her brain was fast catching up. *You're in the house, Jules. Remember?*

"No, sir. No investigation. Like I said, just a check-in. Some landlords like to make sure their tenants are on the up-and-up."

*Oh, thank God for Dad.*

"Well, officer, I can assure you that everything is on the up-and-up. The house is just fine."

"I'm sure it is, sir. But even so..."

"Listen, guys, I know you think you've got a job to do, but I'll need to see a warrant before I let you disturb my day like this."

*Shit. Scream, Jules! Let them know you're here!*

She opened her mouth, readied her vocal cords for the top of their register, and pushed out a yell with all the strength her diaphragm could muster. But nothing came out, only the sound of screeching air, like a balloon with a slow leak. She tried again, with the same agonizing result.

*Of course he thought of that. He's been doing this too long to let a screaming girl become his undoing.*

"You sure about that warrant, Mr. Dylan?"

"I'm positive, officers."

She could see the half-smile on Theo's face now, him outsmarting her dad, buying himself all the time he needed. The sound of the door slamming shut came to her ears.

She drew in a deep breath and pulled on her eyelids with muscles she didn't even know she had. They responded, and her futile situation was finally revealed.

She was in the kitchen on Grayson Lane, sitting in the middle of it, not a foot from the area where she slipped on the puddle of water, almost directly under the spot where she saw the circle of white light pouring out of the ceiling. In front of her, exactly where the freezing cold place in the floor had been, was a giant metal tub of water, at least two feet deep. She raised her head, her eyes blinking in long drawn-out movements. Across from her, a few feet from the tub, was Allison, naked and tied to a wooden chair. Her best friend was unconscious, her head lolled sideways, her blonde hair soaking wet, her body shivering.

*Just like the girls in the Polaroids.*

Julie's gut reaction was to save her friend, to untie her, to see if she was still alive. But then she realized that her own position wasn't that much different. Her hands were behind her back, bound at the wrists. Her ankles were tied to the front two legs of her own wooden chair. Another rope held her to it at her thighs, and another across the middle of her rib cage. She couldn't move, no matter how hard she tried.

The only deviation her captor had made with Julie was in her clothing. She wasn't naked like Allison, not humiliated in that way. Instead, she was wearing a dress of black silk, with a purple and green abstract print all over. Stylish, but dated. It held a purpose, Julie could sense it.

Theo's footsteps approached the swinging door, the one she had installed herself to stop Jerry's nighttime barking. Her anger was palpable, her frustration with her own brazen stupidity piquing.

*"Settle down, Jules. This is far from over."*

The voice startled her, tempering her building rage. It wasn't the normal voice in her head, it was someone else's. An older woman's voice, reassuring and calm.

*"It's me, Jules. It's GranBelle Jenny, and I'm right here with you."*

The kitchen's door swung open, and in came Theo, looking anxiously toward her.  
"Good! You're awake," he said. "Now, we get to have some real fun."

## Chapter 39

GranBelle Jenny's supernatural state had frustrating physical limitations. It had taken decades to learn ways to communicate, but she was determined to get someone's attention.

Starting with noises and bumps, she quickly found out the living could be a hard bunch to convince. She moved on to the cold *feelings* next. A breath across the neck here, a brush with the fingertips there. But those also proved easy for people to dismiss. "This house is awful drafty," some would say, or "Turn the air conditioner down!"

With her options seemingly limited, she turned to smells, a much harder skill to hone, and when too subtle, another simple coincidence that people would ignore. The first time her conjured scent worked was with Julie's dad Chuck, as he lay dying from a gunshot wound. She had gone to him with jasmine, a reminiscent smell, a soothing smell from his childhood. And he had paid attention, fought to live, abided by her angelic instructions. Elizabeth Dempsey Danner had remained exactly where she needed to be, while Julie grew up and grew strong enough to face the reality of her family history.

After that came baby powder, the scent of new life, clean and healthy new life. Babies had always inspired GranBelle Jenny and given her purpose, maybe because she couldn't have any of her own. The powder was harmless enough, but she found that she could make it overwhelming and downright scary. That's what had driven the Eastons out, that sweet couple with the newborn, and the darling little toddler who became a bit of a playmate. She hated to do it, but she had to. The house had to be empty, otherwise Julie would have never moved there.

When she found a way to invoke the deathly stink, it proved to be even more powerful than the powder. Julie had taken notice after that, after refuting everything else – even the creative puddle of water in the kitchen and the song on the possessed

record player. Those tricks weren't hard for Jenny to pull off, but she sure was disappointed when Julie ignored them. The dog had been a believer long before the girl. Unfortunately, dogs, like spirits, can only do so much.

So with the *feelings* and the smells and the music and the puddles of water, GranBelle Jenny had been trying to guide Julie to Theo all along – and also to Liz, before she was gone to the other side herself. But the ghost had not seen this ending when she began her hauntings. She had not wanted Julie to end up in his hands, captured and bound and at his mercy. That's why she had pushed her supernatural abilities to the brink, finding the strength to actually speak to the young girl with the unknown ability, and thankfully Julie had been open enough to listen.

Awake and alert with the voice of GranBelle Jenny in her head, Julie watched as Theo crossed the kitchen and put his hand in front of Allison's open mouth. He held it there for a few seconds, turning his face to the ceiling as he concentrated.

"And we have a winner!" he announced, like an overdramatic game show host. Julie must have shown him a chink in her emotional armor, a glimpse of her abject disappointment in the news of her best friend's death. "Oh, don't worry. She's still breathing. I was just hoping she hadn't given up – I'm not quite done with her yet."

"Let me go, Theo," Julie wheezed.

"No can do, Julie. I've got plans for you. You weren't supposed to be here yet – Allison here was going to be my bait – but we can make do. I mean, I can be a spontaneous guy." His cheerful act was calculated and maddening.

"What about the cops? They'll be back." Her throat stung as she tried to talk above a whisper.

“No, they won’t,” Theo said confidently. “There’s not a judge in this state that would grant them a warrant. And your dad...with those legs of his...well, we know he can’t help you, now can he?”

He moved behind her. Julie felt his hands in her hair, his fingers on her scalp. Burning bile rose into her tightened throat.

“It’s amazing, just how much you look like her.” His hands slipped down to her shoulders, bare except for the dress’s thin straps. “She was so beautiful.”

Julie tried to pull away from him, but the rope around her ribs was too tight. He rubbed his hands on her skin, down her arms, across the top of her chest. Mercifully, he stopped before he went any further, stepping around the metal tub until he was facing her.

“That’s her dress, you know,” he said with longing. “She wore it the night we conceived your sister.”

“You’re twisted, did you know that?” There was actual sound to her voice now, a hoarseness just above a whisper.

“I am what your mother made me, that’s all.”

Julie’s sixth sense came to life. There was something more than a warped infatuation behind what he had said.

“How’d she do that?” Julie asked, taming her indignation.

“You want to know what happened to GranBelle Jenny, right?”

“Yes. It’s the one thing I still don’t understand.”

“Ok, but you may want to sit down for this story,” he poked, laughing under his breath at his own sick sense of humor. “You see, sweet Liz *was very fond of pretending to be two people...*”

“Everyone thought we were twins, but that wasn’t true. She was older than me, just shy of a year. They call that Irish twins – close but not the real thing. And that matters, because big sis always took care of me. And...she taught me things. Especially after our mother died. Father was a brilliant man, but restless. He kept us on the move. We landed in this quaint little piece of shit town when I was thirteen – right around the time your mother was starting to teach me the most important things in life.” The half-smile slithered across his lips.

A strange brew of emotions rolled through Julie as she listened to him reminisce. There was fascination and curiosity, thickly layered with disgust. And deep down, there was a specific kind of dread – she was frightened of the blood that she could feel running rapidly through her veins. *His blood...and her blood.*

“It was summertime,” Theo continued. “And while Father worked, Liz and I roamed the streets of Hopes Ridge on our bicycles. Now I’ll admit, I was a bit of a troublemaker back then. I would do stupid things, teenage boy things. One day that summer, we walked up on this dog, a stray little fuck. I noticed a pond nearby, and I had an impulse, like kids do. I picked the dog up, and dragged him to that pond, and I held him under the water, while your mother watched. He fought hard, turned into a wild beast of an animal, biting, clawing, frantic to survive. But I held him under, until his fighting was done.”

Julie watched as her uncle looked away from her. She could see the memory in his face, the sentimental look in his ice-blue eyes. The bile from her stomach threatened. She cleared her throat, and it felt like razorblades slicing through her soft tissue.

“Sorry, I get distracted with the past,” Theo said. “So there I am, the ultimate deed done, my body bursting with excitement, and behind me I hear a voice, a woman yelling.” He put on a mock southern accent as he continued. “It was none other than Mrs. Martha Jennings, the little town’s beloved GranBelle Jenny, screaming at me, telling me I had done a terrible thing.” He paused, a loathsome look on his face. “Well,

your mother came to my rescue, manufacturing a lie, saying it was a horrible accident. But GranBelle Jenny, that meddling bitch, wouldn't hear it – she'd been watching and had called the police. We could already hear the distant sirens wailing.

“My father knew we were different, and he'd managed somehow to keep us one step ahead of the law. But we couldn't outrun this one. I had a record from other states, and when the judge saw it, he decided I was a threat to society, even at my young and tender age. He was determined to set me straight and decided ‘One year in a juvenile detention center!’ was the way to achieve my redemption.” Theo banged his fist into the open palm of his other hand like a gavel.

“I could take the lack of freedom and the incarceration. There were plenty things and people to entertain me during my stay in detention. But being separated from your mother...the thought of that drove me mad. We told ourselves it was only a year – we could make it – our love could endure. Then word came, Father had died, and the juvey shrink who'd been getting in my head decided I was a true menace, not just a wayward teen. Next thing I know, my sentence was extended – I was to be locked up until my eighteenth birthday. Five years of my life gone, and I was sure that Liz would be gone with them. But guess who was waiting for me, the day I got out?”

Julie didn't answer, didn't want to participate in his grim tale of repulsive incest.

“Go ahead, take a shot.”

“Liz,” she gasped.

“That's right! Your mother waited for me for *five* years. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her, a full-grown woman, so beautiful it nearly broke my heart. She told me to get in the car with her, that she had a surprise for me. ‘A birthday present for my boy,’ she whispered, with a caress on my cheek.”

The cold *feeling* appeared, first on Julie's arms, still bound behind her back. It crept up her shoulders and neck. She knew what was coming, what her mother's sordid gift had been.

“We drove and drove, until we ended up right here, in this very house, in this very room. It was the best surprise I could imagine. In the corner,” he pointed to Allison, “sat the woman who had put me away, the woman who had separated us for all those years. Your mother had tied her up, just like this.” He was next to Allison now, his hand stroking the rope around her ribs. “And she had prepared a tub of water, just like the one in front of you.”

In a flurry of movement, Theo grabbed the back of Allison’s chair and dragged her to the tub, setting her up across from Julie, just a few feet away. Allison’s head rolled loosely on her neck like a rag doll, and Julie could hear her best friend moan as she fought to wake up. Theo took the chair with both hands and carefully tipped it forward, until its weight was on top of Allison, her knees against the linoleum floor, the edge of the metal tub cutting into the pit of her gut. She moaned again, more muffled this time. Julie watched helplessly.

“So imagine you’re me,” Theo said. “I’m sitting there, just where you are now, watching your mother do this, all for me.”

Theo’s actions had been so abrupt that Julie had not acknowledged his words. He wasn’t describing the murder of GranBelle Jenny at his own hands – he was saying that the murder had been committed at the hands of *her mother*.

Without warning, Theo untied the rope around Allison’s ribcage, and her semi-conscious head fell face-first into the water. She woke with a start, struggling to pull her mouth and nose from the washtub, but her reaction was short-lived. The position of her body, with her hands behind her back and between the chair’s wooden slats, was too awkward. She couldn’t hold herself up.

“Stop!” Julie tried to scream, but it didn’t resonate. Her throat was still too damaged, her vocal cords refusing to do their job.

Allison thrashed her head back and forth, but the water was too deep. Theo pulled her from the water by her hair. Allison gasped, gulping in air. The half-smile came back to Theo's mouth as he looked at Julie.

"I asked her to stop at first too," he said. "The poor old woman struggled so much, fought back just like that dog did. But as the day went on, and the torture did too, your mother taught me something else – revenge is exhilarating."

Julie's heart faltered. It was clear that Theo's mind was set, that he couldn't be deterred from his intentions, that his plan for her was already in motion, had been for months or years even. And her best friend Allison was a part of it too. The only way to stop him would be to free herself. She closed her eyes and focused on the binding around her wrists. *What happened to GranBelle Jenny? Thought she was here to help us.*

A sudden jolt of energy rushed into Julie's body, a transcendental shift deep within her soul. All at once, there was another layer to her being, another spiritual presence inside her. The memory of Bruce Woods's story flashed across her mind – the story about the boy in D.C. who "walked up the walls." There was no question about what was happening.

Julie was being possessed.

## Chapter 40

GranBelle Jenny had never a human being before. Truth be told, she didn't know how to. But with Theo's intent clear, and Julie's situation growing more desperate by the minute, she was willing to try. That is, until another energy entered the house on Grayson Lane.

The new spirit was black as night, a darkness that flowed through each room like ink in water. Jenny had never encountered anything like it in her time on the other side. As it filled the kitchen from corner to corner, she sensed recognition, followed by a fear she hadn't experienced since the living world. She knew exactly who the black spirit was.

Not knowing what else she could do, GranBelle Jenny retreated, letting the darkness spread. Then the darkness moved into Julie, taking over body, possessing her.

And GranBelle Jenny could only watch as it happened.

Julie recoiled at the presence inside her. She knew this energy. It was the same darkness inside Madam Angeline. And with the spirit's arrival came another fear – that Theo wasn't alone in his vengeful plans for her.

The black spirit began a horrifying slide show of memories. Julie could see what the spirit had done in its life before death, and with that knowledge, Julie understood exactly who it was.

*It's your mother, Jules. The black spirit is Elizabeth Dempsey Danner.*

Panic swept through her, clawing at the darkness inside her, fighting to regain control. Theo had bound her physically, and now her mother controlled her mind. Her entire body began to tremble uncontrollably.

Images of her mother's past flooded her brain, racing through a timeline of evil from youth to adulthood. Julie saw Theo, as a boy, on his knees beside a pond, his arms and neck and face flexed in joyous rage as he held that dog under the water. Next came a similar scene, except much later, the night her mother had died – there was Theo, blurred by rippling water, standing ominously above her bathroom tub. Then it was Chuck and Elizabeth's wedding day, her dad with a smile so wide it almost reached his ears, her mother not as happy, but still with a smile that was genuine.

As Julie saw more snapshots of her mother's life, the darkness inside her seemed to grow, its inky tentacles slowly spreading throughout her soul. There was another bathtub, this one full of children's laughter. She saw her mother leave the room, and when she came back, the memory turned bleak, the laughter gone, one child holding another under the water, drowning her. "Charlotte Eve!" a younger Elizabeth screamed. "What are you doing to Julianna?" And then Julie saw it – her mother's dark decision. She watched as Elizabeth took Charlotte Eve's head and pushed it under, holding it there with baby Julie still next to her in the tub.

*This is too much! Push her out, Jules! You don't need to see this!*

But there was nothing that she could do. Her mother had imprinted her own existence onto Julie's. They were joined, against any will she had left. One last memory appeared, this one just like what Theo had described. It was in the Grayson Lane kitchen, with GranBelle Jenny tied up, being tortured in a metal washtub, her mother lording over Jenny's struggling body. Water sloshed over the tub's edges, leaving a puddle on the floor, and from the other room, a record played. It was an older song, but one that Julie had gotten to know well – it was Sister Rosetta Tharpe singing her warning about strange things, and how they happened every day. The sloshing and splashing stopped, and Julie saw a circle of light open up in the ceiling above GranBelle Jenny's suddenly still body.

*That was her soul, Jules, leaving this world behind.*

From a place so deep that Julie didn't even know it existed, she found another ounce of fight. *"ENOUGH!!!"* her mind shouted at the black spirit, and suddenly her mother ended her invisible attack. *"Love me or not, I'm your daughter! That's got to mean something to you."* Julie thought back to the memory of her as a baby in the bathtub. *"At least it did once."*

A voice answered her, from within. The same old craggy voice that had spoken from inside Madam Angeline's unconscious body. *"This is who I am, Julianna,"* her mother told her. *"My soul is black, and it always has been."*

Julie felt her own heart sink. If Madam Angeline hadn't been able to stop her mother's darkness, how could she?

*"But you're right, Julianna,"* her mother continued. *"You do mean something to me. And I'm trying, the only way I know how – I'm here to help you."*

Julie was flabbergasted, confused by what she was hearing in her head. But there was one thing she couldn't deny – her fear had disappeared, replaced by a very real strength that she hadn't had before, and a perspective on her situation that was otherworldly.

## Chapter 41

Allison was wide awake now, begging for her life through wet and whispered pleas.

“Oh, sweet Allison,” Theo said to her, still holding her by her dripping blonde hair. “I hate to say this, but you were just an innocent bystander. If your friend over there had found the book when I led her to it a year ago, I wouldn’t have needed you. You were just a means to an end. And, unfortunately for you, this is the end.”

Allison stopped her begging and turned her eyes to Julie. “I’m so sorry,” she mouthed, a look of absolute resignation on her face.

Julie tried to convey a return look of confidence, as her mother’s dark energy transformed into something she could use. There was more to Julie’s being, though she couldn’t quantify it. Her perspective was dual, her senses doubled.

*Talk to him, Jules, slow him down. There might still be a way out of this, but you have to stop him from killing Allison first.*

Julie tried to think of something to say, some sort of distraction. Allison’s hands began to shake behind her back, her fingers wriggling with uncontrollable fear, and that’s when Julie noticed: there wasn’t a red thread tied around her left ring finger.

“Uncle Theo,” Julie wheezed as loud as she could. “Wait!”

He cut his eyes from Allison, and Julie could tell that something had changed. He had gone primal, barbaric, like a snake about to feed on its cornered prey.

“What about the thread?” she asked. “Tell me about the red thread.”

As if a switch had been flipped, Theo’s face lit up, the smile returned. “Yes! The thread! I can’t believe I almost forgot about the thread.” He grabbed the back of Allison’s chair and flipped her upright again. She continued to gulp down air, but she was relieved – Julie could see it. “So you noticed the close-ups, in the Polaroids?”

With her mother’s added spiritual force, Julie felt bolder. “I actually noticed it in crime scene photos months ago. I’ve been tracking you, Theo. All around the country.”

“But you didn’t catch me until now,” he snapped. He stopped and thought for a moment. “Bad choice of words – you never really caught me at all.”

As the conversation continued, Julie examined her surroundings through her mother’s added point of view. She could actually see behind herself, like she had eyes in the back of her head. There was the rope, tied in three knots around her wrists. She focused closer with her mind’s eye, and the knots became clear. Her fingers began to move instinctively, working at the rope with deliberation. And yet she could still concentrate on Theo and his words – a concentration she needed to sustain if she wanted to understand the monster who was her uncle.

“I assume you think you were marrying those girls in some way, putting your own kind of ring on their fingers.”

Theo nodded. “In a way, yes. I married every one of those girls, except for the innocent bystanders.” He glanced at Allison and gave her a wink before turning back to Julie, and back to his manic explanations.

“Confinement is a funny thing, Julie. You have more time in your days than you could ever imagine. That first year in the detention center, I goofed off with the other kids, wasting my time. But when my sentence was extended, when I knew I had another four years of confinement, I made a decision to use the time I had, by reading. So many books, so many stories. But there was one I came back to over and over again. It was a book on Chinese folklore, legends, myths. It was in this book that I learned the story of a boy and a girl, and the undeniable red thread of fate.”

The first knot at Julie’s wrists was loosening, but so slowly. Her fingers pressed on, her mind functioning on two different levels, almost beyond her control.

“The legend is this: A little boy notices a little girl one day, and a god comes to him, tells him that he is tied to her by the red thread of fate, that he will marry her, that he has no choice in the matter. The boy ignores the god, throws a rock at the girl, and runs away. Many years later, his marriage is arranged, and he doesn’t meet his wife until

their wedding day, where she is veiled. That night, when she removes her veil, he finally sees her face, and a hideous scar above her eye. 'A boy threw a rock at me when I was a girl,' she tells him, embarrassment in her voice. And the boy knows then that the god had been right."

"Destiny," Julie whispered, her hands maneuvering without pause.

"You know, they say our pinky swear comes from this legend. Two kids, connected forever by a crossing of fingers. Liz and I used to pinky swear all the time."

His ice-blue eyes were glistening, and Julie wondered if he might cry, right there in the kitchen where her mother had murdered GranBelle Jenny.

"But you weren't destined to be with her, Theo. That much is obvious."

A tear fell from his right eye as he turned sharply on Julie, rage taking over his sadness. "Oh, but we *were* destined! Can't you see that? After she killed Jenny, she said we were done, but she wasn't thinking right. I went to Birmingham, waiting for her, but she chose someone else, that fucking lawyer in the DA's office. She told me she loved *him*, that she was going to marry *him*, not me. So I showed her that I could do the same, with Natalie."

*Natalie Nix – one of the two Birmingham girls.*

"What happened with Natalie, Theo? Was she too nice a girl for you?" The first knot came loose, the ends of the rope dropping out of her fingers. She went to work on the next one.

"It wasn't what she *was*, Julie, it was what she *wasn't* – Natalie wasn't your mother, simple as that. So, I took her, and I presented her to my true love as a gift, just as she had done for me. But Liz wasn't happy with what I had done, Julie, because she knew who Natalie was. She had seen her from time to time, while visiting her friend from Hopes Ridge at her new apartment."

*Pam Russett – the first innocent bystander.*

"Once I had turned that wheel," Theo said, "we couldn't stop it from moving."

“Hometown connections, huh?”

Theo walked closer to her, and Julie’s hands froze. He leaned in, so close she could feel his warm breath as he spoke. “There may just be a little bit of your mother in you after all.”

*If you only knew, Uncle Theo...*

Julie started working the knots again, in defiance more than anything else. She could see Allison fading, her head getting too heavy to hold up. *He must have been torturing her for hours.* Julie’s resolve doubled, feeding on the spirit of Liz Dempsey that was giving her body a kind of super-strength.

“We drowned those girls, together. And that’s when I thought we had reconnected. I thought our red thread had finally brought us together for good. But she wouldn’t have it, as much as she wanted it.”

Another knot came undone, leaving only one more to untie. But Theo’s story was coming to a close quickly.

“We had one more night together, a few years later. The night she wore that dress.” He ran a finger under one of the straps on Julie’s shoulder, bringing it down toward her left breast, stopping before he got there. “We made Charlotte Eve, just as we were destined to do. And then your mother killed her – all because of you. ‘She’s too much like us, Theo,’ your mother told me. ‘I had to do it.’ So, you know what I did? I started killing, and killing, and killing. Showing off my brides, showing my true love what I could do. She fought her destiny too hard, Julie. I had to keep reminding her what she was.”

The flash of one last memory from her mother’s past came to Julie. It was the night she had wrecked her Ford Escape just south of Birmingham – the accident that had brought Julie back to Hopes Ridge. Julie saw what had happened, why her mother had been driving in the middle of the night. Elizabeth had found out Theo was back, and

she had gone to him. She wanted to kill him, but he was too strong for her, and she just barely escaped.

“She wasn’t like you, Theo, as much as you wanted her to be.”

“Oh, yes she was!” he screamed, before settling back into his insane tranquility. “She had refused her fate, that’s all, and she had to pay the price. But it wasn’t until you had come back to Hopes Ridge that the end became clear. Now, where were we?”

He walked to the other side of the metal tub, where Allison sat unconscious again, and he tipped her back over with a thud against the kitchen floor. Still untied at her ribs, her head splashed into the water, except this time she didn’t wake up.

“Her first. Then it’s just you and me.”

The last knot was the tightest. Julie’s fingers cramped, but her mother pushed her forward.

*“It’s now or never, Julianna. Get it done!”*

She felt the rope around her wrists pull away. Her hands were free, but the rest of her body was still tied to the chair. As she brought her arms forward, GranBelle Jenny’s wet and rotten deathly stink hit her nose, and she saw it hit Theo’s too. It was stronger than ever before. He doubled over and began to cough, while Julie discovered it wasn’t bothering her at all. She untied the single knot securing the rope around her ribs and bent down toward the metal tub. She grabbed its edges and yanked it out from under her best friend, turning it on its side as she did. Water spread across the linoleum floor, like the floods from a pouring rain on a flat desert plain.

As Julie went to work on the other ropes binding her lower half to the wooden chair, she saw Theo recover his senses. There wasn’t enough time, the ropes wouldn’t give. She felt him on her, knocking the chair backward, her head banging hard against the wet floor. With a burst of pain, her doubled strength was gone, the spirit of her mother vacated from her body.

“You bitch!” Theo yelled, punching her across the face as he did.

She pushed with her arms against his chest, but he wouldn't budge. Her energy was sapped, her muscles worn to nothing.

"I should have killed you the minute you walked into this house!" He punched her again.

The agony was all over, from her head to her toes, and her vision faded, like she was plunging into a deep darkness.

*This can't be the way it ends. It can't be.*

"It isn't, Jules," she heard GranBelle Jenny say calmly, just as a blinding white light overtook the room, followed by a loud echoing clang. She felt instant relief from the weight of Theo's body. Then another clang, metal against metal. "No, Jules," the ghost from Grayson Lane told her. "That's metal against bone."

She summoned enough strength to raise her head before she passed out, and in her disappearing vision she saw a short but stout figure standing over her, shadowed by bright sunshine pouring in from the open back door. It was a man with a shovel in his hand, the tool's blade covered in blood. He dropped the shovel and knelt down next to her, speaking in a meek voice that Julie recognized.

"You alright, Miss Julie? You alright?"

It was Rufus, and he had somehow known that her life needed saving. She mouthed the words "Thank you," to him. And just as her conscious mind slipped into a deep sleep, she smelled something that soothed her – the unmistakable scent of baby powder.

Despite Rufus's heroic shovel attack Theo Dempsey wasn't dead. As he lay face down on the kitchen floor, blood leaking from his ears and nose, GranBelle Jenny could see the water around his face ripple with each of his exhalations.

"It's not over yet," Elizabeth Danner told her, the black of her spirit now lighter, her scratchy voice smoother, less anguished. "Finish it."

The ghost of GranBelle Jenny, no longer scared of her killer's spirit, understood. She moved to each corner of the kitchen, gathering up the spilled water that had spread across the floor. As the tides of water flowed from her invisible force toward the center of the room, Jenny saw Rufus react. He jumped up from where Julie lay, retreating to the nearest counter, where he watched in fear as the ghost finished her work.

The water that had been prepared for Julie and Allison's drowning started to pool around Theo's unconscious body. It rose an inch, then two. His clothes and hair began to soak it up as it grew higher and higher. The water entered his open mouth slowly. His breaths became wet and labored, but he didn't wake. He couldn't wake.

GranBelle Jenny kept conjuring, bringing the water over his mouth and nose, then over his head. And although Theo Dempsey didn't knowingly struggle, his body fought back instinctively, convulsing as he drowned. She could see that he was dying, and that in his death a sinister evil would be extinguished from the living world.

As Theo's body finally gave up and turned deathly still, another energy filled the room, an all-consuming blackness that was so much worse than what Julie's mother had ever been. But as quickly as it had come, it was gone from the house on Grayson Lane, through a jagged black hole in the kitchen ceiling. To where, GranBelle Jenny had no idea.

*"It's done,"* Elizabeth's evolving spirit said.

And the ghost of GranBelle Jenny agreed.

## Chapter 42

The left side of Julie's face, still swollen and bruised, hurt every time she moved her mouth. Pushing her dad's wheelchair across the hospital parking lot, she stopped to pop two Advil and force them down, her still-sore throat clenching against the pills' rough edges.

"C'mon, already," Chuck demanded. "I've been waiting two goddam days to meet the man who saved my daughter's life. Let's get this show on the road."

"Moving as fast as I can, old man. Have you already forgotten my harrowing experience?"

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go."

Julie was surprised she could even move. Two days earlier, she had woken up in the emergency room, not remembering a thing that had happened. But it had all come back to her, along with the pain.

Her dad had been beside her, waiting for her to wake like old-dog cops do. He kept his emotions cool and detached, until he was sure she was safe. Then with red eyes, he rolled out of the room.

When he came back, he told her everything. Allison was alive, but in intensive care. "Her lungs are all torn up, Julie-bean. She'll recover, but she's gonna have a rough go." Todd Dylan, on the other hand, was dead. And Rufus had been their savior. "Got there in the nick of time. Said something about having a 'feeling' you were in trouble. Nearly beat Todd to death with a shovel. Bashed the guy's head in pretty good. But it's the damndest thing – when they found him, he was soaking wet, and the coroner claims he drowned."

Julie had three sets of stitches and was diagnosed with a concussion. The emergency room doctor insisted she spend the night in the hospital. Chuck gave her one more day to recuperate, and he was ready. "I just gotta meet the man who saved you." Julie

agreed to take him – because she had her own set of questions to ask, but hers were for the madam.

Madam Angeline was sitting up in her hospital bed when Julie and her dad came through the door. With no more breathing tube down her throat, she let out an exalted shout when she saw them.

“Hallelujah!” she shouted.

Julie left her dad at the door and rushed to the madam’s bedside.

“Can you hug?” she asked, reaching out her arms.

“Oh, I can hug, dear.”

The two embraced, holding on to each other like long-lost friends.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” Julie whispered in the madam’s ear.

“Your mother’s black spirit was showing me everything – she wanted me to see,” Angeline whispered back.

“And you told Rufus?”

“The next day, as soon as they took that tube out of my throat.”

Julie eased back from the madam, tears in her eyes.

“Your mother wasn’t trying to kill me, dear. She just couldn’t help what she was.”

“I know that now – she tried to change, she tried to control it.” Julie thought about herself, about the blood of Liz and Theo Dempsey still coursing through her own veins.

“Oh, she did change, dear. And she did it before it was too late, before she missed her chance to cross over.”

Madam Angeline smiled reassuringly, and Julie wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Well, where the hell’s this Rufus fella?” Chuck asked loudly, a well-timed interruption.

Madam Angeline's smile widened. "I like your Daddy already," she told Julie quietly before she answered him. "He's just down the hall, getting me a Coca-Cola. Be right back."

"So you're the psychic?" Chuck asked.

"Medium, Dad."

"It's alright," Madam Angeline said. "I've been called worse. Nice to meet you, Mr. Danner. You've got one fine daughter here, just so you know."

"Trust me, I know."

The room got quiet, until Rufus appeared in the doorway, surprised by the fresh pair of visitors.

"Hey, Rufus," Julie said as he stood in the doorway.

"Hey there, Miss Julie. How you feelin'?"

"Better, Rufus, much better. Thanks to you."

"Well come here, son, let me shake your hand," Chuck demanded. "It isn't every day I get to meet a real-life hero."

Rufus stuck out his hand sheepishly, and Chuck grabbed it hard.

"Thank you, son."

"It wadn't nothin', sir."

Julie walked over to the door and put her arms around Rufus's neck. "Oh, yes it was," she said in his ear. "It was everything."

It took the police another two days to clear the crime scene on Grayson Lane. When they were done, Julie told her dad she wanted to see it, by herself.

"You sure about that, Julie-bean? The place hasn't even been cleaned up yet."

"I need to, Dad."

He could see that she was resolved to go, with or without his blessing. "Alright, then."

The house was cool when she walked inside, the weather outside having taken a dive toward winter since her confrontation with Theo. She didn't mind the cold – it was a reminder, in a way. As she strolled through the rooms, the memories flooded back, of her own time there, and of the night she faced a killer who was her uncle head-on. She moved toward the kitchen.

When she pushed open the swinging door, a sterile scent came to her nose. To her left, the dried bloodstains from Theo's broken head remained, spread like abstract art on the linoleum floor. The metal washtub was gone, but a rust-colored oval stained the floor where it had been. Next to the stain, a chair still on its back.

Julie set the chair upright and sat down, her legs weakening.

"I guess I need to say, 'Thanks,' GranBelle Jenny."

There was no response, no voice in Julie's head answering her.

"Allison's going to be ok, in case you were wondering. She's breathing on her own now. They say it was a miracle."

Still nothing.

"Dad and I haven't discussed who Theo really was. I'm not sure he could handle it." She hesitated. "I don't know that I can handle it."

The ghost still didn't say anything, and Julie began to question the reality of it all.

"Maybe I am crazy – like my mother." Her voice had faded to a whisper. "Like my uncle."

With that, a sound came to her ears, distant and hard to decipher. She couldn't tell where it was coming from. She closed her eyes, listening as hard as she could. A smile crept onto her face as she recognized the music, the singing of Sister Rosetta Tharpe bringing her a sudden peace.

*Everyday - (Everyday) - Everyday - (Everyday) - There are strange things happening every day...*

Julie rose from her chair and looked to the spot on the ceiling, where GranBelle Jenny's spirit had left her earthly body.

"Good-bye, GranBelle Jenny. Maybe I'll see you again someday."

The music continued to play in her head, barely there. She left the kitchen behind, and walked confidently through the house, stopping at the front door for one last look. As she surveyed the front room, a corner of white protruding from between the couch's cushions caught her eye.

*Your Alice book, Jules.*

She went to it, grabbing it from the couch like she had from her mother's old sewing machine. As she flipped through its pages, her thumb held in the middle of the book on its own, out of her control. She stared at the underlined conversation, the first clue Theo had left her, and the mantra she had been telling herself for as long as she could remember: "*We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.*" A vicious shudder ran through her body, and she snapped the book closed. She put it under her arm and squeezed, not quite sure why she still wanted it, but not quite ready to let go of it yet either.

*We're all mad here, Jules – and don't you ever forget it.*

As she closed the front door behind her and locked it, her cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and answered.

"Hey there, Bruce."

"Where you been, Miss Danner?" the old editor asked jokingly.

"You know, this and that."

"I sure could use a good story for the *Herald*."

“Oh, I’ve got one, Bruce,” she said, looking back to the house as she walked across its browning front yard. “Might not get me that Pulitzer, but it’ll damn sure sell you some papers.”

“No fucking ghost stories, Miss Danner.”

She slid into her Honda’s driver seat.

“Ok, Bruce, no ghost stories.”

As she hung up the phone, she wondered if anyone would ever believe what had happened to her.

*They won’t, Jules. This is one secret you’ve got to keep to yourself. Forever.*

Her old Honda rattled to life when she turned the key, and her favorite classic rock station was playing a familiar song. It was Norman Greenbaum’s lone hit from 1969, the seminal “Spirit in the Sky.”

“Are you kidding me?” Julie asked, shaking her head.

She threw her *Alice* book on the backseat and rolled the car’s windows down, letting the wintry air chill her skin with goosebumps. And as she pulled away from the house on Grayson Lane, she cranked the volume all the way up, singing every single word as loud as she could, just like her old man had taught her.

THE END

## **Teaser for *Knock Three Times*** **The Second Book in the Julie Danner Series**

Standing outside the sprawling Birmingham mansion left vacant for decades, Julie Danner wonders why she agreed to accompany Madam Angeline on this venture. She's been trying to hone her paranormal skills since discovering her gift inside her own haunted house six months ago, but this case might prove too much for both of them.

The mansion's new owner hoped to return it to its former glory and transform it into a luxury hotel. But his plans stall when workers can't ignore the noises they keep hearing — ringing bells, echoing knocks, and children's screams — emanating from some invisible source. The same sounds send Julie running when she and Madam Angeline walk through the haunted building, raising fear in her wise mentor.

Julie regrets her encounter with yet another dark spirit, but she can't forget the mansion and its phantom noises. She's drawn back to the ominous building, much like she was to the house on Grayson Lane. Her intuition tells her something terrible happened inside the sprawling space generations ago, and she's certain the children's trapped spirits are the key.

Determined to discover why the children are calling to her, Julie enlists the help of Madam Angeline and her cold-case-solving dad to uncover the sinister secret that no one knew about the former Depression-era orphanage. Or perhaps they did know, and that's why they covered it up.

*“Knock three times if the answer is yes. Were all of you murdered here, inside this awful place?” Julie waited, hoping for no response, but the answer soon came loud and distinct.*

*The knocks that sounded like children's fists banging on hollow walls were clearer than ever before. And all in a resonating unison – once, twice, three times.*

*Followed by a blanket of deafening silence.*