



# DAPHNE'S WEB

A Haunting Romance

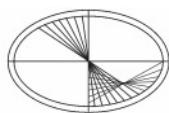
L. L. CARTIN



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DIVERTIR  
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### *Acknowledgment*

Daphne's Web unfolded from a synchronistic merging of people, places, and events. The storyline began in my Victorian home during a series of metaphysical classes when participants were frequently disrupted by unsettling supernatural activity. I invited two separate teams of paranormal investigators to validate and document the presence of ghosts. I thank both teams as well as the spirits in my house for inspiring this mystical work of fiction.

Thank you to my early manuscript readers who stuck with it to see if the story was a grabber and gave spot-on critiques which helped me stay on track. I especially thank my loving family, who I assume thought I was crazy but kept their opinions to themselves.

As a first time author, I foolishly believed all one needed for a novel was a good story and passion for writing. I gratefully acknowledge the editors of the initial, final, and final-final edits before the final edit leading to other final edits (sigh). Of course, it was Dr. Kenneth Tupper of Divertir Publishing who saw the potential and made it happen.

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## PROLOGUE 1956

NORMAN PALMOURE INHALED a deep drag from his cigarette and snuffed its remains into the overflowing ashtray on his gray, metal desk. He leaned back on a swivel chair to put his feet up while savoring the moment of having sold the infamous Victorian house belonging to the late Dr. Arthur Wake. It was the final detail in a long, messy estate settlement. The generous commission made the sale all the more sweet. Norman clasped his hands behind his head and contemplated another vacation.

"Hey Doug, come with me to put the sold sign on the Main Street property. I'll buy you a drink to celebrate," he offered his business partner.

"Someone actually bought that nightmare?"

Norman nodded, shrugging his shoulders.

"Right...and I bet you're telling me about the sale now because you already unloaded the antiques and made yourself a bundle." Doug was annoyed, thinking he missed out again.

"Nah, it sold yesterday afternoon to a woman with two kids. She's keeping everything the estate left behind."

"What's she like?" Doug asked. "There's probably more to it since you never let expensive furniture slip through your fingers."

"Honestly, the broad's a bit of an oddball, but she's perfect for that old house."

"Is she a looker?" Doug glanced at his partner, a handsome guy with one glob too many of pomade in his thick, black hair.

"Yeah, one hell of a looker," Norman muttered, outlining an hour-glass figure with his hands. "I could sure go for those green eyes and pretty face, but..."

"But what?"

"Her husband is Marc Betel, the big-shot criminal lawyer from the city."

"Oh—I guess with all his money, they'll restore the dump, make it a showplace, and entertain the hoity townsfolk. That'll leave you out," Doug teased.

"Not exactly," Norman corrected, ignoring the sarcasm. "She was

obsessed with the place and told me it was calling out to her, whatever that meant. Even wilder, the husband insisted he would never live in it. He wrote me a check right there on the front porch without stepping inside. It was like he couldn't wait to get the hell away."

"Go figure."

"There's more. Get this—Betel bought the house and then wrote her a check for fifty grand to renovate it, but she ripped up his check on the spot."

"The lady probably has money of her own."

"I don't think so. Actually, Betel asked me to keep an eye on her. He said she almost drowned recently, and now he thinks she's going nuts."

"And in that house, going nuts will happen sooner rather than later," Doug snickered.

"Who cares? Betel gave her what she wanted just to keep the peace, and I got what I wanted. That's why the deal was so quick."

"You like being a hero to beautiful damsels in distress, so I'm sure you'll be paying her a few visits like the last gal you sold a house to."

"Over my dead body," Norman mumbled as he stood up to leave the office. He smoothed back his hair, rolled down his shirtsleeves, and reached for his sports jacket, flinging it across one shoulder. Norman mulled over Mrs. Betel's response when he questioned how she could afford to repair the house on her own. To reject fifty thousand dollars was crazy, but not half as crazy as her glib pronouncement, the house will take care of everything.

The phone rang, and Doug gestured for his partner to go without him. Just as Norman opened the door, hail the size of gum balls pelted the ground. He grabbed an umbrella and walked out with a SOLD sign and mallet.

"Gees, Norm, worry about the damn sign later," Doug called after him, holding a hand over the phone's mouthpiece.

The office door slammed shut. Norman was superstitious and feared they could be stuck with that white elephant another three years if he didn't get the sign up. Despite its run-down condition, the turn of the century Victorian was prime waterfront real estate and should have sold easily. Unfortunately, it made a formidable impression on every prospective buyer.

Riding down Main Street, Norman could barely see through the heavy rain and sporadic pounding of hail. He parked his brand new, two-toned '56 convertible with white-walled tires in front of the house to wait for the weather to calm down. Looking across a crumbling cement path leading to a sorry wreck, Norman imagined how elegant the place must have been when built in the 1890s.

Peeling layers hinted at its history of being a Painted Lady. The roofline was enhanced with ornate, gingerbread gables. On the right side was a soaring tower, a stack of rounded rooms on every floor. It rose above the contoured roof to a pointed turret.

Norman believed town gossip about the original owner going half-mad in the house. Just walking onto the rickety porch and through the massive double front doors was creepy enough for him. One's eyes would instantly be drawn up the sweeping, spiral staircase leading to bedchambers and baths. Norman was glad his clients never asked to go upstairs.

He purposely removed the basement light bulb because something down there felt as though it had been lying in wait for decades. Whatever it was, he didn't want it disturbed—not on his watch. For three years, the house frightened away everyone, except for the undaunted new owner.

When the rain persisted, Norman gave up and decided to return to his office. Just as he shifted into drive, a bolt of lightning struck the Victorian, hitting the metal finial jutting up from the turret. In slow motion, the crackling current traveled down the tower, grounding itself in a sizzling burst of light. The flash illuminated a SOLD sign already on the front lawn.

Norman was spooked. He was the only agent with the listing, so who or what put the sign there? His hair stood up along the back of his neck. He floored the gas pedal and sped off, skidding down the street, swearing he would never set foot on the property again.



## CHAPTER 1

### *Moving Day*

“SHH...I’M HERE.”  
Daphne Betel wheeled around, expecting to find a man standing behind her, but the stifling attic room in her Victorian was empty of everything except cobwebs, a wooden chair, and an old steamer trunk. The wind chime hanging by the back door sounded a hollow ring she heard on the top floor of the rambling house. Feeling a chill, Daphne grasped the collar of her blouse and pulled it closer to her neck.

Since her brush with a watery death two months earlier, Daphne was forced to make many adjustments. All she remembered of the accident was being revived on wet sand and the sweet breath of life filling her burning lungs. Everyone noticed a difference in her personality from then on. Her physician said memories might come back little by little. Daphne was hopeful time would also eliminate an onset of migraines she now dealt with, but was told it might be a painfully slow process. Regardless, moving into the Victorian was something she simply had to do.

“Shh...”

Daphne heard the whispery male voice announcing itself a second time. She wiped beads of sweat from her brow. “My nerves are shot,” she exhaled. Spotting a faint outline on the wood-planked floor, she remembered a piece of furniture having been there when the realtor allowed her to roam the upper stories on her own—a handsome, carved mahogany bookcase.

Something shiny was left in its place. Daphne stooped to pick up the striking floral spray, studded with diamonds and attached to a sterling hair clip. Admiring the jeweled piece, she blew off clinging dust and carefully put it into the pocket of her slacks.

The sun cast beams of muted light through the attic’s dirty windows, revealing a door previously obscured by the bookcase. Daphne opened it, expecting another dingy room with falling plaster and exposed lath. What she saw astounded her—it was the turret. Narrow windows lined curved walls that towered upward, tapering to its pinnacle. They displayed a 360-degree

view of a town nestled into a rocky harbor along the northeastern Atlantic coast. In the center of the floor was an old, claw foot bathtub. She thought it strange the door to this extraordinary room had been concealed.

"Mom," Daphne's ten year old daughter, Nancy, called out. "The movers want to know where to put the big mirror we found in the basement."

"I'd like it up here." Daphne's voice echoed down the long, winding staircase as she made an instant change of plans—the full-length mirror belonged in the turret instead of her bedroom. She leaned over the banister to watch the men awkwardly carrying a walnut-framed, beveled mirror set in a solid stand. The children followed close behind. Once reaching the attic, the men looked ashen and nervous. Daphne's daughters grabbed their mother's hands.

"What's the problem, fellas, was it really that heavy?"

"No, that wasn't it, ma'am," one answered, trying to control his voice from quivering as he hurried down the steps. Daphne wondered why they left the mirror on the attic landing without asking where she wanted it. Their sudden retreat made her anxious. Something was not quite right.

"Mommy, will you come with us while we look around," Nancy pleaded.

"Weren't you girls having fun in the house by yourselves?"

"Those movers scared us when we were in the basement. They said they felt something spooky," Mary explained as her eyebrows arched high.

"Nonsense, they were just reacting to the dirt floor—it gives off a clammy feeling. Eventually, I'll have cement poured over it so you both can roller skate."

Mary and Nancy remained underfoot no matter what their mother said. Daphne brought them to the kitchen where several boxes of essentials were already unpacked. She opened a drawer and pulled out two brand new flashlights, handing one to each girl. They began flicking them on and off.

"What are these for?" Nancy asked, focusing the beam under her chin and making faces to frighten her eight year old sister.

"Take them while you go exploring," Daphne suggested, hoping the flashlights would be an incentive to move about on their own again. She watched them walk through the dining room, shining light on dark oak moldings framing floor and ceiling, as well as doors and windows. The concentrated light exposed spidery cracks running everywhere, connecting spaces caused by missing chunks of plaster. Daphne sighed as the girls disappeared from view.

"Mommy, come here," Nancy called from the round room off the vestibule.

Losing patience with the interruptions, Daphne reluctantly joined them. Nancy was aiming her flashlight into holes in the walls adjacent to bookcases filled with the previous owner's dusty books.

"There's newspaper back there." Nancy stepped aside so her mother could take a look.

"That's the way they used to insulate these old places. The holes will be patched in due time." Daphne's mind went right to her husband's check she impulsively ripped up. It would have been enough to fix everything.

"Mommy, there's something else," Mary said, tugging on dirty rags.

"Girls, stop! Walls were insulated with whatever could be stuffed behind them. Please leave the room exactly as it is for now, even the books," Daphne insisted, thinking giving them flashlights wasn't a great idea after all.

Once the movers left for the day, the telephone installers arrived to wire the Victorian with an extension on each floor. Nancy and Mary kept busy while Daphne spent much of the afternoon unpacking. When she opened her bedroom closet door to hang up clothing, a cold breeze produced an uncomfortable feeling—a sense of sadness—not coming from her own thoughts, but palpable in the room itself.

"Nancy, did you leave any doors open downstairs?" Daphne yelled out.

There was no answer. Daphne became concerned the children went outside, particularly because the waterfront property had an old, decrepit dock. She cried out their names, desperately hoping they would respond. And they did, but with a most unexpected plea.

"Mommy, we're here. Help us get out," she heard coming from somewhere, muffled.

"Nancy, Mary, where are the two of you?"

Something wasn't making sense. Daphne shouted upstairs to the telephone installers, but they hadn't seen her daughters. She remained motionless before the open closet door. Another cold breeze passed by, causing the scalloped-edge shelf liner to lift. Just as she was about to slam the door shut, part of the rear wall burst open and nearly scared her to death. Daphne gasped as both daughters crawled through a tiny door at the back of the dark closet.

"Mommy, we were in a secret hallway behind the walls!" Mary blurted out.

Daphne and the girls plopped down on her bed as she calmed herself enough to ask them how they found the passageway.

"There's another tiny door in the back of my closet. It connects to yours," Nancy eagerly reported.

Daphne explained this was nothing unusual, considering the way houses were built in those days. Regardless, the nooks and crannies now seemed menacing to her. The telephone workers interrupted them. They finished the job and wanted their pay. Daphne insisted the children come with her down the narrow, back staircase to get her purse from the kitchen so the men could leave.

Not long after, the phone rang, and Nancy hurried to answer it. "Daddy, hi. Yes...uh...everything's good...I think. Mommy, come here. Daddy wants to speak to you."

Daphne waited for her daughter's conversation to finish. She became increasingly nervous with every passing second as her mood was changing. Nancy turned the phone over to her mother.

"What do you want, Marc? No...we're fine. No...there's nothing we need, but thanks for asking." Hearing her husband's voice stirred many strong emotions. She cut the conversation short so he wouldn't cause her to cry. The phone rang again. "Hello? Hello?" Daphne raised her voice, agitated. "Marc, is this you? Say something," she demanded, and hung up when there was only dead silence on the line.

A headache flared, reminding her she had to slow down and put one foot in front of the other if living without a husband was going to work. Daphne thought back to all the years Marc kept her under his thumb, insisting he know where she was and who she was with. This was her chance to be on her own, but in the moment, having him around might have made the house feel less frightening.

"Shh...I'm here."

"That voice! That voice!" Daphne put her hands over her ears to block it. She shuddered and turned her back to her daughters to avoid further frightening them, but they both knew something was terribly wrong.

"Mommy, I want to call Daddy," Mary whined, on the verge of tears.

An oppressive atmosphere filled the air. Daphne hadn't noticed anything of the sort prior to purchasing the property. At the time of her decision, she was drawn to the Victorian and its furniture—not paying attention to much else—not even her husband's out-of-character agreement to let her move there without him.



## § § §

By evening, the girls fell asleep, and a blanket of quiet descended upon the house. Hoping to find relief from the day's upsetting events, Daphne climbed the stairs to take a bath in the turret's claw foot tub—the thought of which stayed with her since morning. To brighten the space, she lit several candles and dragged the mirror to stand near the tub. A sweet, lavender-vanilla aroma permeated the air as bath salts were poured under hot, running water.

While the tub was filling, Daphne walked to the old steamer trunk under an eave. She loosened the buckles on its worn, leather straps and raised the lid. It felt like it was being pushed back down—then closed with a thud, almost catching her fingers. Steam began spreading throughout the vacant attic space, surrounding the trunk. Daphne hurried to the turret room, thinking the lid was just too heavy.

At last, the tub was full and Daphne readied herself for a long, luxurious soak. She undressed before the mirror, letting the robe slide off her shoulders and drape around her ankles. While pinning up her chestnut brown hair with the diamond clip found earlier, a sinking feeling tightened her stomach. Daphne could have sworn another hand slipped over hers.

She looked into the mirror again. Someone else's dark, searing eyes appeared to be looking back. She panicked and jumped away, hitting something by the tub with her foot. It was a small, rectangular brass placard that read *Doctor Is In*. The message on it was unnerving, as though the former owner was also in the room. She wrapped a towel around her naked body and put the little sign face down on the attic floor outside the turret door.

The fragrance in the air calmed her unsettling thoughts. A determined Daphne stepped into the bath. She rested her head back and closed her eyes, falling into a light sleep, but then abruptly sat forward—alarmed. Silky strands brushed along her arm. Although assuming they were a lingering cobweb, Daphne still couldn't shake off the sense someone actually was in the room. Remembering all the doors had been locked after the workers left, she felt reassured.

The warm water soothed her back into a light sleep, but she was disturbed again. She swatted the air, thinking it was a persistent spider. There was another brush and another—this time across her face. Daphne

was defenseless against the attic bugs or whatever remained unseen in the mist. The sound of footsteps circled the tub. Her mind raced, fearing the realtor might still have a key. Without her knowing, he could have let himself in to hide anywhere in the huge house.

"Who's here?" Daphne yelled out.

She kept perfectly still, barely breathing. Something gently dipped into the water and it rippled—as if stirred by a finger. Daphne tried screaming. Her throat was paralyzed and no sound came out. She held her hands on the water's surface to stop the movement, but it intensified, splashing water about, dousing most of the candles. The turret got much, much darker.

A cold, tingly kiss pressed against her lips. She grabbed the rim of the tub as the room whirled. The water heaved. Her words were finally set free. "No...no!"

"Shh...I'm here."

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Collapse of 13 Years—From Woe to Woo*

DAPHNE'S FRIGHTENING FIRST evening turned her reality upside down. Initially, she wondered if it was a dream brought on by exhaustion, but in truth, Daphne knew she faced a very real situation with no escape. She came to grips with a preposterous fact—a strong, masculine spirit was also dwelling in her house.

In the weeks that followed, she tried staying upbeat, going about the chore of organizing her possessions, ignoring the feeling she was being watched. Each time she opened the closet door in her bedroom, that disconcerting breeze lifted the shelf liner ever so slightly.

Her apprehension spiked the day she experienced a cold puff of air directly on the back of her neck. Daphne could actually hear a breath. There could be no mistake—she wasn't alone. It was hard to accept she was stuck with an entity capable of foisting himself upon her world of substance—and against her wishes. With no money to move again, and not wanting to subject herself to Marc's ridicule, this was her home, like it or not.

The ghost's small encroachments became brazen. Daphne began hearing rumbling words she didn't understand and was petrified when hands she couldn't see grabbed her shoulders to immobilize her. This incited greater trepidation each time.

Marc, trying to gain favor, presented Daphne with flowers on his weekend to pick up the children. She put the bouquet in her cherished crystal vase he gave her as an anniversary present and placed it upon a marble table in the vestibule. If Daphne gave Marc's attempts at reconciliation serious thought, she would have begun to connect ghostly activities with her husband's expressions of interest.

Alone in the house, she heard loud tapping coming from the attic. Determined to stop these otherworldly intrusions, she boldly climbed the staircase. The aged wooden steps creaked and groaned. The higher she went, the more the stairs changed—less worn from use, narrower, darker.

Daphne tried turning on an electrified oil lamp along the wall, but it didn't work. Fiddling with the switch, she was momentarily distracted. When she looked up, a dark shadow in human form reached down to grab her. Crying out, she nearly fell backwards before being whisked to the attic in one swoop.

"Don't touch me, get away!" she screamed, aggressively punching her fists into the air. Her breath formed a frosty vapor.

The hair on her arms stood at attention with the onset of an odd noise. Daphne trembled as she turned her head in the direction of a grating sound. Moving on its own, the trunk scraped across the floor planks, its leather straps dragged behind, leaving tracks in the dust. She wanted to run from the attic, but remarkably—the urge subsided.

Daphne lifted the trunk's lid with surprising ease and removed a cloth-wrapped bundle lying on top. She sat on the chair nearby to untie a ribbon holding it together. There was a stack of old, copper molds for making chocolate. Underneath the molds was a worn, leather notebook which had *Fixings* inscribed on the cover. She read aloud the dedication inside—To Olivia.

Daphne felt a headache coming on. The notebook fell off her lap, jolting her. She picked the book up and thumbed through it. One page was dog-eared to a hand written recipe for, of all things, chocolate. Bemused, she turned more pages. Each one had a special fixing to delight a refined woman of the day—complexion crèmes, hair treatments, herbal teas, and therapies to ease aching bones and calm restless minds. Her headache seemed to lessen. Unconsciously, Daphne passed her hand over her cheek, checking whether her skin felt smooth to the touch.

Daphne examined the rest of the trunk's contents. She lifted sewing tools and fabrics and peeked at what was lying at the bottom, but abruptly dropped it all back into place. The lid slammed shut on its own. Only the copper molds and notebook returned with her to the kitchen. The house seemed more peaceful, as though the entity was satisfied, if not gone.

§ § §

By evening, Daphne readied for bed, dressing in warm pajamas. The late autumn air was nippy, and she looked forward to a restful night at last, falling into a deep sleep under a soft comforter. But to Daphne's horror, she was awakened by a crushing pressure on her body. An invisible

weight held her captive. Slow, deliberate breathing could be felt against her face. Trying to pull away, she broke into a pouring sweat.

"You're mine."

No other words were spoken. The pressure lifted and the breathing was gone. Terrified, Daphne's eyes searched the dark room. All was as it should be. She stretched one arm to switch on the lamp by her bed to check the time. It was 3 AM. Descending to her lowest ebb, Daphne curled on her side, pulled up her knees, and wept until the sun rose.

Exhausted, she stayed in bed the next morning. Nancy and Mary were still with their father and would not return until evening, giving her time to nurse another severe migraine. It seemed the doctor had been waiting for exactly this moment. A deep indentation formed in the mattress where he sat. Daphne's heart beat faster, and the headache became blinding.

"Please, please, let me be...don't hurt me."

"Shh..."

A soft, loving stroke of a misty hand soothed her. His touch was magical—healing. Daphne's migraine disappeared in an instant. All her misgivings miraculously ceased. She realized the spirit meant her and her daughters no harm, but now she had a nagging thought—what did he want?

### § § §

Over time, Daphne became more relaxed with the ghost and often awaited his arrival. When he didn't appear, she grew restless, like a scorned lover. Unable to erase him from her thoughts, she tried out different ways to draw him to her.

Late one night, when the house was quiet and the children asleep, Daphne felt inspired to prepare a batch of chocolate. Entering the kitchen, she lit several candles, pulled out the stack of copper molds, and studied the recipe in the notebook. From the corner of her eye, she witnessed one tray slowly slide across the counter toward the mixing bowl, leaving behind a trace of ghostly light. Taking a minute to collect herself, she noticed each hollow in the tray had the same embossed image, a circle, and wondered its significance to her spectral resident. She soon learned he would manifest whenever she made chocolate.

The ghost also knew how to woo her and became clever at doing so. The old, grandfather clock in the vestibule struck three times in the wee hours one morning. Daphne heard soft dance music coming from the parlor.

Her antique phonograph was cranked up and playing a slow waltz. Feeling like a spectral being herself, she floated down the staircase with bare feet and a longing smile. A delicately stitched, white silk nightgown hugged her curvaceous body and flowed to the floor like a gossamer cloud.

The ever-so-slightly visible, tall, and handsome Dr. Arthur Wake was waiting on the settee, finely dressed in a long-tailed Victorian coat, ascot, and tweed trousers. When he stood up, Daphne stepped into his field of energy. She tingled from head to toe, and the chill of him gave her goose bumps. Arthur was able to transmit a gentle sense of his touch to her hips and extended hand as she positioned herself in a dance pose. Daphne felt an exhilaration that could only be had when the thin membrane of their separate worlds came in contact.

They twirled about the parlor, savoring every fleeting moment he could remain in the earthly realm before being transported back into his dimension. This was the first of many surprise encounters, and whenever he left, Daphne would sulk for hours, anticipating their next rendezvous. As these interludes continued, they set a backdrop for the years that followed, creating a whole new secret life Daphne could reveal to no one. She had fallen head over heels in love—with a ghost.

§ § §

Daphne's change in behavior was noticed by her husband. She seemed happy—almost like her old self before the near drowning. Thinking she had a lover, Marc became jealous and spied on the house. Seeing nothing to make him suspicious, he hired detectives to follow her. No activity out of the ordinary was uncovered.

Desperate, Marc sent letters. They were reported to have disappeared before the mailman's eyes as he attempted to put them into the door slot. Marc's official-looking documents met with the same dead-end. His attempts at phone contact were equally exasperating. Each time Daphne answered, earsplitting static caused her to hang up.

Making a visit in person was even worse for Marc Betel. He would arrive wearing a well-fitted three-piece suit, expensive shoes, and designer sunglasses hanging from the corner of his mouth. His invincible reputation would be damaged before an audience of nosey neighbors when something invariably obstructed him from stepping into the house.

On more than one occasion, he found the battery in his exotic sports

car drained and the vehicle needing to be towed. It embarrassed Marc the most when he spotted Daphne witnessing these spectacles from her parlor window. Upon her eyes meeting his courtroom stare, the drapery would close by what he assumed was his wife's doing. Eventually, his efforts were less frequent. Not even the famed criminal lawyer could upset the Victorian's finely-tuned state of affairs.

Once Daphne's husband was successfully out of the picture, Arthur's visitations became more than just romantic. He telepathically infused his dear one with knowledge about the proper use of essential oils and other natural ingredients, taking instructions from the leather notebook. She learned the art of making old-fashioned beauty and health remedies, lost to present-day manufacturing. Through his mentorship, Daphne began generating income by selling the products in exclusive stores. While earnings skyrocketed, her phantom suitor insisted she keep the details to herself.

This new-found wealth became a blessing for Daphne. During those years, the roof was replaced, copper gutters installed, rotted siding repaired, and lush landscaping put in place around a new swimming pool. This kept the neighbors' interest piqued, and all eyes and ears focused on the Victorian.

It was a mystery where the money was coming from. Daphne's curious rejection of her husband's offer remained the subject of many conversations, thanks to Norman Palmoure's love of gossip. People tried to pry — Marc most of all. However, the overly-possessive ghost shielded Daphne from their interference. She belonged to him now, and nothing would come between them — nothing — including her husband or any other man who might happen along. He would see to it.

### § § §

Throughout the years, both of Daphne's daughters fared well. They were blissfully unaware of the ghost's presence and machinations. Nancy graduated high school and left home to study fashion design in Europe. Two years later, Mary followed her abroad to pursue a musical career as a concert pianist.

Their departure took a toll on Daphne's state of mind. There was no way of describing the deep loss she felt. Her fear of the sea made it impossible to visit the young women by either ship or plane. A sense of melancholy began to dampen her otherwise happy spirit — but this was something for which the doctor already had a remedy.

For well over a decade, Daphne was given devotion, protection, and a means to prosperity by her spectral resident. It was time to collect on his efforts by opening the Victorian to more players in his elaborate scheme, but first, he would introduce his dear one to another level of knowledge.

The Victorian's library still contained the doctor's books, filled with great wisdom from across the ages. Daphne studied night after night, being promised a way to give to others through teaching. Waiting for the ghost to join her, she'd sit in the library on the soft cushion covering a curved bench along its wall. An outline of shimmering lights would appear. When fully visible, he drifted over to an area in his collection. A single book would tip to catch her attention. Daphne took it from the shelf and sat down, allowing the ghost to turn the pages. Ethereal light formed around selected passages which lifted and projected across the wall, leaving behind powerful messages.

Daphne was given no choice about the matter. She became a vessel for vast amounts of arcane knowledge and was inspired to create a school in the house. Dr. Arthur Wake's plan was in place, and various students were to be lured in, until all the right ones came along.

§ § §

It was a blustery winter day, and as Daphne went about her morning chores, something troubled her—Arthur hadn't visited in weeks. None of her feminine wiles or chocolate making was working. In the past, she simply felt his energy without him materializing in one form or another, but now—just stillness. Daphne never had a thought such as this during all the years in her Victorian—Arthur was done with her.

The hours passed, and Daphne felt agitated by the possibility the Invisible world to which she had given so much attention no longer was relevant without the ghost. Agitation turned to anger over wasted years isolated in the old house just to be at the beck and call of a spirit. Tired of being alone, she craved a normal day around real people. On a whim, Daphne decided to get her hair done, an unlikely thing to do without an appointment. She walked into a nearby beauty parlor and was told someone just canceled due to weather.

The beautician sat Daphne in a chair and draped her with a pink cape. "I've never cut your hair before. How would you like it done?"

"I usually wear it long," Daphne explained. "I'll just have a trim and set."



"Are you going out tonight?" the hairdresser asked, being too friendly for Daphne's comfort.

"No, not tonight," Daphne muttered. For a moment, she amused herself imagining how the hairdresser would react if she even told her the half of it.

"Why, I expected a gorgeous lady like you would be out every night. Hey—now I recognize you. I saw you in the boutique down the street selling your beauty products. I bought some." The hairdresser posed in profile for Daphne to admire her flawless complexion.

A pleasant looking woman, maybe late thirties, was sitting in the adjacent chair. She looked at Daphne through bright, gray eyes. "Excuse me," she said. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. My name is Amelia Fulton. I was a chemist in a cosmetic research laboratory, and I've also tried your products. I'm amazed at how well they work. Funny, I knew our paths would cross someday."

Daphne didn't encourage discussion on the subject, still honoring Arthur's wish for her health and beauty formulas to remain a secret. The women chatted about other things until the last blue roller went into Amelia's thick, dark hair. Before being led to the back of the shop to sit under the dryer, Amelia wrote down her phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Daphne.

Daphne smiled and politely stuffed the paper into her purse, having no inkling as to why she would call Amelia.

## § § §

A shopping bag in one hand and key to the back door in the other, Daphne entered her kitchen to the unmistakable scent of roses. She turned on the lights, wondering how anyone could have been inside while she was gone. Yet curiously, a beautiful bouquet of red roses bound with a translucent pink ribbon was lying on the counter. Delicate light shimmered around it. Daphne knew Arthur was back.

She searched for her favorite crystal vase. Upon returning to the kitchen, the roses vanished before her eyes. Daphne reached out one hand to touch the surface where they had been. Her fingers tingled. The vase slipped from the other hand, breaking into smithereens on the floor. The sound of it shattering was eclipsed by a voice out of nowhere.

"Call Amelia."



Soon afterwards, Daphne invited Amelia to her home, the only guest who made it past those massive front doors in thirteen years. She and Daphne became fast friends. But as much as Amelia enjoyed socializing with Daphne, she always knew when it was time to leave—something in the Victorian's atmosphere would change. Only after Daphne opened her school and Amelia signed up for a class was she truly comfortable in the house.

## CHAPTER 3

1969

A HEAVY SPRING RAINSTORM drenched Franklin Port. Flooding was a frequent inconvenience, but on that day both the high tide and full moon added to the ominous water levels overflowing onto village streets.

Daphne awoke to a loud backfire near her house. She opened the bedroom's French doors and stepped onto the balcony to look below. An old, beat-up truck was rattling along behind a young woman sloshing through ankle-deep water, struggling with an army duffle bag slung over one shoulder. Her rain slicker's hood was sliding off the thick, honey-colored hair braided down her back.

"Good morning," Daphne felt compelled to call out, but the girl kept walking, never glancing up.

Daphne watched the truck stop next to her. A white-haired, heavy-set driver got out and opened the passenger door. Daphne was too groggy to ponder why she had been inclined to catch the stranger's attention and went back to bed after the truck drove away. She figured if they were destined to meet, it would happen—of that she had no doubt.

§ § §

"Hey missy, why are you walking so early in this miserable weather?" Gus asked Cassandra Renney in his thick Swedish accent.

"I'm getting a jump start," she answered, adjusting the garden tools poking through her duffle bag. "You know me, I can't waste any time—I have to get the soil ready for planting. Today is the first day of spring."

Cassandra was a beauty of sturdy stock, modest about her natural endowments, with a work ethic Gus respected. Not only did she hold down a job as a library clerk, but Cassandra was also devoted to gardening. She shifted the bag into a more comfortable position across her lap, explaining how her car was parked several streets away due to the flooding.

They headed up the hill toward the entrance of what was once a prominent estate. Huge, black iron gates had the name Hidden Arbor Cemetery scrolled into the intricate, woven design of trumpet flowers and curling tendrils. Cassandra looked across the seat at the cemetery's caretaker and recalled the first time they met, two years before, after her mother passed away. Gus often said he admired the beautiful flowers she planted at the gravestone and her generosity in giving them to fellow mourners. His friendliness made it easy to talk to him about her unfortunate childhood.

Cassandra's father died when she was eleven, leaving her and her older brother to keep their family farm going. Their mother had few resources and even fewer options to run the farm and feed everyone. Working the soil is in my blood, she told Gus on more than one occasion—the very reason he shared stories with her as well.

The truck chugged into the cemetery. Cassandra stared ahead at a barren dirt road leading to an overgrown thicket. She knew from Gus all the land once belonged to wealthy settlers who created a spectacular arched arbor of blooming flowers drawing many townspeople for their marriage ceremonies. He also claimed an old farmhouse was beyond the arbor. Although everything was now heavily enshrouded under unrestrained brambles, Cassandra was charmed by his story's romantic notion. To the south of the choked thicket was the sun-drenched field Gus offered Cassandra to plant a garden, making her a part of the land's history.

Cassandra jumped at the opportunity Gus presented, even though it was in such a strange location. She wanted to grow vegetables for a local food pantry and one day build a business—a line of canned condiments and delicacies using family recipes.

Cassandra looked again at Gus while the pickup sputtered along the road. As they passed the imposing thicket toward the open field, Gus turned to her and grinned. She smiled back, wondering what he was thinking. The truck stopped and Cassandra got out, thanking her friend for the ride.

She worked tirelessly preparing the land, pulling up old roots and stubborn weeds to ready it for seeding on another day. Cassandra looked over the morning's effort and pictured a harvest more abundant than previous seasons. Her life was going to change—she just knew it.

Before leaving, she placed her tools in the moss-covered stone outbuilding bordering the thicket. As she closed the door to the shed, she remembered a familiar apprehension, catching her off guard. There was no wind, but Cassandra heard spoken words rippling through the air—conversation.

She cringed, dwelling on what remained behind. The weathered headstones down the road and the light filtering through the trees formed scary shadows. The smell of rich soil made her feel heady, but the sweet, fruity scent of Gus's pipe tobacco drifting past eased her concerns.

Cassandra's attention was again drawn to the gnarled thicket where sun could not penetrate. Although intrigued by the secrets it must hold, she would never dare to venture in by herself. Cassandra brought her thoughts back to that which she could grasp—at least the duffle bag did not have to be lugged to the car.

The weather cleared as she walked out the gates onto puddled roads. Cassandra took time to admire a rainbow forming in the sky over the homes on Main Street. It had brilliance, the likes of which she never saw before. Spanning one house in particular, the scarlet slice of the spectrum of light appeared to be touching a stunning, fully refurbished Painted Lady with a red gabled roof.

She relished the scenario she was conjuring up—owning the grandest house in the neighborhood, the huge, colorful Victorian directly in front of her. Cassandra imagined herself with a family and a loving husband who was handsome and ambitious. Chills ran up and down her spine at the grandiose dream of having it all.

Then, lo and behold, she saw a wooden sign hanging from the porch of the Victorian. Cassandra stepped closer to read it. She made a mental note to someday find out what it was all about.

SCHOOL FOR DREAMS

Come In

*Daphne Betel, Proprietor*



## CHAPTER 4

### *SCHOOL FOR DREAMS*

**B**OO!" Startled, Daphne stopped rearranging the porch furniture. She turned around to find Amelia standing behind her. "Oh, it's you," she exclaimed.

"I'm so sorry, my mistake. I should never forget this house rattles you at times," Amelia said, watching Daphne drag the wicker chairs back to where they just were. "You seem a little disoriented. Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes." Daphne was abrupt. "What brings you here?"

"Aren't you expecting me?"

"Expecting you for what?"

"You're starting another summer session today, don't you remember? Isn't it why you're sprucing up the front porch for us to hang out beforehand?"

"I'm cleaning, that's all. The class must have slipped my mind. Amelia, do you think I look overweight?" Daphne asked out of the blue.

"Weight was never an issue for you before. Why do you care now? Have you been seeing your husband again after all this time and he's complaining?"

Daphne began wiping down the furniture, ignoring Amelia.

"I've never seen you so unfocused. It must be your husband. You've told me he always wanted you looking perfect. That's what you get for marrying a man with champagne taste."

"Any issues with my husband were long ago. Marc is actually in Europe as we speak, visiting the girls—indefinitely."

"Are you okay with that?" Amelia saw how sad her friend was at the mere mention of her daughters. She changed the subject and pitched in to get the porch ready. "Who's signed up for today?"

"I'm trying to remember. I think Gwen Davens is coming, and a few new women. But you know how things work around here—they come, they go. I'll never understand why."

"Maybe it's your house. It has an overbearing presence at times."

"What do you mean? Never mind, I know what you mean," Daphne agreed. "Look, now I'm rushing. Would you bring out refreshments from the kitchen while I go upstairs?" she asked, hurrying through the front doors.

Amelia filled pitchers with cool drinks to place on the glass-topped tables flanking comfy, wicker chairs. The warm dry air was a welcome relief from steady rains of recent months, and the porch was once again decked out with its multicolored, striped awnings, a magnet for students who gathered early. Amelia greeted a newcomer, Suzanne. Once Gwen arrived, the women settled into soft seat cushions and sipped lemonade, chatting about Daphne's classes.

"Gwen, do you remember your first day in the school and the frantic student who lost her keys?" Amelia asked. "I think you freaked her out when you told her they were lodged in the fireplace grate. I wondered how you could have known. I actually thought you put them there, until Daphne announced something outlandish," Amelia confessed. "Do you recall what she told you?"

Gwen gave a deep laugh, in stark contrast to her slender frame. She swept her coppery red hair off her forehead. Her forte was finding missing things. "Of course I do. It was absurd." Gwen laughed again. "She said with my psychic ability, her ghost might want something from me. But I didn't believe in ghosts and was ready to walk out, like the gal with the keys."

"What made you stay?" Suzanne questioned.

"I couldn't leave. Daphne got up and put her hands on my shoulders."

"No she didn't," Amelia clarified. "Daphne escorted the woman to the door after she called the school a fraud. You know how upset that gets Daphne."

"Oh yeah, I remember, but...but...I actually felt hands on my shoulders holding me in my seat."

"Is this house haunted?" Suzanne asked with a shaky voice. She had been hesitant to register for Daphne's classes because of town rumors about the house and its owner. "Is it?" she repeated when no one answered.

"Maybe," Amelia replied. "The jury is still out. Let's head inside." Amelia got up to lead the way.

The golden oak table in the dining room was always piled high with Daphne's books on one end. Note pads, pens, goblets, and lace glass pitchers of water crowded the rest of it. However, Daphne's usual homemade chocolates weren't there. "I think Daphne is distracted," Amelia said quietly.



She retrieved the dish from the refrigerator to place in its customary spot next to the placard, Doctor Is In.

Daphne was nowhere in sight, giving the three students time to make more small talk. Suzanne studied the room. A sizeable portrait of a woman hung on the wall. Her skin appeared smooth as porcelain, with lips painted fire engine red. Her gently rouged cheeks highlighted green eyes, and her chestnut-brown hair flowed to her shoulders.

"Is that Daphne?" Suzanne asked, pointing to the picture.

"Oh yes," Gwen acknowledged. "It was when she was much younger. It's so odd, Daphne still looks exactly the same," she commented. "Where is Daphne, anyway?"

"She went upstairs a while ago," Amelia replied. "Maybe I should begin the class for her?"

"Yes, please begin so I can get out of here," Suzanne insisted.

Amelia passed around Daphne's chocolates for everyone to select a piece. Suzanne was struck to see Amelia and Gwen close their eyes a moment before putting the chocolate into their mouths, as if there was a purpose to it.

"What were we supposed to do besides eat it?" Suzanne questioned, swallowing.

Amelia smiled. "There's a method to the madness. Each chocolate has a different image. Which one did you choose?"

"I don't know—I didn't look."

"Well, that's the first lesson. We must make ourselves aware of not only what we're doing and thinking, but what's around us."

"Why didn't you tell me before you offered it?" Suzanne asked snidely.

"It's more effective when we learn on our own by being curious, like you are now." Amelia picked up the dish of chocolates and showed her the various raised images. "Each one has its own meaning, similar to common dream symbols. We use these to help focus on our desire. Once we know what we want, we can set an intention. This is the beginning of making dreams come true."

"That can't work. It's too simple," Suzanne argued.

"It's what follows that counts. Daphne's school teaches us the power of our thoughts and how to use them for our benefit. Why not begin with symbols on chocolate?"

They were distracted by a crinkling sound coming down the stairs. "What's that noise?" Suzanne nervously peered through the doorway.

Daphne was making a grand entrance wearing shiny-black plastic garbage bags, cinched together at the waist with a stretchy red belt.

"What kind of outfit is that?" Amelia laughed in disbelief as she turned on the bright lights of the chandelier so they could see it better.

Daphne cast a playful look at the group and responded, "And under this, I'm wearing only transparent plastic wrap."

"I hope we're not supposed to wrap ourselves too," Amelia asserted.

Suzanne looked fidgety, as if ready to bolt from the room. Fishing through her purse for something, she dumped its contents onto the table. "I can't find my keys!" she shrieked.

Gwen approached the fireplace, pulled the keys from the grate, and slid them across the table's surface to the stupefied new student. Smiling at Suzanne, Daphne sat down and introduced herself. As Daphne examined the dish of chocolates, Suzanne leaned forward to see which one Daphne would choose. As usual, she picked the circle.

"Wishing is never enough to make your dreams come true," Daphne began. "You must think differently in order to change what you do. Is anyone here willing to give up old habits for her dream?" she challenged.

"What do you mean?" Suzanne asked.

"If we think the same thoughts, we repeat the same behavior. Then when nothing new happens, our wish fizzles out." Daphne watched Suzanne holding her keys tightly in one hand and patting her outdated bouffant hairdo with the other. "Frankly, you're not going to get a ticket to your dreams here, but you will get the guidance necessary to make dreams come true. It's all up to you. Look at what I'm wearing. Can you even begin to imagine why?" Daphne asked them.

No one could.

"I want to lose weight, and this will help sweat off some pounds," she told them.

"That's silly," Suzanne blustered.

"Sometimes we need to take steps beyond the ordinary, even if others think it's silly. I wore this yesterday, forgetting the electrician was coming to fix the porch light. When I went outside, there I was, looking like what the tide washed up. There he was, standing with a smirk on his face, commenting."

"What did he say?" Amelia prodded.

"Now there's one garbage bag I wouldn't mind taking out," Daphne repeated, amused.

"What did you say?" Amelia asked, dreading being in such a ludicrous predicament.

"I calmly said hello and showed him the broken light. And as you can see by what I'm wearing today, I didn't let myself backslide and give up because of the awkward experience. Not to mention, the light is now fixed."

"I would die, just die!" Amelia wailed.

"Why?"

"I wouldn't want anyone seeing me dressed like that, but if it works, it works. So, are you losing any weight?"

"I'll show you." Casting another one of her looks, Daphne unfastened the belt to remove the upper garbage bag.

"Spare us, we believe you!" Amelia begged.

She and Gwen laughed over the not unexpected zaniness of their teacher while Suzanne maintained a dour look. Daphne stopped dead in her tracks—the chandelier turned off spontaneously and began to twist back and forth. Gwen let out a gasp as a stranger appeared in the doorway.

"Is this the School for Dreams?" Cassandra asked in a shy, little girl voice.

Suzanne had enough, packed up her books, and walked out in a huff. Daphne escorted her to the door. "Next," she said, returning to the group. She invited the bewildered young woman to take Suzanne's seat.

### § § §

Cassandra looked around and admired the elegant, fringed rug and marble fireplace anchoring the room. From where she was sitting, she could see glimpses of the winding staircase and lavish velvet drapery in the parlor. Cassandra glanced out the window at a lovely restored, turn-of-the-century guesthouse, surrounded by mature greenery with a speck of the harbor in the background.

Daphne's carpenter, Jason Wells, entered the room with an inane excuse for being there after seeing a pretty girl walk through the Victorian's front doors. Cassandra locked eyes with him.

Jason was a six-foot tall, muscular man with sandy colored hair and soulful, brown eyes. He was handsome in a way that turned female heads. His broad smile in response to Cassandra's riveting stare sent a shock-wave through her. For sure, this was going to be her school for dreams.

Observing it all, Daphne laughed softly to herself once Jason left.

She then passed the chocolate dish to Cassandra who unconsciously took a moon symbol.

By the end of class, only Amelia remained to help straighten the porch and rearrange the table. "Daphne, what's up with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"That getup you're wearing, saying you're trying to lose weight. What's going on?"

"I am trying to lose weight."

"Since when?"

Daphne was quiet and went back upstairs, telling Amelia to stay put. She returned a few minutes later. Draped across her arms was a cerulean blue satin dress, trimmed with hand-made lace. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Why yes, it's stunning. It looks very old, yet in perfect condition. Where did it come from? Or...should I be asking who gave this to you?" Amelia winked, thinking her friend could use a healthy male relationship.

Daphne twirled around, holding the gown as though it was a dance partner. Without warning, she stopped. "Arthur gave it to me," she whispered. "He left it lying on my bed yesterday morning. But it doesn't fit me yet. I have to lose weight for him."

"Who's Arthur?"

"Dr. Arthur Wake—he's the ghost in the house."

"Cut it out, Daphne. It's bad enough you have me thinking about mystical things, but ghosts giving a dress...come on," Amelia protested.

"You saw for yourself...just before...you saw evidence of Arthur in action."

"Evidence?"

"The chandelier...he turned it off and moved it. He can do things. I thought he was trying to keep me from exposing myself, but then I realized it was something else. It has to do with the new girl, Cassandra."

"You're making no sense. Are you getting one of those migraines you used to have? Here, let me help you upstairs and into bed. I'd stay longer, but Thad will be home from work, and I haven't shopped for dinner yet. You know how grouchy he gets when hungry. I promise to call later."

Amelia exited the Victorian, happy that class was done with.

*Wednesday, June 25*

*Who is this new girl, and what's cooking with her and Jason? ~D~*

## CHAPTER 5

### *Frozen in Time*

MAY I HAVE your name, Miss?" the attendant asked, blocking the flashy white coupe from further entering the Victorian's driveway.

"Jacquelyn Daye."

The man scanned the clipboard in his hand. "Are you a student of the School for Dreams?" he asked, not finding her name on the list.

"No," she curtly answered.

"I'm sorry...this party is for past and present students only. I have strict orders not to let in gawkers."

"Idiot, get out of my way. I've been invited by the owner of the house." Jacquelyn rolled her car forward, forcing the man to jump aside. "Lackey," she mumbled to herself, passing him. To the rear of the property was a valet, prepared to park her new vehicle.

"Keep it close by," she insisted, sliding off the red leather seat. "I don't intend to be here long."

The valet sized her up. It was hard not to notice her stunning good looks and sharp tongue. He smirked as she stood there not knowing where to go, and pointed to the gardens where Daphne's Fourth of July party was being held. "Is this your first time?" he asked, getting into the driver's seat.

"First time for what?" she rudely responded.

"Oh...it is your first time." He heartily laughed as he drove her car to the parking area.

Jacquelyn walked toward a huge, white canvas tent erected alongside a swimming pool. The tent was decorated with red and blue helium balloons. Centerpieces of exquisite flowers were on the tables, giving off fragrances holding their own against aromas of fresh food cooking on grills. Women wore floppy brimmed hats and flowery sundresses, adding color to the décor. Jacquelyn self-consciously adjusted the scanty red and blue wrap covering the lower part of her strapless white bikini. She could barely tolerate looking out of place in any social setting.

"What kind of freaky event is this? I thought it was a pool party," she complained out loud to no one in particular.

"First time?" Amelia asked from behind.

Jacquelyn spun around. "Why the hell is everyone asking me the same thing?"

Amelia introduced herself and escorted Jacquelyn to the pool. Some people were sitting on the edge dangling their feet in the water, while others were standing in it up to their necks, as though the water held the magic of Lourdes.

There was an empty Adirondack chair next to where Amelia sat down. "Is this seat taken?" Jacquelyn asked.

"Around here, you can't tell." Amelia laughed loudly, patting it.

Jacquelyn rolled her eyes with annoyance and settled in.

"It won't be much longer," Amelia stated.

"Much longer for what?"

"You'll see." Amelia quietly studied Jacquelyn, guessing she was probably in her twenties. Her long, platinum blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, as if hair was so easy for her. Instinctively, Amelia gently flattened her unruly mane into place. She wondered why this girl was invited, aware she'd never been a student at the school. Daphne's annual Fourth of July party was something not publicized around town, as the bewildering incident, which always took place on this holiday, might flame negative stories about the Victorian.

"Jacquelyn, how do you know Daphne?" Amelia was curious.

"I heard her give a library talk. To me, everything she said was nonsense. I don't believe in waving magic wands and saying abracadabra to get results. I'm a scientist—I work in toxicology," Jacquelyn proudly stated.

Amelia, having also been in science, had this defensive conversation before with others. She gave Jacquelyn another once over, knowing it wasn't the right time to drive home the principle that thoughts and words are magic wands. Amelia was certain the party would shake up Jacquelyn's ordered world, as it had done to hers. She could hardly wait for the phenomenon to happen.

Daphne whisked by the chatting women. "Oh, I'm glad you two met," she spoke in passing, tipping her head a bit to glance at them with one of her mischievous looks.

Amelia nodded back. As she and Jacquelyn became more relaxed, a loud shout was heard from the dock. Amelia checked her watch—it was

4:50. The commotion was underway at exactly the same time as in previous years, a reliable attraction captivating Daphne's most psychically sensitive students, particularly Gwen, and terrifying less psychic ones.

Like a moth to a flame, Jacquelyn disappeared into the crowd by the dock, exposing her long lean legs under the beach wrap as she ran. Amelia repositioned herself on the lawn, expecting a particular scene from another realm to play out in the identical spot. This year, Amelia was determined to interact with the main figure in the episode, just to satisfy her mounting curiosity about the Victorian's ghostly activities.

A portion of the baby-blue sky on the horizon turned a deep indigo. The water surrounding the dock roiled, lapping against wooden pilings and splashing over the pier. A rip in the Universe formed, and a muted gray schooner sailed across, creating a sense of alarm for the onlookers. It came forward rapidly — skimming the inky water's surface and traveling through all the pleasure craft, fishing boats, and water skiers who had no awareness of its presence. The horrified guests watched the unfolding scene, as the sailboat headed straight toward the house.

"Why is that boat coming here?" Jacquelyn shrieked with a voice louder than the others.

Amelia noticed Gwen blinking her eyes. When she began rubbing them, Amelia knew Gwen's vision was shifting into sepia tones she once described as having the quality of a turn-of-the-century photograph — like a picture one would find tucked away in an old attic. Gwen abruptly turned her back to the dock and looked up at the turret. Amelia followed with her own eyes, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Jacquelyn ran across the yard with the others who were trying to get into the Victorian for protection. Daphne blocked the frantic guests and directed them to either side of the lawn. The crowd waited. Many wanted to leave, but were transfixed, as if under a spell. They heard sails lowering on riggings and the start of engines as the vessel prepared to dock. A brown haze hung over the large craft. It began oozing onto Daphne's property toward the back door, laying an obvious path.

Gwen witnessed something even more upsetting by the dock. "Help! A boy just fell into the water! I can't swim to save him from being hit by the boat! Please help...somebody!"

A few brave souls converged on the platform and searched the water for the child, but he was nowhere to be seen. Jacquelyn laughed out loud, yelling it was all play acting with very believable props. Amelia stiffened

at Jacquelyn's dismissive attitude, knowing some implausible situation was desperately trying to reveal itself year after year.

In a split second, a wind pushed the people back, and Jacquelyn became silent. Guests struggled to regain their balance and steady glasses and plates in hand. A wider aisle formed from the disturbance. The water bulged and a green, aqueous mass emerged out of it. One could almost discern the outline of a child in midair, dripping across the path to the back door. On its own, the door opened and then slammed shut, swallowing the watery figure.

An apparition of the boat's skipper, dressed in white nautical clothing, descended the stately vessel's plank. It moved toward the house. Amelia was waiting for this moment and stood directly in his way to block him, but he walked right through her. The breathless crowd gasped. Amelia shivered from the deathly cold under the July sun's heat.

The apparition furiously pounded on the door with both fists and shouted, "This has to stop—he's all that's left!"

The wind chime rang turbulently, and from inside the Victorian came an angry response, "Go away!"

The ghostly skipper turned around, clutching his chest over his heart with both hands. He became less visible with each step he took. His faint figure returned to the boat, whereupon he boarded. The shadowy crew readied the vessel, and it sailed out of the harbor, escorted by a flock of black gulls. The schooner disappeared across the rip in the Universe, which closed up after it. Everything reverted to normal. The whole thing happened so fast, guests, as always, were in disbelief. If asked about it, Daphne would shrug her shoulders and say the past is frozen in time.

Amelia looked at her watch again—still 4:50. She rushed over to Gwen. "Does this make more sense to you yet?"

"No, except a child falling into the water is new information. It must be connected somehow."

Amelia pursed her lips, struggling to understand the meaning behind bits and pieces of the spectral event. "Why were you looking at the turret?"

"I saw a man up there, watching us. He vanished the second the child fell off the dock. Unfortunately, I still can't figure it out. I'm sorry, Amelia."

"I guess we'll be meeting here same time next year," Amelia said, furrowing her brow as she thought it over.

As always, guests whispered to each other about the madness. Some were so overwhelmed by the interruption of reality they remained dazed,



while a few sat on the grass, unable to stand for several minutes. It took a while for everyone to get their bearings and return to enjoying the extravagant party. Amelia observed Jacquelyn sunbathing by the pool, as if nothing out of the ordinary happened. "Now, that's a state of denial if I ever saw one," she clucked.

## § § §

The sun was setting below the horizon. A parade began on Main Street ending at Daphne's grand Victorian. A brass quintet, dressed in military uniforms, gathered with other townspeople by the American flag erected on her lawn. Fireworks in the harbor rocketed into the night air, bursting with color and sparkling luminosities in concert with the band's ceremonial performance of the Star Spangled Banner.

A woman's glorious voice, easily reaching the highest notes, rose above other singers in the crowd, punctuating the entire celebration. Amelia looked around and saw it was Jacquelyn singing her heart out in front of the band.

## § § §

Daphne peeked through the kitchen window at her deserted yard. Nothing was left of the party. She put away the last of the dishes and turned off the light.

"Daphne," she heard plaintively spoken in the darkened room. It was a voice seemingly all around. The air chilled and became thick. Arthur was about, but did not materialize, although he was imparting his emotions to her. His world seemed bleak and joyless.

"Arthur, where are you?" Daphne waited, and then felt a weak static charge next to her. She saw an outline hunched over with its head bent low. "Arthur, tell me what's wrong. You remain so distant during these times. I wish you would tell me what the schooner means to you. How can I help if I don't understand?"

She felt the air being sucked out of the room. He was gone.

*Friday, July 4th*

*Sadness remains imprisoned in this house. ~D~*



## CHAPTER 6

### *Secrets in the Turret*

CLASSES WERE SCHEDULED throughout the summer despite languid afternoons where even a single breeze off the harbor was noticeably missing. The heat was so intense one could fry the proverbial egg on the pavement. Only a few daring students arrived for the first class after the holiday gala—Amelia, Gwen, and Cassandra.

Daphne was nowhere to be seen. A note, written on parchment, was affixed to the fireplace indicating class would be held in the turret, a place where no student ever went before. The three agreed it must be sweltering at the peak of the tower, but worse, they were instructed to find their way alone—one at a time. Standing in the vestibule, they looked up the gloomy stairs to wallpapered corridors with closed oak doors, offering no daylight. Only old, electrified kerosene lamps lit the way. They remembered even Daphne, at times, admitted to getting disoriented in her own house. Their imaginations ran wild with frightening thoughts of encountering the ghost.

“Why can’t we go as a group?” Cassandra pressed.

“That’s not what we’re supposed to do,” Amelia reminded her.

They returned to the dining room where there was an odd state of affairs. The table was brimming with a pile of silver goblets and assorted dinnerware. The aberrant heap was in desperate need of polishing.

“Daphne must be expecting us—the chocolate is out. Gwen, you’re the official psychic. What’s going on here?” Amelia asked, staring at the array of mottled silver.

Gwen took silver polish and rags off the mantle. “Maybe we have some work to do. Daphne has another party coming up. I wouldn’t put it past her to expect us to pitch in.”

“The note instructed us to go to the turret,” Amelia insisted. “What’s Daphne thinking with all this silver nonsense?”

“Who knows—but it will keep us busy while we wait our turn.”

“I have more important work to do than play games or polish Daphne’s silver,” Cassandra groaned, thinking about the weeds in her garden.

The wind chime by the back door began to ring wildly. It was not as though a mild breeze had wafted in from the shore, but more as if an impatient schoolmarm called a class to order. Cassandra's arms turned cold.

"Who wants to go first?" Amelia redirected their attention to the note.

Cassandra defiantly rose from the table and stormed into the vestibule. "I will. I want to get this over with."

The sound of her footsteps climbing creaking stairs left a rumbling echo, more exaggerated the higher she went. Cassandra pushed on, overcoming her apprehension, but suspected something did not want her venturing any further. "This is stupid," she spouted.

At that moment, every toilet in the huge Victorian flushed in unison. The old pipes, knocking from the pressure, reverberated throughout the house, sounding like a speeding freight train. It was Cassandra's breaking point. She had enough of Daphne's weird classes and rapidly retraced her steps back down, flying into the dining room. With the color drained from her face, she spewed details of what happened. Amelia and Gwen laughed, but shaken to the core, Cassandra felt she was the butt of a joke. Angry with both of them, she refused their encouragement to try again, picked up her books, and left. The screen door slammed shut.

"Cassandra could use a moon chocolate about now," Gwen teased. "It might help remind her she has a softer side under all that pent-up anger."

Amelia pulled the chocolates closer to study them but could not make out the images. "Look at this—they're melting in front of my eyes. How can I possibly know which one to choose?" she asked, passing the platter to Gwen.

"That's strange. Each one has the same image—a flame. It's as though the symbol itself is melting the chocolate."

"What does a flame mean?"

Gwen paused a moment. "It means transformation. Something old is changing into something new. I think we're in for it today."

"Great." Amelia pursed her lips with anticipation.

Amelia wondered if Cassandra had the right idea and considered leaving as well, when a rare, peaceful calm came over her. She picked up a gooey piece of chocolate, closed her eyes, and savored it. Courageously, Amelia offered to go next.

The higher she climbed, the greater her sense of urgency. Far off in the distance, a somber sound ripped at her heart—the mournful song of humpback whales. Amelia stopped before reaching the attic and strained

to listen. A smell of acrid smoke from a burning forest took over her senses and she began coughing. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Something was stirring inside her. Amelia couldn't imagine what was to come, but then looked up.

A transparent apparition of a man was waiting on the top step. Fright tore through Amelia. Her instinct was to turn and run, but she couldn't. She began to hyperventilate, grabbing at the banister to support her wobbly legs. The apparition hovered until Amelia regained composure. Trance-like, she followed the ghost into the turret.

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The house was quiet. Gwen remained seated, staring at the silver. She felt uneasy for Amelia, hoping she didn't encounter the same loud, alarming noises as Cassandra. Gwen tinkered with the tarnished pieces to pass time, admiring one or two interesting ones. From the corner of her eye, she caught a glint of light bouncing off a small, ornate tray with a heavy sculptured border. She picked it up to read the inscription of a wedding invitation, dated 1915.

Gwen put it down immediately. Memories of her own wedding invitations flooded her mind, as did the unexplained tension they evoked between her and her mother. That, her failed marriage, and so many other disappointments were the baggage she carried everywhere. She didn't need a reminder of those times.

Impatient, Gwen wandered aimlessly around the main floor. A door off the vestibule creaked open on its own, and a beam of sunlight landed directly at Gwen's feet. She sensed she was being summoned—but for what? Amelia was nowhere in sight, so Gwen trusted the beckoning ray and entered the circular, rose-colored library on the ground floor of the tower.

The light inside was blinding, and Gwen had to shield her eyes. She heard Amelia coming down the stairs and attempted to leave the library, but the door closed. To her horror, she heard the lock bolt on its own—holding her hostage. As hard as she tried, she could not get it to budge.

"Amelia! Ameliaaaa! Get me out of here—I'm locked in the library!" she screamed.

Amelia reached the empty dining room. She did not hear Gwen's frantic shouts or her pounding on the library door. Assuming Gwen already left, she picked up her books to go.

There was a sudden quaking and loud roar in the room where Gwen was trapped. It sounded as if upper levels of the tower were caving in like a collapsing telescope. A force held Gwen against the wall. She could feel vibrations at every floor—the tower was turning itself inside out. Within seconds, Gwen was somewhere else not resembling the library at all. She had been transported to the turret by a supernatural force.

The room had a panoramic view of the entire town and harbor with the Victorian's red roof below. She could see Amelia's car leaving the driveway. Panic stricken, Gwen banged her fists against the windows, running from one to the other, trying to get Amelia's attention. Oblivious, Amelia drove away.

Gwen found herself right back in the dining room, sitting before the pile of tarnished silver. Her mind was fuzzy. It was difficult to remember what happened, and she wondered if it was merely a dream. Yet the shock she was feeling seemed real enough, and the rapid beating of her heart was unmistakable. Getting her wits together, she gathered her books from the table and hurried outside in time to see Daphne parking her car.

Dressed in beachwear, Daphne removed a cooler and folded aluminum chair from her trunk. "Hi. I'm surprised to see you here."

"I came for class along with Cassandra and Amelia. They left before me."

Daphne looked puzzled. "There was no class scheduled today."

"What do you mean? You had your chocolates on the table and taped a note to the fireplace mantle which told us to go..." Gwen stopped. The look on Daphne's face confirmed something was amiss.

Daphne lowered her voice. "I haven't made chocolate recently because it's too hot—and I surely didn't leave a note on the mantle."

Gwen couldn't argue. The bizarre afternoon already dwindled from her mind.

Daphne was anxious to get inside, said goodbye to Gwen, and went directly to the dining room. She sat at the table with a polishing cloth, frantically rubbing off tarnish, perturbed she had been excluded from the class.

"Have you forgotten this is my school?" Daphne hollered into the air.

She threw down the cloth and ranted throughout the house. This move by the ghost was something new, and she demanded an explanation. Daphne walked into the library. He was waiting for her, appearing as a faint glow against a bookcase.

"Are you taking over my school?" she raged. "You're just like Marc. I can never have anything of my own. You control it all!"

"Daphne, my dear one, I would never do such a thing."

"Then what happened here?" she demanded

"Shh..."

"Don't shush me. It doesn't work anymore."

"You must trust me. When the time is right and everything is in place,  
I need you to carry the love."

"What love are you talking about?"

"You'll remember."

*Wednesday, August 13*

*There's no going back now. ~D~*





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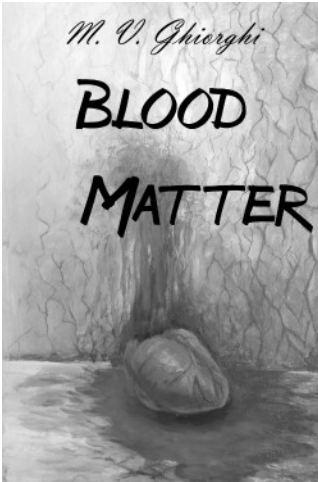


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*About the Author:* Ecstatic over the symphony of life, L. L. Cartin's passion is to embody the Invisible into her stories. Counselor and educator, she has a Doctor of Divinity in Metaphysical Science and runs a metaphysical school in her Victorian home. Her interests are family, animals, Nature, belly dancing, and especially music.



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