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Writing the Young Adult Novel: Analysis and Process

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WRITING THE YOUNG ADULT NOVEL:
ANALYSIS AND PROCESS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by Lucinda Lewis Boone

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WRITING THE YOUNG ADULT NOVEL:
ANALYSIS AND PROCESS

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The thesis consists of two sections: research and creative. The research section includes brief analyses of five young adult novels that received the Newbery Medal, awarded annually by the American Library Association to the author of the most distinguished contribution to children's literature. The creative section is an original young adult novel that incorporates some of the characteristics uncovered in the analysis of the Newbery novels.

The Newbery Medal winners analyzed for this thesis are *The High King* by Lloyd Alexander; *Dear Mr. Henshaw* by Beverly Cleary; *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant; *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle; and *The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin.

The plots of the five books differed greatly, and the genres ranged from fantasy (*The High King* and *A Wrinkle in Time*) to mystery (*The Westing Game*) to "slice of life" (*Missing May* and *Dear Mr. Henshaw*). The writing styles of the authors varied as well, from the more mature writing styles of L'Engle and Rylant, to the choppy, simplistic style of Raskin. Three of the novels (*The High King, A Wrinkle in Time, and Missing May*) seem more suitable for more mature readers, while *Dear Mr. Henshaw* and *The Westing Game* are more appropriate for a younger audience. Analysis of these novels revealed that, among these five books, the only element they share relates to theme: in the subplot of each of the works, the hero or heroine of each book comes to realize something important in his or her life.

The authors reveal different aspects of writing to the novice writer. Analysis of
Madeleine L'Engle's work shows that those who write for a younger audience should not assume their audience is incapable of reading highly sophisticated writing, while Cynthia Rylant shows that young readers can handle a mature theme, such as the death of a beloved family member. Lloyd Alexander's novel clearly instructs that the author must have a complete vision of the world about which he writes. Beverly Cleary displays the pitfalls of writing a first person narrative, while Ellen Raskin most clearly displays an example of disorganized writing.

Because the only constant in the five Newbery novels was that the hero came to realize an important truth, this element was incorporated into the creative thesis. The plot of the creative thesis is that of a classic ghost story: Tasha Manning, the 14-year-old heroine, and her family move into a haunted house in a new town; she and her new friend Stephen uncover the history of the house and of the ghost. While trying to solve the mystery of the ghost that haunts her family, Tasha Manning also uncovers two important truths: that moving to a new environment is just as difficult for her parents as it is for her, and that by making an effort and changing her attitude, she can make new friends and a new life for herself.
SECTION I: ANALYSIS
A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle

The old adage "Never judge a book by its cover" could not be more truly applied than to my own experience with Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time. The book won the Newbery Medal in 1963, and in those 36 years since, I carefully avoided reading it, simply because I didn't like the book's cover. Reading the blurb on the inside of the jacket didn't help matters--too much talk of "tessering" and of other science fiction ideas I couldn't understand. [While I am a fan of fantasy, I find that when reading some science fiction, I can't appreciate the book if it's too scientific. I can easily make great leaps of imagination, if only the author doesn't try to make me understand how it happened--in other words, I can believe in a time machine, I just don't want to know how it works. And the cover of this particular Newbery winner simply looked too scientific for my taste.] Interestingly enough, L'Engle wrote one of my favorite children's books, Meet the Austins, but, even so, I didn't trust her enough to attempt reading A Wrinkle in Time.

A Wrinkle in Time is indeed science fiction along the lines of Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury, involving travel to different planets, but the scientific bits don't interfere with the ultimate message of this book. Take away the time travel, the travel to different planets, and the quantum physics, and what remains is a book about a young 14-year-old girl who doesn't fit in with her peers at school and doesn't understand why she's so different from everyone else. Add to that a much bigger message that it is quite all right to be different--indeed, that we as individuals must be different, or the planet will be overrun
by automatons—and a children's classic is born.

In a nutshell—and without dwelling too much on the scientific aspects of the book—the plot of *A Wrinkle in Time* could be stated simply: A teenage girl who feels herself a misfit is forced to travel through time and to distant planets to free her father and little brother from the dark clutches of an evil force and ultimately finds she can free them only through love.

**Method**

L'Engle begins *A Wrinkle in Time* with a line considered a joke among writers and critics alike: "It was a dark and stormy night." In the following paragraph, we learn that this is no ordinary storm; Meg fears a hurricane. Even more important, we recognize that the storm outside the house echoes the raging storm within Meg: she feels that everything she does is wrong. Her grades aren't good enough (both of her parents are physicists), her classmates constantly tell her to grow up and quit rough-housing, and she's likely to beat up anyone who picks on her baby brother. By page two, we learn of her still deeper concern: her father is missing, and the whole town thinks he has abandoned his family for another woman, yet Meg and her family know he is involved in a secret scientific mission.

In her autobiography, L'Engle sets down what she considers the rules for writing: "... a writer should immediately tell the reader four things:

1. Who the story is about.
2. What he is doing.
3. Where he is doing it.
4. When he is doing it.

The reader must be placed in action, space, and time. In a good story we find out very quickly about the hero the things we want to know about
ourselves (Circle of Quiet, 62)."

L'Engle follows her own advice and pulls us into the room with Meg in the first few sentences of the novel: "It was a dark and stormy night. In her attic bedroom Margaret Murry, wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, sat on the foot of her bed and watched the trees tossing in the frenzied lashing of the wind. Behind the trees clouds scuddied frantically across the sky. Every few moments the moon ripped through them, creating wraith-like shadows that raced along the ground. The house shook. Wrapped in her quilt, Meg shook" (A Wrinkle in Time 3). Using L'Engle's own rules for writing, we know immediately that this story is about Meg Murry, and we also know where she is, what she is doing, and when she is doing it.

L'Engle is no lazy writer. Her writing involves all the senses, and her descriptions are vivid:

"The warmth and light of the kitchen had relaxed her so that her attic fears were gone. The cocoa steamed fragrantly in the saucepan; geraniums bloomed on the window sills and there was a bouquet of tiny yellow crysanthemums in the center of the table. The curtains, red, with a blue and green geometrical pattern, were drawn, and seemed to reflect their cheerfulness throughout the room. The furnace purred like a great, sleepy animal; the lights glowed with steady radiance; outside, alone in the dark, the wind still battered against the house but the angry power that had frightened Meg while she was alone in the attic was subdued by the familiar comfort of the kitchen. Underneath Mrs. Murry's chair Fortinbras let out a contented sigh" (Wrinkle 11).

L'Engle uses passive voice sparingly, preferring active voice and strong verbs.

"One of the things a storyteller really has to know how to do," L'Engle said in an interview, "is to make you find out what is going to happen next, make you want to turn the page . . . . I get my own attention first. If it doesn't grab me it's not going to grab the reader" (Horowitz par. 18).

Every reader, young or old, who has ever felt himself a misfit in society
will identify and sympathize with L'Engle's main character, Meg Murry. To that reader, L'Engle serves up some powerful advice on many fronts. Meg's mother tells her, "I don't think I can do anything till you've managed to plow through some more time. Then things will be easier for you" (Wrinkle 13). Meg's brother Sandy advises her not to take everything so personally, while his twin Dennys says, "You just make things harder for yourself" (Wrinkle 24). Even the principal of Meg's school asks her, "Don't you realize that you just make everything harder for yourself by your attitude?" (Wrinkle 25) L'Engle's advice to misfits is carefully couched within the story, never obvious, but with luck, the young reader cannot miss it.

In an interview with L'Engle, Karin Snelson commented that Meg must "strike a chord with many kids who feel misunderstood or shunned as geeks," and L'Engle agreed that "... there are a lot of Megs running around the country... I get over 100 letters a week, and not all of them are from kids--in fact, most of them are not. They are from ages 16 on up to 80. And there are a lot of nonconformists around, sort of coming out from under the covers" (Snelson par. 5).

Diction

Madeleine L'Engle never "writes down" for her reader. No simple sentences here, nor is there any attempt to skirt the scientific theories that make Meg's travel through time possible.

L'Engle never assumes that her reader is ignorant. Mrs. Who speaks in several languages, including classical Greek, dropping profound universal truths throughout her conversation. Mrs. Who translates her own words, so that Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace (and the reader) can understand her:

"Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connait point. French. Pascal. The

Age of Intended Audience

Is A Wrinkle in Time really a children's book (i.e., written solely for the young reader)? I can only say that I enjoyed this book and am sorry that I waited so long to read it. I have no doubt that, as an adult, I find different aspects of the book more interesting than I would have had I read it at age 12. For instance, the first sentence ("It was a dark and stormy night") intrigued me as a writer—where does an author turn after writing a sentence like that?

The book can be read on two different levels, perhaps not as "young" reader versus "old" reader, but more as "immature" versus "mature" reader. The mature reader will see that L'Engle not only comforts the reader who feels himself a misfit, but also warns against conformity. IT, the evil mastermind behind the dark planet, bears great resemblance to Adolph Hitler, and IT's insidious method of luring young and impressionable children to the dark side reminded me of the Hitler Youth. So, while the young reader will find comfort in this book, the more mature reader will discover that L'Engle's moral is that certainly life would be easier if only someone else would make the decisions, but once that happens, individual freedom is lost forever.

The question of the intended age group for A Wrinkle in Time is one that L'Engle was forced to address when she tried to find a publisher who would take the book. In two and a half years, every publisher to whom she submitted it rejected it. Of this experience, she said, 'I got a few queries saying, 'who is the book for?' I said it's for people; I don't write for an age group, I write for
people. If I'm writing about a 12 or 14 year old, I've got to be myself at that age. There isn't any difference except the age of the protagonist" (Horowitz par. 5).

Conclusion

If asked what my particular voice is, I would have to reply, "I have no idea. I just write, and there it is." Every so often, though, I have come across books that I wish I had written—not because I think I could improve them in any way—but because in those particular books, the authors wrote with a voice I wish I possessed. Call it "pen envy." Since I like to write for the young adult group, it is hardly surprising that the books I wish I had written belong to that classification: Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Alison Uttley's *A Traveler in Time*, Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle*, and now, at long last, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Better late than never, but I wish I had found this book when I was about thirteen. I know that I would have owned my own copy, and by now it would be well-worn. It would have been interesting, too, to see at what age the bigger theme of the book occurred to me, when I realized it wasn't just a book about time travel. Most important, however, I think it would have inspired me to stretch my imagination as a writer.
Dear Mr. Henshaw by Beverly Cleary

During my stint working in the public library children's room, Beverly Cleary easily walked away with "Most Popular Children's Author" honors. Her books appealed primarily to boys and girls ages 8-10 (with such books as Henry Huggins, Henry and Ribsy, Ramona the Pest, and The Mouse and the Motorcycle), as well as to young teenage girls (Fifteen, Jean and Johnny, and The Luckiest Girl). A prolific writer, Cleary received the Newbery Medal in 1985 for Dear Mr. Henshaw, the story of a young boy trying to make sense of his own life following his parents' divorce.

The hero of Dear Mr. Henshaw is Leigh Potts, a sixth-grader, whose life isn't an easy one after his parents' divorce: he and his mother move to a new town, he has no friends at his new school, and every day someone at school steals the food from his lunch box. Leigh's father, a truck driver, rarely calls him and is dating a woman with a young son close to Leigh's age. Besides losing regular contact with his father after the divorce, Leigh also loses his dog, who stays behind to give Leigh's father company as he drives his rig cross-country.

Is this Newbery Medal-winning book Cleary's best work? Having read almost all of her books, I must admit that I think not. Fans of Cleary's are not accustomed to her writing about serious childhood problems, and perhaps that's why I am not particularly fond of this book. In Henry Huggins, Ramona, and Ellen Tebbits, the children--always the main characters of her books--face problems, but they are amusing ones: a stray dog befriends Henry Huggins, and he wonders how to get the dog home since the bus will not allow dogs to
ride; Ellen Tebbits struggles with hiding her long underwear under her ballet tights; and Ramona represents the quintessential younger sister, causing havoc in her older sister's life simply by being what the title of the book implies—a Pest.

In her books for teenagers, Cleary deals with typical teenage problems: Jean in Jean and Johnny learns that trying to be something you aren't simply to attract a boy doesn't work; Shelley in The Luckiest Girl finds her true self when she spends her junior year of high school in a different city with friends of the family; and Jane in Fifteen learns that 15-year-old boys are every bit as unsure of themselves as 15-year-old girls. In these books, Cleary writes honestly about problems that every small child or young teenager can understand.

Suddenly, however, with Dear Mr. Henshaw, Cleary tackles the darker problems of the child with divorced parents. Certainly, many children can relate to Leigh Potts' plight. I have no difficulty accepting Cleary's subject matter; my concern is that this book lacks her trademark humor. Perhaps this is because Cleary found nothing humorous in writing about divorce. Cleary also piles Leigh's troubles on a little thick; isn't it enough that he must contend with his parents' divorce, the move to a different town, and his father's affection for a new boy without his having to contend with losing his dog and someone stealing his lunches? I found myself wondering how much more this small boy could take.

Method

Cleary's earlier works for children are episodic, each chapter a complete work unto itself and capable of being read separately from the others. In Dear Mr. Henshaw, Cleary leaves this format behind as she heads for what is, for her, the uncharted water of the story of a broken home and its effects on a small child.
Dear Mr. Henshaw is an epistolary book, a format rare in children's books. The book opens with Leigh Potts writing letters to his favorite author, Boyd Henshaw, author of Ways to Amuse a Dog. Leigh writes one letter to him every school year in grades 2-5. In Grade 6, however, Leigh's teacher gives an assignment to the students, asking them to write to their favorite author and ask ten questions. Leigh dutifully does this but is appalled when Henshaw turns around and asks Leigh to answer 10 questions for him. Leigh's mother makes him answer the questions for the author, and it is through answering such questions as "What is your family like?" and "Who are your friends?" and "What bothers you?" that the story unfolds. As Leigh eventually moves into keeping a diary rather than sending all of his letters to Mr. Henshaw, he still uses the "Dear Mr. Henshaw" salutation to make his writing easier.

One problem Cleary faces with the epistolary/diary method is that we as readers are never directly involved in the action. Every problem that Leigh tackles has taken place earlier--something happened to him at school, someone took his lunch--and Leigh relates it all as a past event later that night in his letter or in his diary. There is never any sense of immediacy in this book, simply because we remain too removed from the action. It seems that Cleary is guilty of telling, not showing--a huge sin in the world of creative writing and one most creative writing teachers warn against. Frankly, this is surprising, because Cleary has previously proven herself one of the finest children's writers in America.

Diction

The first person narrative frequently proves a bit of a problem for writers, and Cleary is no exception. There is little or no description in Dear Mr. Henshaw, and it is Cleary's use of the first person narrative that prevents descriptive
detail: an average 12-year-old boy would probably use little sensory detail in his writing—and Leigh Potts is nothing if not average.

In this book, Cleary writes in her usual conversational style, yet the writing is strangely passive. Perhaps it is because the reader is so removed from what happens to Leigh Potts, or perhaps it is Cleary's use of simple vocabulary and simple sentences:

"Today wasn't the greatest day of my life. When our class went to the library, I saw a stack of Yearbooks and could hardly wait for Miss Neely to hand them out. When I finally got mine and opened it to the first page, there was a monster story, and I saw I hadn't won first prize. I kept turning. I didn't win second prize which went to a poem, and I didn't win third or fourth prize, either" (Cleary 113)

Any young, inexperienced reader would have no difficulty understanding any of this book. Although not necessarily a bad thing, it does not allow the reader to stretch intellectually while reading it. Reading this book is, in my opinion, as passive an experience as watching television.

Age of Intended Audience

Besides the fact that this story is written about a 12-year-old boy, it is evident that the intended reader is either a quite young or a very inexperienced reader. Cleary writes in extremely simple sentences with little description, and there are no words that are going to send a young reader in search of a dictionary: "I'm going to get whoever steals from my lunch. Then he'll be sorry. I'll really fix him. Or maybe it's a her. Either way, I'll get even" (Cleary 79). Her use of the first person narrative proves to be a large handicap, for she can never use a vocabulary not befitting that of a 12-year-old child.

Children older than 12 might enjoy reading this book, but, I suspect, only if they are suffering through their own parents' divorce.
Conclusion

The overall analysis of *Dear Mr. Henshaw* is that it is merely adequate fiction, not worth a second reading and most definitely not one I would want in my collection. Perhaps if someone other than Beverly Cleary had written it, my own disappointment in this book would be less acute. As it is, though, I must reiterate my belief that Cleary received her Newbery Medal for this book merely as a sentimental favorite.

This book does make me question using the first person narrative in the creative section of this thesis. In reviewing my past writing, I know that first person works best for me; my voice naturally seems to be first person. I also believe that use of the first person can create a more personal relationship with the reader. However, seeing the difficulties that the first person narrative posed for Cleary, I will try to avoid the pitfalls. If they cannot be avoided in first person, then I will attempt a third person narrative.

As to why this book won the Newbery Medal and her others didn't, I can only speculate. Did the judges decide to reward Cleary's realistic subject matter? I don't think so. Long before the appearance of this book, other children's authors (most notably Judy Blume) wrote extremely popular books about children coping with their parents' divorce. Cleary's winning the Newbery Medal for this book reminds me of certain actors winning a "sentimental" Academy Award— it isn't that they were particularly magnificent in the award-winning role, but they had never received an Oscar before, and, if for no other reason, they deserved one for the volume and quality of their previous work. So, perhaps, it goes with the Newbery Committee: *Dear Mr. Henshaw* is not Cleary's best work, but she had never won a Newbery Medal before, and recognition was long overdue.
The High King by Lloyd Alexander

The High King, by Lloyd Alexander, received the Newbery Medal in 1969 and is the fifth and final book in a series known as The Chronicles of Prydain; the previous titles in the series include The Book of Three, The Black Cauldron, The Castle of Llyr, and Taran Wanderer. The author maintains that each of the books in the series can be read independently of the others, but, speaking as one who has read none of the previous books in The Chronicles of Prydain, I can only state that my own lack of knowledge of the storyline hindered my appreciation of this book, assuming, of course, that the four previous novels provided ample opportunity for character development. Although Alexander recaps much of the characters' previous adventures and trials in this book, I found myself feeling slightly detached from the characters and the problems they faced in The High King. After finishing it, I remained so disinterested that the thought of reading the previous four novels in the series held no appeal whatsoever.

There is a definite Tolkienesque feel to this book. Like The Hobbit, The High King provides a map of the countryside for the reader, as well as a variety of fanciful beings—dwarves, dragons, trolls, and pigs with ESP. Other fantastic elements include a talking harp; Kaw, the talking crow; Dallben, the ancient enchanter; Taran the Assistant Pig-Keeper (and hero of The Chronicles); Glew the Giant; the bard, Fflewddur Fflam; and Dyrnwyn, an enchanted sword, which could be drawn only by "those who would use it wisely and well" (Alexander 34).

In The High King, Alexander has created a complete fantasy world, based
only partly on Wales: "As for Prydain itself, part Wales as it is, but more as it never was: at first, I thought it a small land existing only in my imagination. Since then, for me it has become much larger. While it grew from Welsh legend, it has broadened into my attempt to make a land of fantasy relevant to a world of reality" (Alexander 12).

_The High King_ opens with the joyous return of Taran and Gurgi to Caer Dallben, and the Princess Eilonwy recaps the previous book, in which Taran went in search of his father. By the end of the first chapter, the reader learns that the dark foe of this book is Arawn, Lord of Annuvin, Land of the Dead, who has stolen Dyrnwyn, the enchanted sword. Although Dallben the enchanter is unsure of whether Arawn can use the sword, the course of action is clear: even if it means a trip to Annuvin, Land of the Dead, the sword must be taken from Arawn's evil clutches. Alexander doesn't disappoint, as Taran defeats the evil forces and wins the hand of the Princess Eilonwy by the book's end.

**Method**

In _The High King_ and the previous books in the series, Alexander has created his own fantasy world, inhabited by fantastic characters. His planning and note-taking before he undertook this opus must have been immense; keeping all of the characters straight and all of the enchanted figures separate would prove quite an undertaking.

Stripping the novel down to its barest bones, however, what one is left with in is a classic struggle between good and evil: Taran and his friends versus Arawn, Lord of Annuvin. Ultimately, of course, good triumphs over evil.
Diction

Alexander is a competent writer. His descriptions of the land of Prydain provide the reader with a definite setting: "At mid-morning of the following day, Caer Cadarn rose before them, and from a stone tower Smort's crimson banner with its emblem of a black bear snapped in the wind. The stronghold had been built in a clearing, and the heavy walls jutted like the bearded King's own brows, scarred and pitted by many a battle" (59).

Age of Intended Audience

_The High King_ should appeal to any child aged ten or older who enjoys the fantasy genre. More advanced readers who have already read Tolkien's _Trilogy of the Rings_ may be left feeling a little disappointed, however, since Alexander's series is light-weight in comparison with Tolkien's.

Conclusion

Oddly enough, I liked _The High King_ while I was reading it and immediately after reading it; given a bit of distance from it, however, I felt less inclined to like it and now find myself less than impressed. My current disinterest in _The High King_ sparked questions about fiction in general and young adult fiction in particular. At first, I thought that perhaps I merely disliked fantasy as a genre—that whole Tolkienesque genre of an ancient, Celtic world inhabited by kings, dragons, trolls, and enchanted animals. But this is not the case. I enjoyed _The Hobbit_ when I read it many years ago, but, admittedly, I read it only once and have not been able to reread it, although I've tried many times. I certainly am not a member of _The Hobbit_ cult who reread it every year. I love Arthurian legend, and surely nothing is more fantastic than those tales, told and retold many times throughout the centuries. To appreciate
the Arthurian tales, one must be willing to believe in ample fantasy: the enchanted sword, the Lady of the Lake, Merlin, etc.

Why, then, did this particular book pale after I read it? Perhaps it is that Alexander's work lacks the depth of Tolkien's, and, in that aspect, it proved particularly disappointing. Or perhaps, given that I hadn't read the first four books of the series, I was incapable of being involved enough with the characters to care about their final adventure. In the Author's Note, which precedes Chapter One of *The High King*, Alexander writes: "Nevertheless, certain long-standing questions are resolved here. Why was that sneering scoundrel, Magg, allowed to escape from the Castle of Llyr? Whatever became of the small-hearted giant, Glew? Can Achren really be trusted in Caer Dallben? And, of course, the secret of Taran's parentage. Readers who have been asking me these questions will see why I could not, until now, answer them fully without spoiling the surprises" (Alexander 12). I can only say that, without having read the first four books, I did not care about the answers to these questions.

The main lesson I learned about my own writing from reading *The High King* is that if the reader is not willing to jump head-first into the author's fantasy land, or if the author cannot lure the reader into believing his fantastic premise, then the book simply doesn't work for the reader. It is not enough that the author believes in what he has written.
**Missing May** by Cynthia Rylant

Despite the fact that this book was marketed for children, *Missing May* is no more a young adult book than is *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Member of the Wedding*. True, the narrator is a 12-year-old girl, but author Cynthia Rylant never "writes down" to children, and she tackles serious issues in this book, including the death of a beloved family member and the subsequent grief following. Besides winning the Newbery Medal in 1993, this novel also won the 1992 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction.

The narrator of *Missing May* is Summer, a 12-year-old orphan, who, immediately following the death of her parents, gets passed from relative to relative, never staying with one family very long, "treated like a homework assignment somebody was always having to do" (7), until Uncle Ob and Aunt May adopt her and take her home to their trailer in rural West Virginia. The title of Rylant's novel reveals the plot of the entire book: Summer's Aunt May dies while gardening, and Summer must learn to deal with her own grief while trying to help her Uncle Ob find a reason to continue living.

**Method**

Rylant uses the first chapter of the book to give the reader all the pertinent information about Summer's life to the present, skimming quickly through the death of her parents and providing glimpses of Summer as she shuffles from one relative to the next. Written in the past tense, this chapter also tells of Summer's adoption by Aunt May and Uncle Ob and of their love for her.
and for each other.

At the beginning of Chapter Two, Rylant immediately switches to the present tense and gets right to the point with the very first sentence: "May was gardening when she died" (9). Summer, now age twelve, struggles to deal with her grief and to console her uncle: "... it has been nearly six months—we have gone through two seasons—without her, and still I don't know what kind of life Ob and I are going to come up with ourselves. We have not done much of anything since, except to miss May and hurt. I never would have thought us to be so lost. We used to be tougher than this" (10).

But there is more to this novel than two people simply dealing with their grief. Summer states her major concern at the end of Chapter Two: she fears that Ob, too, will die if she can't "figure a way to mend his sorry broken heart" (16). The subplot of the book pertains to Summer's relationship with her fellow student, Cletus Underwood, who she fears is mentally unbalanced; he attaches himself to her, and although she wants nothing to do with him, she allows Cletus to visit because Uncle Ob enjoys his company, temporarily distracting him from his grief for his wife.

Rylant's characters are wonderful and well-rounded, quirkily human and so well-drawn that we feel we know these people. Aunt May, although dead before the reader ever really meets her, is an avid gardener who always sees the good in everyone; it is this quality that makes everyone near her strive to be better. Uncle Ob, a tiny wizened old man suffering from arthritis, creates unusual whirligigs that depict life's mysteries. Cletus collects unusual pictures around which he creates stories; he attends prayer meeting only for the doughnuts and is in training, he says, to be a Renaissance Man. The main character, Summer, is old before her time and wise beyond her years, the result of losing both parents at such a young age and of living with relatives who did
not want her.

*Missing May* should be considered a novella, as it consists of only 89 pages—twelve chapters, divided into two parts of six chapters each. The first part, entitled "Still as Night," deals with Summer and Ob's grief and Summer's fear that she will soon lose Ob as well. The second section, "Set Free," relates their trek to the Spiritualist Church, where the pastor (The Reverend Miriam B. Young: Small Medium at Large) advertises that she can communicate with the dead. It is this trek, although unsuccessful, that eventually gives Ob enough hope to continue living and caring for Summer.

**Diction**

Rylant's biographical sketch mentions that she has published books of poetry, including *Soda Jerk*, named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. Her talent for poetry is evident in this novel; her writing is rhythmic, vivid, and tight: "Cletus's house was tiny and brown, not much bigger than some people's garages. It sat far back from the road in a clump of pine trees and to a child might have been the house where Goldilocks met the three bears. In the cold of February it looked brittle and tight, and when I saw it I had a strange urge to throw a blanket over it and warm its insides" (59).

Rylant manages to convey a West Virginia dialect without resorting to writing in dialect. It is the rhythm of the words that sounds rural, at least to my ear: "Cletus says I think like a tired old woman. He says I'm going to turn into one of those green-eyed ladies at the Kmart checkout if I'm not careful. 'Summer,' he said to me once, 'drop some of them bricks you keep hauling around with you. Life just ain't that heavy'" (23).

Rylant consistently creates a mental image through word pictures: "Home was, still is, a rusty old trailer stuck on the face of a mountain in Deep
Water, in the heart of Fayette County. It looked to me, the first time, like a toy that God had been playing with and accidentally dropped out of heaven. Down and down and down it came and landed, thunk, on this mountain, sort of cockeyed and shaky and grateful to be all in one piece" (5).

It is interesting to note that, although Rylant uses a twelve-year-old narrator just as Beverly Cleary did in *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, Rylant never allows her young narrator to stifle her vocabulary. While analyzing this novel, it occurred to me more than once that if I were to try to relate every specific example of fine writing, I would end up typing the entire book and submitting it.

**Age of Intended Audience**

As I stated in the first paragraph, there is little reason for this book to be marketed as a children's book, other than the fact that the narrator is a young girl. My own opinion is that it would appeal to readers aged 10 to adult. Rylant never sidesteps the issues of death and the process of grieving for a loved one, assuming that her young readers can handle both issues: "All Ob and me wanted to do when we lost May was hold on to each other and wail in that trailer for days and days. But we never got the chance, because just like there are certain ways people expect you to get married, or go to church, or raise kids, there are certain ways people expect you to grieve. When May died, Ob and me had to talk business with the funeral parlor, religion with the preacher, and make small talk with dozens of relatives and people we'd hardly ever seen before. We had to eat their food. We had to let them hug us. We had to see them watching our faces for any sign of a nervous breakdown" (36). Rylant never once assumes that her young audience is incapable of dealing with these complex topics.
Conclusion

Perhaps I have learned more about my own writing from this book than from any other that I have analyzed for this thesis. The most valuable lesson is that a unique voice not only can be published but also can win a Newbery Medal. A children's author does not have to mimic anyone else's style to be successful.

Rylant reinforces, too, what I learned from Madeleine L'Engle's *Wrinkle in Time*: children are capable of comprehending almost any subject matter thrown at them, whether it's time travel and quantum physics (as in *Wrinkle*) or the death of loved ones and fear of abandonment (*Missing May*). These two writers also taught me that the truly good novelists never try to "dumb down" their writing for children.
The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin

The plot for Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game* is an ideal one for a writer to contemplate: an eccentric old millionaire, knowing he is about to be murdered, leaves his vast fortune to one of 16 people whom he has selected to try to solve his murder, using cryptic clues that he himself has concocted. This plot is almost perfect for the writer who occasionally ponders what it would be like to try his hand at writing a mystery. However, in Raskin's hands, this becomes a confused mishmash of bizarre clues and even more bizarre characters. I found the writer's style tedious, her plot confusing, and her characters among the least likeable in the entire realm of children's fiction.

*The Westing Game* is a mystery in genre, but the biggest mystery of all is contemplating why the Newbery Committee would have selected this book as its recipient of the Newbery Medal in 1979. I am baffled. Were there no other contenders that year? Were no other children's books published in 1979? What happened in the world of children's literature that could produce the Newbery Award-winning *A Wrinkle in Time* in 1963 and, a mere 16 years later, this book?

The difference in writing styles in *The Westing Game* and in *A Wrinkle In Time* is truly mind-boggling. While Madeleine L'Engle stretches the reader's intellect by using an adult vocabulary and adult themes in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Raskin appears to bend over backwards to cater to a young audience. She even throws away the concept of chapters, preferring to bolt from scene to scene with a series of dots (• • •) after only a few paragraphs, as though she knows her young readers suffer from short attention spans.
Method

As I mentioned above, Raskin has abandoned the idea of proper chapters, preferring instead a series of vignettes consisting of two or more paragraphs (rarely more than five). This peculiar method, while perhaps appealing to a younger reader more accustomed to watching television than to reading, gives the book a jerky rhythm, yanking the reader's attention from one character to another, from one setting to another. I would imagine that this method would suit a lazy writer who doesn't want to worry about creating atmosphere, mood, character, or setting; Raskin doesn't linger long enough to delve very deeply.

Raskin's characters are one-dimensional stereotypes. Her most interesting and detailed character is Grace Wexler. Not since the publication of Mommie Dearest has there existed a more foul portrait of motherhood. Grace Wexler ignores her younger daughter Turtle completely, lavishing all of her doting attention on Angela, Turtle's older and beautiful sister. Raskin obviously enjoys writing about Grace more than she does the others because she repeatedly gives the reader the details of Grace's relationship with her two daughters:

"That's enough of your smart mouth!" Mrs. Wexler leaped up, hand ready to strike; instead she straightened a framed flower print, patted her fashionable honey-blonde hairdo, and sat down again. She had never hit Turtle, but one of these days--besides, a stranger was present" (11). Truly interesting villains usually have complex personalities. Grace Wexler does not; she is merely self-centered and nasty.

In this book, Raskin has accumulated a series of characters who come across as nothing more than emotional and physical freaks. Chris Theodorakis suffers from what surely must be cerebral palsy, although Raskin never really
says. His appearances in the novel consist of little more than appallingly horrible fits and attempts at speech: "O-o-o-uggg. Chris's arm flailed the air, his accusing finger pointed here, no, there; it pointed everywhere" (29). Early in the book, Raskin writes that Chris's "binoculars fell to the boy's lap. His hand jerked, his body coiled, lashed by violent spasms" (9). I couldn't shake the feeling, as I read this book, that Raskin took some kind of strange delight in creating Chris's garbled speech, as he tried to repeat others' words.

Turtle Wexler is an obnoxious brat who delights in kicking everyone, young and old alike, on the shins; small wonder, perhaps, when one discovers how her mother treats her. Turtle's older sister, the beautiful Angela, is yet another stereotype, the beautiful yet vapid blonde incapable of taking up for herself, who gains strength at the end of the book only after an explosion permanently scars her flawless face. Because Raskin's characters are totally unsympathetic and feebly drawn, we care little about which one of them wins Westing's fortune.

Surely one of the greatest pleasures in reading any mystery is for the reader to attempt solving it before the author reaches the denouément and tips her hand. The reader of The Westing Game could not begin to solve the mystery. Raskin involves so many characters in the murder (sixteen people in all) that I could not keep track of who did what to whom. The mystery itself is also a complicated one, with many of the clues dealing with the stock market. I can't believe that the average twelve-year-old would understand how Turtle eventually solves this mystery; I certainly did not, and I am an experienced reader of adult murder mysteries. Suffice it to say that Turtle solves the mystery when she realizes old Mr. Westing isn't really dead at all, and I couldn't have cared less.
Diction

Ellen Raskin is the Anti-L’Engle. Where Madeleine L’Engle lingers over lush descriptions that involve all of the reader’s senses, Raskin avoids detailed description, preferring instead quick visuals. A perfect example of her neglect is her description of Samuel Westing’s mansion on the night of his death. The setup is good, as the young heroine, Turtle Wexler, creeps into the old man’s mansion to find the dead man’s body. However, just when Raskin captures our full attention and the pulse quickens, Raskin abruptly ends the scene using her customary • • •••s. It’s as though Raskin relies on these dots to keep from having to write with any depth and to keep from involving the reader in any of the action. The result is a series of speedy vignettes, with nothing to bind the sequences together.

Raskin varies her sentence style frequently, bouncing from simple sentence to complex sentence to fragment: "Flora Baumbach was sappy. Always smiling that dumb smile, always so polite to everybody. And so timid. When they had finally reached a snowbound broker, Flora Baumbach was so nervous she dropped the telephone. Turtle had to admit to some nervousness herself, but it was the first real order she had ever placed" (54).

Age of Intended Audience

I had hoped that the Library of Congress information at the front of the novel would shed some light about the intended age group for this book, but it seems that they, too, must have been stumped. My estimate is that The Westing Game is intended for readers aged twelve-to-fourteen years old, if only for the reason that younger children would not be able to understand the premise of the book, let alone all the different characters involved. However, the vocabulary is so simple that younger readers would be capable of reading the
Despite the fact that *The Westing Game* was a Newbery Medal winner, I can truthfully say that, as a writer, I came away from reading this book with nothing that I can use in my own writing, except perhaps hope: if *The Westing Game* was published and received accolades, then surely one day one of my novels might do the same.
CHAPTER ONE

HOUSE FOR SALE
1313 Hawthorne Street. Five-bedroom Victorian in established neighborhood close to schools, churches, and shopping. Garage. Available immediately. Affordable!
Haunted.

Dad ruffled the newspaper and lifted his left eyebrow. "Haunted," he repeated, staring down at the ad and groping for his coffee cup on the table. "That's what the ad says, I swear. It must be some kind of joke." He looked up at us, blinking owlishly behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

"It has to be," I agreed. "I'll bet it's just somebody's idea of a cutesy advertising gimmick. Since Halloween is next month, the owner probably thought it would grab the reader's attention." I grinned at him. "And it worked, too, Dad. It grabbed your attention, didn't it?"

That Saturday morning was like every other Saturday morning I could remember, not one single sign pointing to anything out of the ordinary, nothing to signal that anything momentous would occur that would change our lives. The entire Manning family, all four of us, gathered around the kitchen table, each of us doing our own thing over breakfast, as we did every Saturday: Dad scrutinizing the paper, trying to pretend he was an average citizen but always searching for mistakes and sloppy writing, never able to forget that he was the
editor and responsible for everything printed in it; Mom lingering over her coffee and basking in the calm that only Saturday morning could bring, so unlike the weekdays when she rushed to scoot us out of the house to school or to work on time; my 10-year-old brother Max spooning nasty chocolate cereal into his mouth and every so often sneaking some to our dog Tess; and me, deeply absorbed in whatever book I happened to be reading at the time.

On that particular Saturday, I struggled to read *Crazed for Love*, a sappy story of two amazingly silly teenagers not much older than I was, who had defied their parents and eloped, only to find that the reality of married life didn’t quite stack up to their romantic expectations. It wasn't much of a story and it wasn't even particularly well written, but I didn’t care, even though I yawned uncontrollably on almost every page. Everybody at school seemed to be reading it, the cover staring up at me from desks and lunch tables, and I hoped that if I read it, too, somebody might casually ask me what I thought about it, and then we'd have something to talk about, and I could at least carry on a conversation about Tim and Judy, the young lovers in the novel. I carried the book everywhere with me at school, giving it pride of place on top of my schoolbooks, so that everyone could see that I, too, owned the book and might be interested in discussing it if they wanted to. A pretty lame excuse for reading a book, but it just goes to show you my desperation.

Even though I still had the book propped up in front of me on the salt and pepper shakers, I gladly quit concentrating on it when Dad read aloud the ad for the house. He and Mom had been scouring the want ads since we’d first moved to town and into our temporary apartment, much too small for us and for our furniture, most of which was waiting for us in a storage facility until we could find a house big enough. We needed to find something bigger, and the sooner the better. The four of us kept bumping into each other like pinballs in
the tiny apartment. So, each morning Dad rattled off the description of every house for sale, and occasionally he and Mom would make an appointment with a realtor to check out the possibilities, always returning with dismal faces. For the past few weeks the want ads in the paper had been particularly discouraging, the same tired houses still on the market, with nothing new listed. I lost count of how many houses my parents actually looked at, but the result remained the same: Mom returned to the apartment depressed, while Dad tried to cheer her up by saying that the perfect house would turn up eventually. His remarks did nothing to lift Mom's spirits, but he kept trying.

The quest for a new house had been going on since that first week we moved to town at the end of July, and here it was, almost the end of September. I didn't voice it aloud, but I had a sneaking suspicion that our apartment would end up being more permanent than we would have hoped. The combination of being stuck in the cramped apartment and of meeting with realtors was beginning to take its toll on my mother: her face had taken on a pinched, tight look, and I noticed that she hardly ever found a reason to smile. Dad had been the first to notice the change in her, but Mom assured us that once we found a house and she could have space to set up her studio, all would be right with the world once again. Mom needed space so she could paint and sculpt; without it, she couldn't create. I attributed the change in her to being pent up with creativity. The woman definitely needed a release.

The ad for the haunted house appeared to perk her up a bit. "I agree with Tasha," she said. "It's a gimmick. The owner wants to set his house apart from all the others that are for sale. After all, nobody believes in ghosts in this day and time."

Max turned to Tess, who stood in front of him on her hind legs, begging as usual. "Mom doesn't watch many movies does she, girl?" he laughed,
dropping a small piece of bacon into the dog's mouth. She wolfed it down whole and immediately started begging again, whimpering and dancing about on her hind legs to make sure Max noticed her.

Mom's eyes narrowed as she looked first at Max, then down at the dog. "Max, I don't know what kind of movies you've been watching lately, but apparently we need to monitor your viewing. And I've told you time and time again not to feed that fleabag food from the table! Human food isn't good for her. Especially that bacon."

Normally, Mom took everything in her stride, but now even the dog wasn't safe from her short fuse.

"Tess isn't a fleabag, Mom," Max insisted. "She's clean. Aren't you, girl?" Tess thumped her plummy tail and stretched her paws out on his leg. She's a big mutt—at least that's what Dad calls her, among many other names. Gray and white, part terrier but not much, with long fur that needs brushing constantly, and a fuzzy, dopey face. But she's a sweetie most of the time, unless she's chewing up my shoes.

"Well," Mom said, choosing to ignore the dog, "I think we should check this house out." She looked at my father. "Five bedrooms would be marvelous, Jack! Sounds like plenty of space for all of us, and then some. I could have my own studio again! And the fact that it's close to the schools and shopping is nice, too. I hate being stuck out here on the outskirts of town."

I couldn't believe that Mom would even consider looking at the house. "That house has to be a loser. If the owner has to pretend that it's haunted just to get people to look at it, it must be in terrible condition. Really, Mother!"

"It's all very well and good for you to say 'Really, Mother,'" Mom said, bristling and sitting up very straight, "but I, for one, have had enough of living in this horrid apartment. The plumbing never works--I can't remember the last
time I had a decent hot bath—and the furnace needs to be replaced now that the weather's getting cooler and the landlord insists it works just fine even though we all know it doesn't because we can't even get the thermostat to crawl up to 65 on chilly nights, and I'm sick of these paper-thin walls, where I can hear the neighbors talking and sneezing and coughing—"

Dad held up his hand to stop her tirade. We'd heard all of these complaints before and knew most of them by heart. If Dad hadn't interrupted her, she would have gone on to gripe about the yard—"it's no bigger than a postage stamp, and there aren't any trees, and I'm not even allowed to plant any flowers"—and about the parking—"we have to park a mile away because there's no room on the street, and I'm tired of having to lug groceries up three flights of stairs and having the bags break and lemons spill out everywhere."

I don't think the apartment would have bothered Mom so much if only she had a room to herself to work in. Back in Frankfort, she had turned the extra bedroom into an art studio—nothing big—but there was enough room for her easel and paints and clay. Several of the nicer gift shops in town sold her paintings, and, while she couldn't have supported the entire family with her earnings, she did all right. We were all proud of her, Dad especially so, and he loved telling Max and me how he had fallen in love with her at first sight, when she was a poor art student in college. He'd been a struggling writer at the time, and they had "nothing to live on but love." Corny, but true.

To be totally fair, though, everything she said about the apartment was true. The absolute worst part of the current living arrangement was that I had to share a room with Max. And if you've ever shared a room with a 10-year-old boy, you know how horrible that is. Max and I made do, but just barely, mainly because I'd extended a sheet across the room, separating his side from my side. But it didn't stop me from knowing when he was in the room, even if he tried
his best to be quiet. I could still hear him breathing.

It hadn't been like that before we moved to Prescott. Back in Frankfort, we'd lived in a house just the right size for all four of us, and I had had my own room, and Max had his, and I had plenty of space to avoid a kid brother who was loud and noisy and, well, typical. As brothers go, Max ranks pretty high, especially when I compare him to the little brothers of some of my friends. I wouldn't even consider trading him. He's brainy beyond his years and funny, and he tries to be good and not get on my nerves too much. But he's only a 10-year-old and can sometimes act like one, usually when you wish he wouldn't.

"What should we do?" Dad asked. "Make an appointment to see the house? Or assume that Tasha is right about it's being a clinker and forget about it and hope that something else comes up on the market soon? I can go either way on this one, so you all decide." He refolded the paper and placed it beside his plate, then leaned back, casually draping his arm across the back of his chair. Dad might have thought he appeared nonchalant, but I could see beyond his glasses and into his blue eyes that he wanted to see that house. I sighed inwardly. He'd never learn.

Mom poured herself another cup of coffee, added a heaping teaspoon of sugar and a stream of cream, and stirred, dreamily staring down into the cup. "I say let's go look at it, Jack. What can it hurt? It may be just perfect for us, and heaven knows we've looked at every other house that's been on the market. Why should this one be any different? I give an extra ten points to the owner for his creativity—heaven knows, creativity is at a premium when it comes to want ads. And if the house turns out to be a clinker, we can all have a good laugh later."

I didn't say so, but I highly doubted it, good laughs being rare these days. The past few months had taught me to keep a lot of my thoughts to
myself.

Mom, Dad, and Max had been excited about the move from Kentucky, looking forward to packing up all of our belongings and moving halfway across the country to Arizona, but not me. Dad couldn't wait to finally have editor's duties, so he wouldn't have cared if we'd moved to Egypt, as long as he finally had a shot at the job he wanted. Mom hoped that she would find some arty types she could share ideas with. And Max? Well, he's the sort of person who seems always to land on his feet with a smile on his face. Nothing much fazes him.

Arizona is pretty enough in a wild and woolly kind of way, I guess, but it's nothing like the kind of countryside I'd grown up with. No resemblance whatsoever to the midwest. Arizona is so Western, with everybody wearing cowboy hats and boots--women, too--even when they're supposed to be dressed up. In Kentucky, I'd grown up with gentle scenery--rolling hills and white fences and the Kentucky River winding its peaceful way through town. Arizona had no such landscape, even the beds of gulches were dry and dusty.

If the change of scenery and clothing had been the only differences, I might have been able to adjust fairly easily to our cross-country move. But, for me, the most difficult part of moving had been saying goodbye to my best friend, Jenny Reynolds. Even though she and I now wrote letters back and forth almost daily, and Mom and Dad had promised me that we would go back to visit during summer vacation, it would never be the same again. Jenny and I had practically lived at each other's houses, spending the nights on weekends, eating dinner with each other during the week. Mr. Reynolds even referred to me as his other daughter.

Jenny's letters only made me more homesick for Frankfort. Lately, I even found myself wishing she wouldn't write to me at all. In her letters, always
written in purple ink, she chattered on about the latest news at school—who was going steady this week, who had broken up, who had made the football team, who had been sent to the principal's office, all that good stuff that had been a part of my former life, when I was younger and happy. Life back in Frankfort went on without me. I found it harder and harder to write to her because I had absolutely nothing to tell her, other than that I missed everybody and had never known such loneliness. And how many different ways can you think of to say that you're miserable and you have no friends and no one pays even the slightest bit of attention to you at school? Already I could sense that Jenny and I had grown apart, simply because we shared nothing in common anymore other than the old days, which made me feel awful because her letters were all that I had left as proof that I'd once had lots of friends.

My new school in Arizona was simply the worst. Back home, I'd attended the same small school my whole life, everyone knew everyone else, and we'd all grown up together and had been friends with each other since preschool. But here? Here, everyone already had friends, and no one showed the slightest interest in making any new ones, least of all in making friends with me. It wasn't that I hadn't tried, either. I had. I could truthfully say that I had given it my very best shot. Every single day, I forced myself to be friendly, even when I didn't feel like it, and I always tried to laugh at the right places and smile at all of the right things and just fit in in general.

It hadn't worked. Not at all.

Oh, everybody said hello and smiled back at me, sometimes even adding, "How're you doing?" but that's the only progress I'd made in the few weeks school had been in session. The most difficult time of the day was lunch in the cafeteria when I would sit all by myself at a small table and nobody would motion me over to their table to sit with them, so I'd gotten into the habit of
reading while I ate, trying to ignore everybody else sitting together and
laughing and sharing their lunches. To tell the truth, I now found myself living
only for the weekends, when at least I could be with my family, who loved me
and liked me, and I didn't have to wear a frozen smile plastered on my face all
the time, even when I felt like scowling or sulking or being moody. Weekends
let me relax my facial muscles. Mom assured me that making friends takes
time, much more than a few short weeks, but it seemed to me that plenty of
time had passed. No one had shown even a vague interest in befriending me. I
doubted seriously that things would ever get better, and I could only look
forward to four horrible years of anonymous existence at Prescott High.

The whole awful situation sent me running to the mirror a lot and
studying my reflection. Was there something physically wrong with me? Did I
look so much different from everyone else that they might be embarrassed
being seen with me? I'm average looking, I suppose you could say. I look
enough like my dad that everyone can tell at a glance I'm his daughter: we're
both tall and lanky and blonde with blue eyes. I wear my hair long, sometimes
pulled back loosely with a barrette because it's so easy and I don't have to think
about it when I'm hurrying in the morning. And my face is just my face. I don't
know how it looks. I was born with it, and it hasn't changed all that much in
the years I've had to look at it. I have a normal nose and mouth. I guess I look
like a lot of other people, no better, no worse.

Dad smiled now, picked up the newspaper, and thumped it on the table.
"My vote is that we all go check this place out and see what it's like. It's a
beautiful sunny day, perfect for a drive around the town. We've got nothing to
lose. Heck, we might even like it." His eyes lit up as he looked at Max and me.
"We are on a quest to find your mother a studio!"

I shook my head and turned my attention back to my book. More false
hopes just waiting to be dashed. I knew exactly what to expect: another morning wasted looking at a house no one would possibly want.

Things simply had to get better. They couldn't get any worse.
"Location, location, location!" Dad shouted, turning the station wagon onto Hawthorne Street. He looked back at Max and me in the back seat through the rearview mirror. "You've heard that saying before, haven't you? That there are only three things that are important when you're buying a house?"

I sighed, and Max shouted back, "Location, location, location!"

"Right!"

Which pretty much explains why I usually tried to avoid trotting along when Mom and Dad went house-hunting. Already Dad's mood let me know just how much he counted on this house being The One, even though he had tried his best during breakfast to keep his true feelings from being known. I wanted to reach across, pat him on the shoulder, and tell him to calm down, that there would be other houses, but of course I didn't do that at all. I merely sighed again, watching the houses roll past.

Even I, the dedicated Prescott hater, grudgingly admitted to myself that the neighborhood far surpassed my hopes. If I squinted and used my imagination, I could almost pretend we were back in Frankfort again and not in Arizona. Beautiful old Victorian houses lined both sides of the wide street, big trees shading the front yards, the verandas welcoming, and turrets and towers so high that they almost pierced the clouds—not a cactus or huge rock in sight, definitely a good sign. Old-fashioned verdigris street lights with glass lanterns bordered the sidewalks. What mattered most to me, though, was that I'd already calculated that from Hawthorne Street I could walk to school every day,
avoiding the school bus I'd had to take each morning since school started. There's nothing like trying to find a seat on a crowded bus full of classmates chatting together in happy clusters, totally ignoring you, to let you know exactly how unpopular you really are, just in case you'd forgotten overnight. It's not the best way to start the day—things kind of have a tendency to go downhill from there.

We oohed and ahhed in unison as we passed one stunning house after the other. "This can't be the right neighborhood," my mother announced, turning her head from left to right so that she wouldn't miss anything. "These houses are simply too good to be true. Look at all these Queen Anne beauties! Everybody in town must want to live on this street. There's probably a waiting list, and someone has to die before you can get one. Kind of like box seats at the Kentucky Derby."

I agreed with her, although I said nothing, not wanting to dampen anyone's spirits. I'd seen massive Victorian homes like these back in Frankfort and on television, and I'd always wondered what it would be like to live in one, to call one home. I had even gone so far as to design my bedroom in such a house: it would have a wide bay window with a window seat and overstuffed pillows, my maple roll top desk would stand in the corner, there would be lots of bookshelves to hold my favorite books and all of my stuffed animals, and I would have a big wrought iron bed, painted white, with a navy blue and white bedspread and matching curtains. Best of all, no Max to share it with, no piles of his dirty clothes cluttering the floor, no hard plastic toy soldiers attacking my bare feet when I least expected it, their pointy guns embedding themselves in my heels. Had my fantasy room finally arrived? Would Mom and Dad really consider buying one of these houses? Could we, at long last, really be bidding the tiny apartment farewell? I scarcely dared to hope.
"This is Hawthorne Street, all right, unless the street sign is wrong," Dad said. Then, the visions of my dream room dissolved before my eyes, as he continued, "I'll tell you one thing, though. If one of these houses is going to be affordable, we can bet our last dollar it's going to be a fixer-upper."

Mom, Max, and I collectively caught our breath. Nothing strikes fear into our hearts the way the word "fixer-upper" does. You see, Dad fancies himself handy with tools. I don't know why. He tries so hard to repair little things, but something always goes wrong. If he tries fixing the sink, then water starts spewing in all directions from the pipes. Once he tried to rewire the overhead light in the kitchen where we used to live, and he received a shock so powerful it knocked him backwards off the ladder and onto the linoleum floor; he wasn't hurt, only dazed, but even that didn't stop him from trying. No matter what he put his hand to, it simply never turned out the way it was supposed to. Nevertheless, he continued to tell us that he really wanted to get his hands on a house he could renovate from the ground up.

Small wonder, then, that I cringed when I heard the word "fixer-upper."

We slowed down as we neared 1313, finally parking in front of the most imposing house on the block. None of us spoke, not even Max. We all simply sat there, leaning out of the car windows, mouths gaping as we stared at the huge Victorian monstrosity, slate blue with white trim, the largest house on the entire street, surrounded by a spiked wrought iron fence. The house seemed to ramble on forever with its wrap-around veranda, arched windows, and gable after gable jutting forth from the roof, yet all of these features somehow paled next to the circular turret on the far left side.

"Seven," I announced.

"Seven what, Tasha?" Dad asked.

"There are seven gables, Dad. Just like Hawthorne's House of the Seven
Gables. This is a house with seven gables, too. I'll bet that's why this is called Hawthorne Street."

"If you're right, Tasha," Mom said, "here's hoping we don't meet the same fate as the people who lived in that cursed house."

"What happened to the people who lived in the House of the Seven Gables?" asked Max.

Mom answered sharply, "You don't want to know."

I leaned across Tess and whispered to him, "The people who lived there died, and the ground opened up and swallowed the house."

Max breathed, "Cool!"

Mom opened her door and said, "Let's go look at this and get it over with."

Dad planted both hands on the steering wheel. "If that's the attitude you're going to take, Sarah, why should we even bother going in to see what it's like? There's no point. You won't like it. You've already made your mind up about it."

"No, I haven't," Mom insisted. "It's just that I instinctively know we can't afford it, that's all. This is a classic gothic Victorian, Jack. Houses like this don't come on the market every day. It's perfect." I felt sorry for her when she added, "That turret would be ideal for my studio. It's too perfect."

"We don't know that the inside looks as great as the outside," he argued. "I'll bet the inside is antiquated. Probably needs new pipes and rewiring, too." Rubbing his hands together, he continued, "Max and I will have a great time, spackling and hammering and getting everything just right."

Mom said nothing, studying his face. Uh-oh, I thought, sliding down in the seat, afraid to watch. Would it all come out now? Would Mom finally tell Dad what we thought of his abilities as a handyman? Everybody else knew it--
Mom, Max, me, probably even Tess—everyone knew the facts about Dad but Dad himself. And with Mom hardly her old, cheery self lately, I feared the worst, that she would lash out at him much like she'd been lashing out at Max and me since we'd arrived in Arizona.

Mom's jaw tightened. "Jack, you know as well as I do that you're much too busy with your new job and all of your responsibilities at the newspaper to take on a major renovation that a house of this size and age would involve. You'd exhaust yourself and the rest of us, too. And I'm no good with wiring or drywall or any of that stuff. You know I'm absolutely hopeless when it comes to that kind of thing. The painting and decorating I'll be glad to do. But anything else, no. There is no way in the world we could undertake such a huge job."

I let out my breath, slowly and silently. Way to go, Mom. She had managed to skirt the issue without hurting Dad's feelings. Good.

Dad let her words sink in, his thumbs thumping rhythmically against the steering wheel. "Let's just go see what the inside looks like. If we can get a good loan, we could hire professionals to do whatever needs to be done. You're absolutely right, honey. I don't have the time to do it or, to be perfectly honest, the energy. Come on." He nudged Mom in the ribs. "Be a sport. Do it for me. Please."

"Okay, okay." Mom sounded very tired. "I'll keep an open mind, I promise. I won't pass judgment until we've seen the whole house from stem to stern."

"Thank you, Sarah." Dad's voice was gruff. He kissed her lightly on the cheek, then jumped out of the car. "Let's check this place out, gang!"

Max tumbled out of the door, rushing ahead to unlatch the gate and hold it open for us. It clanged shut behind him, making me jump and Tess bark. "It's just an old gate, Tasha," he laughed. "Nothing to get spooked about!"
"It's an old, squeaky gate," I snapped, angry with myself for being so jumpy. "Right out of the Addams family. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised to see Thing galloping toward us, welcoming us to his house."

"Look!" Max cried, pointing up at the turret. "Is that Uncle Fester up there, hoping that company is coming?"

"You're so clever," I commented. Really, though, Uncle Fester would have felt right at home in that turret, although I didn't admit it to Max.

The front porch, I couldn't help noticing, definitely needed work. Several of the boards sagged underneath my feet, and the grimy screen across the huge front picture window needed to be mended or maybe even replaced altogether. "Minor repairs," Dad said cheerfully from the far end of the porch. He stamped his foot. "Solid as a rock."

Mom said under her breath, "And rotten everywhere else."

I stifled a giggle, while Max looked up at her, reproachfully. "Mom, you promised you'd keep an open mind."

"Really, I'm trying to behave." She twisted the big doorbell, and it bleated like a rusty foghorn. "Heavens! I believe we have summoned Lurch!"

"Mom--" Max placed his hands on his hips.

"You started it, Max," she informed him, "with that comment about Uncle Fester. I just can't help myself! This place is so--so--"

"--haunted?" I finished.

"Exactly!"

The house reeked of the supernatural. Even the sky, which moments before had held billowing white clouds and sun, now began to darken, angry storm clouds rolling in from the north. Everything became noticeably still--no birds chirped, no traffic noises sounded from the street, nothing. All was silent as we waited for someone to answer the door. Mom motioned for me to look
above the door at the half-moon shaped stained glass window in shades of cobalt blue and rose and pale yellow. "Isn't that beautiful?" she breathed. "Original to the house, I suspect. Very nicely made."

The front door opened slowly, and a man in overalls, covered in cream-colored paint from his hair down to his shoes, stood in the doorway, blinking at us. "Come in, come in!" he cried, opening the door wider. "You folks must have seen the ad in the paper this morning! My name is Dave--Dave Wright." He held out a paint-encrusted hand, then looked down at it since none of us had offered to take it. "Mmmm. Can't say that I blame you. I didn't know I was such a mess." He wiped his hand on his overalls, which didn't help his hand or his overalls. "Well, come on in anyway."

"Can the dog come, too?" Max asked.

"Sure." Dave peered at us as we filed past him. "You sure look familiar," he said to Dad. "I've seen you before, haven't I? Have we met somewhere before? Wait a minute now." He rocked back on his heels, then slapped his thigh. "I know--you're that guy who took over the newspaper. Manning, that's it! The new editor of the Prescott Courier."

Dad, Mom, Max, and Tess followed along in Dave's wake, leaving me all alone in the entrance hall, trying to absorb the atmosphere. Beautiful hardwood floors gleamed like new, the walls covered in delicate floral wallpaper, with an ornate, multi-tiered chandelier, its prisms reflecting on the walls. I breathed in. The house smelted of wood polish and pine cleaner and fresh paint, yet of something else as well, something fainter but very distinctive and welcoming...lavender? I squinted, concentrating. Lavender, definitely.

From the back of the house, I could hear Mom saying, "Well, this is lovely!" but I didn't hurry to catch up with them. A doorway at the left of the foyer led into a largish room with an old fireplace encased in an iron mantel,
twin alcoves on either side with built-in bookshelves, and a big mullioned window. "This would be the den," I thought, already seeing it furnished with Dad's leather recliner and his books and the television. Tess would love sleeping in front of the fireplace and would make it her own in no time.

Across from the den stood another room almost its twin, although perhaps a bit larger, I thought, crossing to look out one of the side windows. The living room, definitely. I noted with satisfaction the floor to ceiling bookshelves at the far end, knowing that Mom and Dad would love them.

Back out in the hallway, I turned right into another large room, this one more rectangular than the others and with fewer windows. The dining room, maybe. I pushed through the swinging door on the right and into a tiny room with nothing but shelves and cabinets and a small, diamond-paned window, the entire room barely large enough to turn around in. The butler's pantry.

Beyond that lay the kitchen, and I knew then, if I hadn't known already, that we would buy this house, that no other would do. The kitchen was everything my mother admired in a kitchen--and more. Spacious, bright, and airy, it was a country farmhouse kitchen with modern appliances, plenty of cabinets and counter space, a beige tile floor, and an island that, to my untrained eye, looked like it was made of oak. More than enough room to satisfy her. In our last house, Mom had made do with our kitchen, but she hadn't liked it, not at all. Time and time again, she had told us that she wanted a kitchen big enough for a round farm-style table, where the whole family could sit and eat casually. So now she would have that much room and more, as well as a formal dining room where we could entertain company.

Her voice called down to me from up the stairs. "Tasha, come up here with us! You're missing the guided tour."

Finding my way back out into the foyer, I slowly climbed the vast
staircase. Midway up, there was a small landing, perfect for the grandfather clock Mom's parents had given her when she married Dad, then the stairs turned sharply and headed back up to the next floor. "Where are you?" I called out.

Dad's head appeared from behind one of the many doors. "In here. Master bedroom."

Dave was happily telling them about the many improvements he had made in the house, while Mom peered out the front window. "Lovely view," she murmured. "And, Tasha, look--the master bedroom has its own bathroom. Isn't that marvelous?"

I said nothing, my eyes on Tess. She sat quietly by Dad's feet, her body tense and her head cocked, as though she were carefully studying something in the far corner of the room. I followed her gaze to see what she found so captivating, but I could see nothing. There was quite literally nothing in the room other than us. But, where downstairs I had smelled lavender, suddenly upstairs I smelled roses. Dead roses. Rotted roses. Tess gave a low guttural growl, bared her teeth, then barked at the empty corner.

"Hush, Tess, or Max will have to take you outside!" Dad cleared his throat and put his hands into his pockets. "I guess the big question, Dave, is why are you getting rid of this beauty? You've done so much work on it and obviously put your heart into it. Why would you want to get rid of it?"

Dave smiled. "Good question, Jack. You see, I renovate houses for fun. It's my hobby. In my real life, I'm an accountant and I'm good at it, but I can't stand it. But it pays the bills and supports this hobby. This is what I do that I love. And I'm about finished here. Except for the veranda, of course, and I'll have that finished before anyone moves in. Shouldn't take me more than a week, tops. I guess you could say that it's time for me to move on to something
else. Another house. I've got my eye on another Victorian over on Nob Hill that needs a lot of work."

"Is this house haunted like you said in the ad?" Max asked.

Dave looked sheepish and hooked his thumbs under his overall straps. 

"Not really. Or at least, not that I know of. But it sure looks like it should be haunted, doesn't it? That great turret and all those gables and everything. Oh, sometimes I hear mysterious little creaks and the floorboards groaning, but it's just the house settling in for the night. Old houses make funny noises at times, but they can always be explained. I've never seen anything even vaguely resembling a ghost."

"Oh." Max put a lot of disappointment into such a little word.

Mom hugged him to her side. "We wouldn't really want a ghost, would we, Max?"

"I would," he retorted, wriggling out of her grasp and reaching down to pet Tess.

Mom and Dave exchanged a look which read, "Little boys."

I agreed. I didn't want a ghost either. Like I said, I had enough trouble in my life, what with school and missing my old friends, without a ghost thrown in to gum up the works even further.

"What's up there in the turret?" Dad asked, looking out the side window.

"We were hoping we might be able to make it into an art studio."

Dave replied, "That's a real good idea. I hadn't thought of that. I'd thought it would be a good library or a study or maybe even another bedroom. Let's go check it out. Who's the artist?"

Dad followed him out of the room, eagerly telling him all about Mom and her paintings, Max and Tess behind them. Mom stayed in the master bedroom with me, clasping her hands together, her eyes shining like they used
to back in Frankfort. "Tasha, isn’t this house just a dream? Don’t you simply love it?"

I nodded. "What do you think about the kitchen?"

"Perfect, perfect! It’s what I’ve always wanted! So far, I haven’t found one single thing wrong with this house!" She held up two crossed fingers.

I started to mention the smell of decaying roses, but she looked so positively ecstatic and so like her old self that I bit my tongue. Probably some kind of goop Dave was using to make his repairs, some kind of heavy-duty spackle that only professionals could buy. Whatever the smell had been, it apparently had no effect on my mother.

But what, I wondered, as she and I went to join the others up in the turret, had Tess seen?
CHAPTER THREE

The next few weeks flew past, the move from the apartment to the house on Hawthorne managing to eclipse even the most dismal day at school. In the afternoons and evenings and all during the weekends, we boxed up our belongings yet again (the second time in about four months), hauled the furniture out of the apartment and from storage, and moved everything into the new house on Hawthorne Street. The gilt-framed mirror and the marble-top table, once at home in Frankfort, now graced our new foyer, Dad's maroon leather recliner and the TV were in position just the way he liked them in the den, and it looked pretty much the way I'd imagined it on the first day we visited the house.

I selected the room toward the back of the second floor as my bedroom, with Max directly across the hall from me, and my parents' room on the same side as mine but at the front of the house facing the street--that same master bedroom where Tess had barked at the invisible. Beyond my door and to the right lay the door that led upstairs to the attic.

My bedroom, with its sloped ceiling and windows that overlooked the overgrown back garden, still needed some personal touches, despite all my familiar furniture. Mom and I had spent an entire afternoon trying to position my bed just so, and we finally decided to place it right beside the windows so that I could lie in bed and look outside at the moon and stars at night, a perfect view. It was, I kept telling myself repeatedly, a great room, the room I'd always longed for. But I had to force myself not to imagine the fun Jenny and I would
have had, hanging posters and pictures, trying to decide which ones would look best on each of the walls. But Jenny lived thousands of miles away, and if I wanted anything other than naked walls, I knew I would have to go it alone or forget about it.

Despite the hubbub of moving and picking out the navy blue and white checked curtains and bedspread I'd envisioned for my dream room so long ago, I still couldn't shake my feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Instead of things getting better with time, time only made me feel worse. If anything, finally settling down in the new house made me even more miserable than when we were living in the apartment, maybe because actually owning the house finally proved to me that our stay in Prescott was permanent. From the day we'd arrived in Arizona, I had hoped that, because the apartment was temporary, maybe our stay in Prescott would be temporary, too. Deep down, I had harbored an unspoken hope that Dad wouldn't like his new job or he would dislike Arizona as much as I did, and we would all pile into the car and head back home to Frankfort, and once again I could be in the school I loved with my old friends. Our new house made the possibility of that particular fantasy coming true highly unlikely.

So, on that first Sunday morning on Hawthorne Street, I had unrolled all of my posters and laid them out on the bed, trying to select which ones to hang on my new walls, when Max walked in.

"My bedroom feels like it belongs to someone else," he complained, carefully moving aside one of the posters so that he could sit down on my bed. "It's like we're visiting somebody's home. Some old aunt."

"These things take time," I assured him, hoping that my voice sounded more confident than I felt. "Every house has a mood, and this one is just--well, it's a bigger house than we're used to, that's all, and it's going to take a while for
us to get settled in it. But it will be familiar in no time."

"Really?"

"Sure. But you need to put out some of your stuff in your room, your baseball pennants and your posters, like you had in your old room back in Frankfort. Then it will seem more like home to you. Before long, we'll forget that we ever lived anywhere else."

Fat chance, I thought, that we'd ever forget that, but I couldn't say that to him.

His face brightened a little. "I'll help you hang your posters if you'll help me fix my room up, Tasha."

"Okay, but I doubt we can get much done before Mom calls us down to breakfast. I can already smell bacon. And coffee." I handed him the roll of masking tape, and he started tearing off little strips of it, placing them on his arm so I could take bits as I needed for hanging. "Max, do you ever miss Frankfort and your friends back there?"

He gave a little shrug as he held out some tape for me. "Sometimes. Not too much. I like it here."

"Oh." I smoothed out a poster of a seascape, took some tape from Max, and pressed the poster onto the wall above the dresser, then stepped back to make sure I'd hung it evenly. "Does that look straight to you?"

"Yes. You don't much like it here, do you?"

"No, I don't. Hand me that poster of the unicorn, will you?"

"Why don't you like Prescott? It's a neat town. I like downtown best, right around Whiskey Row, where all the old saloons are lined up right next to each other. And I like the court house, too, and that cool statue of Bucky O'Neill."

"That guy on the horse?"
Max snorted. "He's not just a guy on a horse, Tasha. He was one of the Rough Riders. You know, with Teddy Roosevelt."

"I know all about the Rough Riders. I just don't care that Bucky O'Neill happened to be one, that's all."

"Well, I don't see why not. It's a good statue. I'd like to have a horse like his."

I turned and looked at him, giving him one of my best big-sister, withering stares. "I will never in my life care about this awful little town, Max, and it will never be my home."

"Oh." He was quiet for a few minutes, peeling off more tape. "But it is our home."

"Maybe it's yours. But it isn't mine. It never will be, not in a million years. I don't know why we couldn't have moved some place closer to Frankfort. Like Lexington or Louisville. Why we had to pick up and move clear across the country, I'll never understand."

He followed me to the other end of the room, where my maple rolltop desk stood, and helped me position my bulletin board on the wall above it. After I'd measured and hammered some nails into the wall, he said, "Dad explained it over and over to us, Tasha. He wanted an editor's job, and he was offered one here, and the pay is good. That's why we're in Prescott and not closer to home. There weren't any jobs there for him."

I mumbled, "He could have taken another job. He could have done something else."

"But he's a newspaper man!" Max's green eyes grew so large that I could see the little yellow flecks in the iris. "What else could he do? Work in a Mini-Mart? Paint houses? Would you honestly have wanted him do something else for a living rather than move here, Tasha?"
"Of course not!" I retorted, more than tired of the turn this conversation had taken. "Just shut up about it. Please."

"Okay. But I wish you weren't so sad."

"You and me both."

"First Mom changed, then you changed. I don't like it."

I froze, a poster in my hand. "It's that obvious?" I asked him.

"Gosh, yes."

There was nothing I could say. And I thought I'd done such a good job at keeping my feelings to myself.

"Is it school?" he asked.

I set my jaw and looked at him again, but it was difficult to stay angry with Max for very long, with his freckled face and those green eyes looking so serious, turned up towards mine. "Yes, it's school," I admitted to him. "Maybe it wouldn't be so awful here if just one person at school would treat me like anything but an outsider. You can't imagine how horrid it is to have absolutely no one talking to you, day after day after day, like you're invisible. Or a leper."

"Sure I can," he said cheerfully. "That's what it was like at my new school, too. But it got better. I like it now."

Still eyeing him, I asked casually, "What made it get better? What did you do?" Heaven help me, I thought, if a 10-year-old boy could teach me anything about making friends at a new school. Still, it never hurt to ask.

"I kicked a home run during a game of kickball during recess!"

I sighed, wishing that my problems could be solved so easily, that I could kick a home run or win a race and suddenly be surrounded by an entire group of people, all of them longing to be friends with me, the hero of the hour. Life, I decided, is much easier for the young.

Mom yelled up the stairs just then, calling us to breakfast.
Dad sat at the table already, sipping his orange juice, but he looked up from the newspaper long enough to greet Max and me, as we slid into our chairs across from him. With his glasses perched on the end of his nose, he looked like a wise owl with messy blonde hair.

"Who," he asked, peering over his glasses, "was hammering so early in the morning?"

"That would've been me," I said. "Max helped me hang my bulletin board. I put it right in front of my desk."

"How's your room coming along, Tasha?" Mom asked, pouring the coffee from the pot into a large white carafe.

"It's getting there," I replied, pouring juice for Max and me. "We've been arranging some of my posters on the wall, too. I wish Jenny were here to help me, though. She and I could have a great time decorating."

Mom slammed the platter of scrambled eggs onto the table, and we all looked up at her, startled, even Dad. "I'm sorry," she said, rubbing her temples. "It's just that... Tasha, you have got to stop talking so much about Jenny. I can't stand seeing you mope around here like some kind of zombie! You used to be such a sociable child. I don't know what's gotten into you."

I closed my eyes, trying to will away the anger I felt rising, but it didn't work. Clenching my glass of juice in my hands, I struggled to keep my voice calm and even. "I'll tell you exactly what's gotten into me, Mother. School has gotten into me. It's very difficult being sociable when nobody talks to you! But I don't expect you to understand. You never do."

Dad's face took on that puzzled expression he gets whenever tempers flare. He rarely loses his temper, so he's always surprised when others do. "Sweetie, these things take time," he said. "I know it's been difficult, but this move has been hard on all of us, too."
"It hasn't been as hard on any of you as it has been on me!" I shouted, shoving my chair back from the table and standing up. "I hate this town! I simply hate it! I'll never forgive either of you for making me move away from my friends! Never!" I ran upstairs to my bedroom and slammed the door behind me as hard as I could. "They don't understand," I muttered, furiously pacing the length of the room. "They don't know what it's like to lose every single friend they ever made and have absolutely no one their own age to talk to. It hasn't been hard for them at all. Dad has his job, and Mom has us and this new house, and Max hit a home run and magically made friends with everyone. Nobody knows what it's like to have everybody look at you like you're some kind of freak in a circus sideshow!"

My stomach growled, reminding me that I had eaten nothing and had only taken a few sips of orange juice. Trying hard not to think about the eggs and bacon and toast left on the breakfast table, I opened my door, straining to hear sounds from downstairs. I heard Dad and Mom talking, their voices low, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Then I heard the back door slam, and walking over to the window by my bed, I could see Max and Tess run out into the backyard, Tess galloping and leaping and barking, nipping at Max's heels.

There wasn't much room for them to play out there, since most of the yard was a rampant jungle of a garden that Mom couldn't wait to get her hands on. "Come spring," she had promised us on moving day, "that garden will be a showcase. I'll weed out all the overgrowth and really make something of it."

But spring seemed like an eternity away. First we had to contend with autumn and winter. And all the while the overgrown garden dominated most of the yard, stretching all the way back to a short white picket fence that separated our yard from the house behind us.
While I stood at the window and tried to ignore the hollow gnawing in my stomach, my gaze wandered to the house behind us, a two-story white frame house with a red bicycle propped up against the fence and a small dog house in the corner by the garage. A soccer ball lay near the back door. As I took all of this in unconsciously, the back door opened, and a tall boy with long, dark shaggy hair loped down the back steps, stooped down to tie his sneakers, then scooped up the soccer ball, bouncing it a few times on the grass. Suddenly he stopped. Shielding his eyes against the morning sun, he looked up toward my window.

I sidled away so that he couldn't see me. Had he suspected that I might have been watching him? Would he think that I'd been standing there all morning, waiting for him to make an appearance? Even though I was all alone in my room, I could feel my cheeks burning. The boy looked familiar. He must go to Prescott High, I thought, but, if he did, I didn't know his name and knew that I didn't have any classes with him. Wonderful. All I needed to make life even more horrible was some guy at school thinking that I had nothing better to do than play peeping tom and stalk his every move from my bedroom window, then telling all of his friends about it. I cringed at the mental image of him and his friends laughing and pointing at me in the halls between classes. "Yeah, she's the one, all right," he would jeer. "She likes to watch me when she thinks I can't see her."

Cautiously, I inched back to the window to see what he was doing now. Apparently, my window no longer fascinated him. He dashed back and forth across the yard, practicing his soccer moves, bouncing the black-and-white ball off his knees, his forehead, then kicking it deftly across the yard with the side of his foot, where it rebounded off the garage and careened right back at him, hitting him smack in the face. I couldn't help but laugh—he was tall and lean.
but muscular, his dark hair glinting in the sun. I was too far away to see much of his face. A short while later, he picked the ball back up, tucked it under his arm, and again turned toward my window and looked up.

This time, I ducked down onto all fours, crawled away from the window, then ran from my room, slamming the door behind me, and bumped straight into Dad in the hallway. "Whoa! Slow down a bit," he said, steadying me by the shoulders. "What's the rush? See a ghost?" Behind his glasses, his eyes were teasing me.

"No ghost. I was just—in a hurry."

"For what?"

I couldn't very well tell my father that his only daughter had peeping tom tendencies and that I'd been staring out my window, mesmerized by the guy who lived directly behind us. Fortunately, Dad didn't expect an answer. "Young people are always in a hurry. You didn't get any breakfast, and there are eggs and bacon left. Why don't you go downstairs and eat and talk to your mother?"

"I'm not hungry," I lied.

His expression let me know that he knew better. "Tasha," Dad began but stopped and hugged me instead. "I know you're not happy here, sweetie," he whispered, "but all I ask is that you try a little bit harder. Please. I can't stand seeing you like this. Your mother can't either. Make an effort."

"Dad, I am trying!" I could feel tears pricking the back of my eyelids, but I forced them back down. "Nobody likes me!"

He held me out at arm's length. "How can they not like you? You're the most likeable girl I've ever met. Unless, of course, you're yelling at your mother and me at the breakfast table."

"You have to like me," I quavered, trying to return his smile. "You're my
dad. You're partial. Parents are always partial to their own children. They
don't know any better."

"That's total nonsense. I like you because you're so darned likeable." He
fished around in his pocket for his handkerchief and held it out for me. "Now,
stop crying and blow your nose. If you're sure you're not hungry, then come on
up to the attic with me. We can go exploring together."

The attic. Did I really want to explore the attic in this massive old house?
Despite my hunger, I discovered that I did want to. Very much. I blew my nose
and sniffed. "Okay."

The attic door lay just beyond my bedroom, to the right at the end of the
hall. Dad lifted the latch and opened the door, and I followed close behind him,
up the dark narrow stairs, not even wide enough for my whole foot to fit.
"There must be a light here somewhere," he said, his fingers fumbling across the
wall. "Tasha, do you see anything even vaguely resembling a light switch?"

My hands slid along the cool rough walls until I found the switch.
"Here." I flipped it up, and a naked light bulb at the top of the staircase barely
lit the steps.

With Dad in front of me, we reached the top. "Lavender," I announced,
sniffing the air.

"What? Where?"

"Everywhere? Can't you smell it?" I asked him. I breathed in. "It's
wonderful. Maybe someone dried lavender up here. Sometimes I can smell it
downstairs in the foyer, too, but it's even stronger up here. I think lavender is
the best smell in the world."

Dad shrugged his shoulders. "I don't smell a thing, just mustiness. And
maybe, heaven forbid, dry rot." He brushed wisps of cobwebs away from his
face and arms. "Watch your footing. We'll need to put up a railing or some
kind of guard around these stairs. It could be quite a drop if you don't know what you're doing."

At the top of the stairs, the whole attic spread out before us. The dusty windowpanes let in barely enough sunlight to make out the shapes of furniture, lamps, trunks, an old dressmaker's model, hat boxes—all enshrouded in thick dust and cobwebs. Dad surveyed the mess happily. "A veritable treasure trove," he said. "And it's ours!"

"But does all of this—this mess really belong to us, too?" I asked him. "Surely Dave didn't know this stuff was up here, or he would have cleared it out. He could have had a garage sale or something and made some extra money."

"Oh, he knew about it, all right. He told me it was mostly a bunch of old junk, and he couldn't be bothered to move it. So we bought the house—lock, stock, barrel, and attic. All of this is ours. And who knows what we might find?"

Whistling, Dad headed off in one direction, back beneath the eaves, while I took off for the opposite side, over to the window to study the view. It was basically the same as from my bedroom, only higher up, overlooking the backyard and the soccer boy's house. He, I noticed, was nowhere to be seen, nor were Max and Tess. Turning away, I decided to explore this side of the attic, leaving the other side to Dad. Three large steamer trunks were lined up in a row by the window, an interesting enough place to begin my exploration. I fingered the rusty clasp on the nearest trunk, and, to my surprise, it gave way at my touch, springing up. I lifted the lid hesitantly, half afraid of what I might find. A wave of musty mildew mixed with a revolting combination of mothballs and decaying roses rushed out, and I reeled backwards, covering my nose with my hand. "Oh, Dad, you should smell this trunk!" I called to him.
"It's awful!"

"What's in it?"

I uncovered my nose long enough to reach into the trunk and pull out what lay on top, a long black dress with a high, frilly collar. Underneath it lay more of the same, layer upon layer of black material. "Black dresses. Widow's weeds, I guess. Ancient. And smelly. The whole thing needs to be thrown out."

The stench of roses blending with the other odors intensified, and my stomach lurched. There was, I thought, something to be said for not having eaten. Slamming the trunk closed, I sat back on my heels and covered my face with both arms. A cold, clammy cloud settled on top of me, enveloping me. I shivered, hugging myself and clenching my eyes shut, trying to will away the coldness that embodied the mildew and dead roses and rotting clothes.

Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the coldness and the stench simply lifted and let me go. I sniffed a few times experimentally and could smell only the musty attic mixed with the odd smell that Dad thought might be dry rot. Not at all unpleasant, just stuffy and stale. The normal smell of a room that had been closed up for years and years.

"Tasha!" Dad cried. "You'll never believe what I've found. Come look!"

On shaky legs, I tried standing but first had to lean against the wall, not caring that cobwebs draped themselves across my hair and shoulders. Where, I wondered, had the coldness come from? And where had it gone when it left me?

Dad was sitting cross-legged under the eaves near the stairs, rummaging through a box of ancient phonograph albums. "Look at this, Tasha! Old 78s. I'll bet you've never even seen a 78 record before, have you? Look. Kay Kyser. Glenn Miller. The best of the best of swing music from the 1930s. These are vintage records. Vintage!" Carefully, he placed the records back in the box.
"I'm taking these downstairs with me. Imagine being able to listen to original swing music while I write! Music just doesn't get any better than this." He reminded me of Max on Christmas morning.

We carefully descended the attic stairs, the box of records cradled in Dad's arms. I stuck as close to him as I could get, unable to shake the feeling that someone was still watching us and had been watching our every move the whole time we'd been exploring.

I don't know what stopped me from telling Dad about the coldness in the attic, but I made no mention of it, feeling only relief as we made our way back out into the bright hallway and latched the attic door firmly behind us. Perhaps at the time I didn't know how dark and evil the cold really was.

But I soon would.
 CHAPTER FOUR

If anyone had asked me what I liked best about our new house, I would have replied without even stopping to think, "I don't have to take the school bus anymore." On Monday morning, my first day of school since moving onto Hawthorne Street, I lingered over my cereal and juice, envisioning the school bus making its regular stop near our old apartment and its doors closing without me on board. Mom and I had made tentative peace the night before: she apologized for asking me to quit talking so much about Jenny, and I told her I was sorry that I had shouted at her and ruined breakfast for everybody. Still, I thought that she might have been a bit more sympathetic. But that's parents for you. Sometimes they're just too caught up in their own little worlds to pay much attention to what's really going on.

It was a beautiful, bright morning, perfect for October. The only thing spoiling it was the thought of school. With no time to lose, I grabbed my books from my dresser, threw them into my backpack, checked my purse to make sure I had enough money for lunch in my wallet, and galloped down the stairs.

"Bye, Mom!" I called into the kitchen.

Dad stood in the foyer, straightening his tie in front of the big oval goldleaf mirror. "You look very nice this morning," he commented, locking eyes with me in the mirror.

"I do?" I looked down at my jeans and blue nubby turtleneck sweater. "I always dress like this."

"I know, but that blue really matches your eyes. Actually, it matches my
eyes, too. If I thought it would fit, I'd ask to borrow it sometime. Do you want to ride with me this morning?" he asked. "I'm going to drop Max off at his school, then I could take you on to the high school."

I tried to keep my tone casual. "No, thanks. It's such a beautiful morning, I'd like to walk." I didn't think he needed to know that riding with him would only get me where I didn't want to be that much sooner, namely school. The longer it took for me to arrive, the better, providing I wasn't late for my first period class. Besides, I looked forward to having some time to myself, uninterrupted by the droning of lecturing teachers, to contemplate what had happened in the attic yesterday. I hadn't had any chance to mull it over the night before because Mom had enlisted me to help her unpack some boxes up in the turret/studio she hadn't gotten around to yet. What exactly was going on in our attic? Why was it so cold in that one spot by the trunk? I hoped that the long walk to school might provide me with some answers.

Dad and Max climbed into the car, waving to me as they backed out of the driveway, then headed down Hawthorne. I waved and walked on, savoring the warm, golden sunlight, glad to be out walking on such a day, even if I was heading for school. Leaves had started falling from the trees, multi-colored leaves of red and yellow and russet that reminded me wistfully of Frankfort. An earthy fragrance of burning leaves tinged the crisp morning air. I inhaled and sighed gustily, forcing all images of Frankfort from my mind.

"Since we're both heading toward the high school, I hope you don't mind if I walk along with you," a male voice said close behind me.

Startled, I turned around. It was the boy from the house behind ours, the boy I had seen kicking the soccer ball around. Remembering that he might have noticed me watching him from my bedroom window the day before, I looked down at the sidewalk, unable to meet his eyes, which, I noticed, were dark
brown. "No, not at all. There's plenty of room on the sidewalk," I said.

He grinned tentatively, falling into place beside me and matching my stride. "I saw you and your family moving in over the weekend."

There didn't seem to be any response to that. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw that he was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt and a black vest, with an orange sweater tied around his waist.

He stopped abruptly and extended his hand to me. "My name is Stephen, by the way. Stephen Collier."

We shook hands. "Tasha Manning."

"Short for Natasha?"

"No. Tasha for just Tasha."

"Like Tasha Tudor?"

I nodded, amazed that he would know the name of my favorite children's author, then walked on. Stephen caught up with me, shifting his books under his left arm. "I've seen you around school," he said. "Kind of a loner, aren't you?"

"Not really," I said, looking up at him. "It's just--" Did I really want to tell this total stranger, this Stephen Collier, whoever he was, about the agonizing homesickness I felt? I thought quickly. No. "Never mind."

"What?" he persisted. "It's just what?"

I tried to come up with a reply that wouldn't make me sound like a total idiot. Finally, I settled on telling him, "I've never been called a loner before. It's just that it's hard when you're new to a school and don't know anyone."

He nodded. "I guess it would be. I never thought about it. I've always lived here. I've known everybody forever, and they've known me. There aren't any surprises left."

"Mmm. Well, there have been plenty of surprises for me." We walked
along in silence for awhile, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to have Stephen Collier accompany me to school, like we always walked together, like I'd known him for years.

He said, "Come to think of it, Tasha, you're about the most surprising thing I've seen around Prescott in a long, long time."


"Surprising like why such a pretty girl is always by herself. Surprising like wondering where she comes from and why her eyes always look so sad when I pass her in the halls at school, even though she's smiling like she's really happy. Surprising like she never looks up and meets my eyes. Never meets anybody's eyes, come to think of it, at least not that I've seen."

I could feel a flush creeping up my cheeks. "Those aren't surprising."

Stephen dashed around in front of me so that I almost ran into him.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm hinting. This is when you, Tasha--" he pointed his finger at me "--are supposed to tell me, Stephen--" he pointed at himself "--all about yourself, like where you're from and what you like. All those things you tell somebody when you're getting to know them."

I smiled. "Oh. It's not a very good hint."

"It's the best I can do."

"I'm from Kentucky," I told him. "My dad is the new editor of the Prescott Courier. My mother is an artist. My little brother, Max, is 10 years old. Our dog is Tess. I left all of my friends behind when we moved here, and I don't like it here. It's so--well--different from where we came from. Everything is so Western."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Of course it's Western. It's Arizona. What did you expect? New England? The Deep South?"
"Of course not!" I could feel myself beginning to flush again. It sounded so stupid when I tried to put it into words. "There are river beds here with no water in them. And there are cacti--" 

"Cacti, then. Prickly ones, in assorted sizes and shapes. And everybody wears cowboy hats and boots, and the downtown looks like it's straight out of a set for a western movie. And there are statues of cowboys in front of the courthouse, for heaven's sake."

"I can't deny any of that," he chuckled. "And that's why you don't like it here? Because it's so Western?"

I considered it. "No," I said after a few moments. "I could probably get used to those. The main problem with Prescott is that it isn't my home, and it's not where I'm from, and none of my friends live here. That's the problem with Prescott."

"So the main problem you have with Prescott," he said, "is that it isn't in Kentucky."

"Yeah, I guess."

"I see. By the way, just for your enlightenment, one of those cowboys in front of the courthouse is actually one of the Rough Riders. Bucky O'Neill. He was a Rough Rider with Teddy Roosevelt."

"I know, I know. But there's that other statue, too. The one that looks like the horse is standing on the cowboy's back."

"Hey, don't knock that statue. It's my favorite. Whenever I look at it, I think how much it must hurt to have a horse standing on your back, but that cowboy just smiles like it's the most comfortable thing in the world."

"So what about you?" I asked him. "You said you're from here?"

"Yeah. Born here and everything. My parents are divorced. My dad
lives in California now, and I live in the house right behind yours with my mom. Mom owns a little shop down on Whiskey Row. She's an artist, too. She makes her own jewelry and sells it to the tourists."

"Really? What kind of jewelry?"

"Mostly Southwestern stuff. She does a lot with turquoise beads and silver, mostly because that's what the tourists want, but she likes it, too."

He stopped in midstride, reaching inside his tee-shirt to pull out a chain. "Look. She made this for me."

He showed me the liquid silver chain that held a little claw-shaped charm with turquoise in the middle. "It's beautiful," I breathed. "But what is it supposed to be?"

"A Navajo bear claw," he explained, tucking the chain back inside his shirt. "It's supposed to bring strength to the wearer."

"And you need strength, do you?" I asked, grinning.

Stephen grinned right back, his brown eyes glinting. Not at all unattractive, I thought, with his dark shiny hair.

"Oh, a person can always use more strength," he said, laughing now. "You never know when you might need it."

"I guess so."

"You can laugh!" he exclaimed. "That's nice. I was afraid you had some sort of deformity that affected your sense of humor."

I didn't tell Stephen, of course, but when he made me laugh I felt as though a huge weight had suddenly released me from its grip. It had been months since I'd found anything at all to laugh about. I couldn't remember laughing once since the night Mom and Dad told Max and me that we were moving. I almost felt shaky with relief, it felt so good to laugh.

"You know," he said at length, the leaves scrunching beneath our feet as
we walked along the overpass above a little park, "I was a little concerned watching you and your family move into that big old house behind us."

"You were? Why?"

He hesitated. "I dunno. Have you felt anything funny since you moved in? What I mean is, is it . . . ?"

"Is it haunted?"

"Yeah, that's the question I'm trying to ask, I think."

I swallowed. How much should I tell him? I barely knew him. And to admit that you've felt a ghost or a presence or whatever it was up there in the attic that had enveloped me in the cold . . . what would he think? Even people I'd known my whole life might not understand what had happened, what I'd sensed. How could I expect this complete stranger to comprehend? I didn't even know that I could trust him if I told him what had happened. Would he tell all of his friends and then make fun of me afterwards?

It took so long for me to figure out how to answer his question that he finally said, "Something must have happened to you, all right, or you would have answered me with an immediate no."


"Tell me about it."

I took the plunge, figuring I had nothing to lose. Already I was unpopular and had no friends--how much worse could it get? So I described to him the coldness I had felt as I dug through the mildewed clothes in the old, dusty trunk. "If it had just been cold, it wouldn't have bothered me so much, Stephen. But there was this intense smell that I can only describe as how rotting roses would smell."

"Like a funeral home smell?"

"Yes! That's it!" When Mom's mom, my grandmother, had died and we
went to the funeral home, the overpowering scent of hundreds and hundreds of roses and carnations had made me physically ill. I thought I'd never be able to rid myself of that horrible stench of too many flowers in too small a room. "It's exactly like a funeral home," I told him.

I tried to read his thoughts, but if he was worried that I might be bordering on insanity, it certainly didn't register on his face. His expression looked as though he talked about haunted houses every day. "I read somewhere," he said, "that whenever ghosts are around, that there can be a scent of flowers with them. I don't remember where I read that. Some magazine. Or maybe I saw it on television."

"Really? How odd." I stopped walking again, and he turned to look at me. "Stephen, what made you think our house might be haunted? Have you seen something? Have you ever been in it?"

"I've been inside your house a couple of times when it was still empty, before you moved in. Did you meet that guy Dave who was fixing it up?"

"Dave Wright? Sure. He sold us the house."

"He's the one. Well, when he first started working on the house, I went in and offered to help him with whatever it was he was doing. He let me. I didn't want any money or anything. I just wanted the experience because sometimes Mom has things that need to be done around our house, and I like being able to help out." He slowed down long enough to kick his way through a big pile of leaves, then continued. "Anyway, I helped Dave with some grouting and puttying. I like doing that kind of work. Manual labor frees your mind up to think about other stuff. One night after Dave and I had worked late putting up some drywall, I went home to my house, and I was up in my bedroom--it looks out into your backyard--and I saw a light shining up in your attic. But Dave wasn't there. I even ran back over to your house to make sure
that he hadn't come back, like maybe he'd forgotten something and had just returned for it, but his truck wasn't there. I rang the doorbell and waited a long time, but no one answered the door."

I walked along beside him, considering some different possibilities. "Maybe he left the attic light on earlier in the day and forgot to turn it off," I suggested.

"No, that's what I thought at first, too, but when I mentioned it to Dave the next day, he said he hadn't even been up in the attic. For a little while, I thought that maybe I was so exhausted from all the work we'd been doing that I'd imagined it, but I know it wasn't my imagination. My imagination isn't that good."

"Oh."

"But that's not the strangest part. That next day I went up to the attic to turn the light off. And, Tasha . . . it wasn't on."

I felt chills crawling up my neck like tiny fingers inching their way up to my scalp. "Who had turned it off?" I asked, faintly.

"I don't have any idea. Nobody else was in that house, and Dave sure didn't do it."

Prescott High School loomed before us. Traffic was heavy in both directions, and it took us several minutes of intense concentration to cross the street. Crowds of students stood in clusters in front of the school, and I expected Stephen to leave me then, to search out his own friends. Funny thing, though: he didn't. He stayed beside me all the way into the school, through the front door and the sign that read 'No Bare Feet in the Building'--something I had never once seen in a Kentucky school--and waited for me while I pulled my books from my locker. In front of my homeroom, I said, "I believe this is where we come to a parting of the ways."
He glanced at the huge black watch on his wrist. "We've got two minutes yet. Hi, Mrs. Fletcher!" he called, waving into the classroom at my homeroom teacher. "She's all right," he mumbled to me. "A little cranky at times but all right." He grinned. "I'll see you around. What class do you have first?"

"English."

"I've got Spanish. I'll see you later, Tasha." He sprinted down the hall and around the corner, just as the first bell rang.

Somehow, meeting Stephen Collier made everything about Prescott High School immediately much better. Simply knowing that someone in the school knew me by name and seemed glad to see me made me feel not quite so anonymous. Stephen stopped me twice in the halls between classes to talk, and he sat with me at lunch in the cafeteria. He didn't seem to belong to any particular clique, but everyone seemed to like him, stopping to talk or slapping him on the back or calling out to him as we ate and talked in front of the big picture window that overlooked Thumb Butte, Prescott's most famous landmark. I hardly needed to remind myself that it was much nicer eating lunch with him than sitting alone amid all the noise, much better than reading a book by myself.

He met up with me again after school, as I was standing in front of my locker, trying to remember what books I needed to take home for homework. Algebra, for sure, always--math has always been my least favorite subject, and I have to work very hard just to keep up--and English. "Are you going my way?" he asked, leaning lankily against the locker next to mine.

"I might be if you're heading home."


"Mine, too," I said, pleased for some reason.
"Who's your English teacher?" he asked.

"Fergusson."

"She's good. Bizarre sense of humor, though. Does she still laugh at her own jokes?"

"She does," I told him, laughing. "And they're not particularly good jokes either. They're more like really bad puns."

"Right. Probably the same ones she used in my class last year. But she tries. I've got Holloway. He's merciless. He gives us vocabulary tests every Friday afternoon, and they're made up of terrible words like--well, I can't think of any right off the top of my head, but they're all scientific words. I think Holloway really wants to teach physics, but through some horrible twist of fate he wound up teaching English. We have assigned seats, and if you're not in the right seat when the bell starts ringing, you have to stay after school. No excuses."

We walked down the dim hallway together, past the rows and rows of lockers and posters announcing ball games, past all the trophy cases, then out into the late afternoon sunshine of Prescott. On our way home, after we'd crossed the street, he told me that he liked poetry (Keats and Shelley mainly) and classic rock (the Stones and Led Zeppelin in particular, but there were other good ones that he listened to), and lately he'd been trying to understand opera, but he hadn't been able to get the hang of it, no matter how hard he tried. "The orchestra part I can understand and even like," he admitted, "but it's the singing. I just don't get it."

"The sopranos hurt my ears," I agreed.

"Exactly! Like when violins hit notes that are too high. It does the same thing to me and makes me cringe inside like I'm trying to escape from the sound. But I do like listening to the tenors. Jose Carreras, for instance. I heard
him sing once in New York at Carnegie Hall. He was great."

I couldn't help wondering what Jenny would make of a cute and intelligent boy who liked poetry, Led Zeppelin, and Jose Carreras. I couldn't help wondering what I made of it myself, other than that I knew I'd never ever met anyone like Stephen Collier in my whole life.

Before I knew it, we were standing in front of the wrought-iron gate in front of my house. "Would you like to come in?" I asked.

"Your mom won't mind? Mine kills me if I have company over while she's at work."

"Mom paints and sculpts at home. Right now, she's trying to get her studio set up in the turret," I explained, opening the gate. "She hasn't had any space to work in since we moved here in July."

"I'll bet your mom would like my mom, since they're both artists. We need to introduce them."

I smiled. "She'd like that. She hasn't had a chance to meet anyone yet." I opened our front door, and we stepped into the foyer, Stephen looking all around, curiously checking everything out. "Mom, I'm home! I've brought company with me!"

Her voice called out from the kitchen. "I'm here! Come on back. I've made cookies!"

Stephen grinned. "She sensed I was coming."

"The ghost told her."

Mom was flipping chocolate chip cookies off a cookie tray when we walked into the kitchen. "Mom, this is Stephen Collier. He's in school with me. Stephen, this is my mother."

"Hello, Mrs. Manning," he said, shaking her hand. "I met Tasha when we were walking to school this morning. I live right there." He pointed out the
kitchen window to his house behind our yard.

"I saw you playing soccer yesterday!" Mom exclaimed. "Are you on the Prescott High soccer team?"

"No, ma'am. I'm not competitive enough. I just like to fool around with the ball and kick it around and see how long I can keep it moving. It's fun."

"I see." Mom tried to meet my eyes, but I wouldn't let her. "How was school today?"

"Okay," I said, passing the plate of cookies to Stephen. "Would you like a glass of milk?"

He nodded and took two cookies.

"Stephen, take more cookies than that. I'll get the milk," Mom said, shooing us over to the table. "Tasha, the oddest thing happened to me this morning."

Stephen looked at me over his cookie and cocked an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Well, I was upstairs in the turret, trying to figure out the best place to put the old deacon's bench that your father bought at the flea market, and I heard a woman call my name. Very distinctly. 'Sarah—Sarah.' I almost jumped out of my skin, thinking that somebody who knew me had come straight through the front door, into our house, and walked right up our stairs and found me in my studio. But there was nobody in the hallway. Nobody in the house. I searched high and low and couldn't find a soul."

I tried to sound nonchalant. "Whose voice did it sound like?"

"It wasn't a voice that I recognized. And I only heard it that one time. Very strange." She placed two full glasses of milk on the table in front of us. "I don't know who it could have been."

Stephen cleared his throat. "Sometimes late at night," he said, "I think I
hear someone calling my name. But it only happens on nights when I'm really tired."

Relief registered on Mom's face. "I'll bet that's it. And, heaven knows, I am tired! We all are. It's not easy moving into a new house. There's so much cleaning to do and rearranging furniture and unpacking all of the boxes." She patted Stephen on the shoulder. "Thank you, Stephen. That has to be it. Whew! For a minute there, I thought the house might be haunted."

Stephen and I pretended great fascination with our cookies.
CHAPTER FIVE

A nightmare awoke me that night. Not your average, run-of-the-mill bad dream, but a particularly horrifying, full-blown nightmare, complete with menacing dolls with pointy little teeth, a possessed stove that kept turning itself off and on, and a shrieking, winged teakettle that flew around the room, dive-bombing me as I ran for cover. Nightmares always sound embarrassingly ridiculous when you're thinking them over in the clear light of day, but this nightmare, once I'd finally awakened from it, left me feeling weak and trembling in the dark, relieved to be free of it, but unable to shake the frightening images that would not go away. I lay there, trying to forget the vivid details, and pulled the blankets up to my chin, looking out at the stars in the night sky outside the window, willing myself to think pleasant thoughts.

In time, my breathing returned to normal, and I calmed down, listening as the grandfather clock on the landing ticked rhythmically, then struck twice. Two a.m. Mom and Dad and Max would be sound asleep. Tess, too, wherever she happened to be, more than likely at the foot of Max's bed or beside it on his rug. Tess hadn't slept in Mom and Dad's room since we had moved into the house. She wouldn't go anywhere near it, not even in the daytime.

All was quiet.

And then I heard it.

A noise coming from the attic. The sound of footsteps directly over my head.

For one fleeting second, I thought I might have fallen asleep again and
the horrid nightmare had resumed where it left off, but after pinching myself, I knew this was no dream. I was wide awake.

And terrified.

At breakfast the next morning, I hardly tasted my bagel and vanilla yogurt, trying to figure out the best way to learn whether Mom, Dad, or Max might have been prowling around the attic at two in the morning. I hoped to find out without alarming everyone, in case the culprit happened to be none of the above. My dad has always been a night owl because of his job, but I couldn't picture him up in the attic, sifting through the boxes, hoping to find some more old records; his nightly prowls usually only consisted of trips to the refrigerator in the wee hours. As an editor, he wouldn't even get home until long after midnight, and then he would drop into his recliner and either listen to music under the headphones or read a mystery until he had unwound enough to go to bed. Mom hardly ever stayed awake until midnight, usually falling asleep on the couch in front of the television around 10 or so, although she always insisted she was merely "resting her eyes," despite the fact that she frequently snored. More often than not, Dad would have to wake her up so that she could go to bed. As for Max ... well, he always ran out of steam around 9:30, barely able to drag himself to his bedroom.

So who had been walking around the attic last night?
Mice?
If those sounds I'd heard coming from the attic had been made by mice, they were a mutant breed, so huge that no exterminator could ever get rid of them, and we had a real problem on our hands.

Tess? No way. I shook that idea out of my head. Tess had never been a dog who snooped around at night, scavenging through the garbage. Tess slept
when we did.

While Dad crunched his toast and sipped coffee, and Max sleepily ate his cereal, I ventured, "Do you think there could be mice in the attic, Dad?"

"Mice?" He put down his coffee cup and gave me a blank look. "What makes you think there might be mice in the attic, Tasha? Did you see any evidence on Sunday when we were exploring up there?"

"I'm not sure. I think I might have seen some shredded pieces of paper. Oh, and I heard some noises up there last night. That's all." I kept my voice casual, trying not to arouse his suspicions. He narrowed his eyes, then shook his head and turned his attention back to his toast.

I had definitely aroused Max's suspicions, though. Plenty. "What kind of noises?" he asked, perking up, just as Mom joined us, still in her robe and with her long hair piled loosely on top of her head, and sat down with a bagel and coffee.

"Hard to say really," I told him. "I just thought I might have heard mice in the attic."

"Maybe it's a ghost!" Max exclaimed.

"Oh, Tasha, don't go giving your brother any silly ideas about this house being haunted," Mom said.

"I'm not!" I protested. "I only wondered if we might have mice! Attics have been known to have mice, you know. I never once mentioned the word ghost. A ghost never even entered my mind. Max brought up the subject. Not me."

Dad said, "I suppose it's possible that we could have mice. Or perhaps a squirrel or a family of squirrels could have come in through one of the windows or the chimney. Or a family of birds might be living up there."

"Do you think it was birds, Tasha?" Max asked.
"It might have been," I lied, my voice calm. Birds wearing big army boots, maybe.

Thankfully, Dad changed the subject, and Max gave up on the subject of ghosts. But my little ruse had been successful: obviously if either Dad or Mom had been up in the attic last night, I had given them the perfect opening to admit it. Dad might have said, "Oh, that was just me, trying to find more records, and it wasn't mice." Mom might have said--but it couldn't have been Mom, not at two o'clock in the morning. No way. She had once slept through an earthquake back home in Kentucky. But neither of them had said a word, which could only mean that they hadn't been in the attic.

So who had been?

When I left the house for school that morning, Stephen was waiting for me, leaning up against our gate, his face turned up to the sunshine. "Another beautiful day," he remarked, falling into place beside me.

"Gorgeous."

"I'll bet you don't have mornings like this in Kentucky. Where else can you see a sky this blue and clear?"

"Kentucky has its moments," I informed him. "But for the most part, you're right. The weather here is perfect."

"That's a good sign. You've said something nice about Prescott. You've found something perfect. I think you might be on the mend."

We walked down Hawthorne Street in silence and were almost to the end of the block before Stephen said, "I didn't sleep very well last night. I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep for almost an hour."

"I did the same thing. A nightmare woke me up."

"Whenever I can't sleep," he went on, "I have to get up and walk around
and look outside and just kind of wander through the house. I can't stand lying there quietly, waiting for sleep to hit me."

"Really? I'm exactly the opposite. I lie there very quietly and try to get tired again. Sometimes I even count sheep and that usually bores me so much that I nod off eventually."

He stopped, pulling my arm so that I turned around to face him. "Look, Tasha. I couldn't sleep last night, so I got up and looked out my window, and the light in your attic was on! But the rest of your house--the entire house--was dark!"

I stared up at him, alarmed by the fear in his dark brown eyes. "Stephen, I woke up at two this morning and heard footsteps coming from the attic, and it wasn't any member of my family." As we started to walk on slowly, I described the noises I'd heard and told him that no one had come forward at breakfast to confess to having made them. "I don't know what it was that was up there. But I know I definitely heard footsteps walking around."

"Did it sound like a man or a woman?"

"I don't know. Very steady footsteps. Back and forth across the attic floor. I don't know how you'd tell male footsteps from female footsteps, anyway."

Shrugging, he said, "I don't know either. It just seemed like the thing to ask. Although I would think that a man's footsteps would be heavier than a woman's. But I'm not positive."

I said, "I hinted around this morning that I'd heard something, and Dad suggested that it might have been some kind of an animal, like a squirrel or a bird. But you can't hear them walking. At least, not with steady treads." A thought occurred to me. "Stephen, can you see inside our attic from your room?" I asked him.
He shook his head. "I can make out the walls, but that's about it. I've never seen anyone up there, even when the light is on, if that's what you mean."

I nodded. "I guess that's what I was getting at. Someone had to have been up there last night, walking around, for me to have been able to hear it downstairs in my bedroom. Someone must have been up there."

"Someone. Or something."

I glanced at his face quickly to see if he were merely trying to be funny. From the stern set of his mouth, I guessed that he wasn't.

Classes ended that afternoon an hour early, as they did each week so that students could either attend a club meeting, if they happened to belong to a club, or they could go back to their homeroom to study. Since I hadn't joined any of the clubs, I collected some books from my locker and was making my way back toward homeroom to get a head start on my homework, when Stephen jumped out of one of the classrooms and tugged me inside. "I've decided that you need to join the newspaper staff, Tasha," he said, grinning at me. "I've been giving it some thought, and you definitely belong with us."

I peered into the room, which turned out to be not a regular classroom at all, but the office of the school newspaper, with four big battered old desks in the front of the room and long tables toward the back. Several other students stood around one of the big desks, all of them arguing amiably with the boy behind the desk. All conversation stopped when Stephen and I walked in, and everyone looked over at me, with curious expressions. "This is Tasha," Stephen announced. "She's new--from Kentucky--her dad's the new editor of the Prescott Courier, and I figure she must have journalism in her blood, so I thought we could use her."

"Ah, young blood." This from the stocky boy dressed in a rumpled
flannel shirt and faded jeans who sat behind the desk. The editor, I thought, smiling, knowing the look only too well. He had that same rumpled, frazzled look like my father. He pushed his light brown bangs from his forehead and regarded me, returning my smile. "Can you write?"

"I'm not illiterate," I replied.

The others laughed. Score one for me, I thought, although I hadn't been trying to be funny.

"Of course she can write," Stephen told him. "Like I said, her father's an editor. Cut her and she bleeds ink!"

"I'm Wes Edgerly," the stocky boy said. "I'm the editor of our humble high school newspaper."

A girl with wild black curly hair and big tortoiseshell glasses cut in,

"Humble is right, Tasha. We're the entire staff. Right here in front of you." She laughed, flashing perfect teeth. "I'm Helen Bittman."

Stephen explained, "Helen is our poetry editor. And Prescott High's resident poet. Recite something, Helen."

Helen struck a dramatic pose, hand to forehead. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio."

"You wrote that?" I asked, feigning amazement. "Gee, and it's famous, too. I never hoped I'd get to meet its author."

"Well, either I wrote it or Shakespeare did."

"It's hard to tell them apart sometimes," Stephen admitted. "And this intelligent looking fellow is Jeff Armendarez, our modest photographer--"

"Modest, nothing," Jeff protested. "I'm the best photographer in the entire school! Which really isn't saying much, other than I own a camera, and these guys promised me fun and excitement, neither of which I've experienced."

"--and last, but certainly far from least, Rob Traeger, our sports editor,"
who girls swoon over. We have to beat them back with a stick, or he'd never get any work done at all."

Rob Traeger I had seen before, but usually surrounded by pretty girls, his blonde, sun-streaked hair, tanned complexion, and green eyes making him extremely popular. He rolled his eyes and made a face at Stephen, then turned to me. "Welcome to the ranks, Tasha."

"This is the entire staff?" I asked. "All of it?"

"What you see is it," Helen replied. "We work very hard to put out a quality paper. But it's an effort every single issue."

"How often do you publish?"

Wes frowned. "It's supposed to be every other week, but sometimes we just can't make it. Like Helen said, it's an effort. We're not having much luck recruiting people who really want to work, and putting out a paper is always work. But I'm sure I don't need to explain that to an editor's daughter."

No, he certainly didn't. Nobody knew better than I the work involved in getting a newspaper out and into the hands of the people. Dad might have been an editor, but he frequently rolled up his sleeves and tackled anything else that needed to be done--editing copy, writing headlines, doing layout--whatever. I'd heard Mom say many times that doctors kept better hours than newspapermen and got paid better, too.

Wes asked, "So, Tasha, are you with us?"

I didn't even need to think about it. "I'm in."

"Good," he said. "So let's get this week's meeting underway. This is the Halloween issue we're working on, people, so we're looking at a theme edition here. Helen, have you got any really good scary Halloween poems up your sleeve for this issue?"

"Oh, I think I can scare up something. If I can't write something
appropriate, I'll borrow something from Mr. Poe."

"Good, good." Wes nodded. "Rob, sports are always sports, unless you can think of some kind of Halloween spin to put on a sports story. I'll leave that to you, but I won't be too worried if only straight sports come out of it. Do what you can."

Rob scratched his blonde head with a pencil. "I might throw in some witches or vampires or something."

"How about 'Prescott High Badgers Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance'?" Stephen quipped.

Wes looked heavenward, appealing for strength from beyond.

"Whatever. As I said, there's not much you can do with sports except for straight reporting, so don't try too hard. At least don't try as hard as Stephen did for that headline. Jeff--how about a scary picture?"

"Of what?" Jeff asked.

"Students in costumes, maybe. I don't know. Just something scary."

"A picture of the teachers is always scary."

Stephen broke in. "If I might, Wes--I have an idea. It just came to me out of nowhere, and it's a story that would involve Tasha, Jeff, and me."

"Well, spill it, man--spill it! What is this brilliant idea?"

"I don't remember saying that it was brilliant, but at least it's a Halloween story. What would you think if Tasha and I were to collaborate on a story about a haunted house? And Jeff could take the pictures that would go along with the story."

I realized suddenly exactly where Stephen meant to go with his idea.

"Now wait a minute, Stephen--" I began.

"Why not?" he asked me. "It would be perfect!"

Wes looked understandably confused, turning first to me, then to
Stephen. "I'm lost. What haunted house? What's going on?"

With a quick glance at me, Stephen told him and all the others, "Tasha and her family live in a haunted house."

Silence fell with a thud. Blank stares all around, from Helen, to Wes, to Jeff, to Rob. I wanted to hide my face in both hands and run from the room, already imagining the headline: Insane Student Claims to See Ghost. I could easily have strangled Stephen right there on the spot. Insane Student Claims to See Ghost, Then Murders Classmate. The headlines burned vividly in my mind.

"A haunted house?" Helen repeated.

"I'm not saying that it is really haunted. Only that it certainly could be a haunted house," Stephen explained. "Tasha and her family just moved into that old Victorian house that's right behind mine on Hawthorne Street, and even before they moved in, I noticed some very strange goings-on in their attic. When no one was there."

Wes nodded. "I know the house. And it certainly looks like a haunted house should look. I like the idea, Stephen. I like it a lot. Tasha, how do you feel about it? After all, it is your house we're talking about."

I replied, honestly, "I have a few reservations."

"Oh, name one," insisted Stephen.

"Okay, for one, I'm not sure that my parents would like my writing a story about our living in a haunted house when they're not even aware that we are living in a haunted house. Second, don't you think I'd be setting myself up to be teased by everybody in this school?"

"Of course," Stephen snorted. "So?"

I scowled at him. "Even if that doesn't particularly bother you, Stephen, it does me. Don't forget, I'm the new kid in town and being branded as the Village Idiot doesn't exactly thrill me. And there is the question of my
"They might be a bit of trouble," Stephen agreed, rubbing his chin, thinking. "What if we tell them that we're just going to pretend that the house is haunted for a school newspaper article? That it's straight fiction and nothing else?"

"You mean lie to them?"

He frowned. "No, that won't work. Okay. We'll think of some way to approach the story so that it's on the level. I'll work on that, Wes. But what do you think of it otherwise?"

Wes leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head. "I think I like it a lot. Tasha, maybe you and Stephen could just make it fiction totally, if you don't want to delve into realities with this story. We do publish fiction on occasion."

Jeff the photographer asked, "Where do I fit in? What do I take pictures of?"

"You take pictures of the front of some of those great old Victorians over on Nob Hill or on Mt. Vernon or on Hawthorne at twilight. A spooky shot with bare branches, you know what I mean. Or, if Tasha's parents buy into the idea, then you go set up your camera and take pictures of their attic and see if anything develops." He pounded his fist on the desk. "That's a joke, people! A pun!"

We all laughed half-heartedly.

Jeff raised and lowered his eyebrows. "Cool assignment. Finally, the excitement I've been promised from the beginning. I like it. It will give me the chance to get a little creative. For once."

"So everyone knows what they're supposed to be doing?" Wes asked, as the final bell rang, signalling not only the end of the period but also the end of
the school day.

We nodded. Helen joined Stephen and me. "I think this story has great possibilities, Tasha. Whichever way you and Stephen decide to write it, fact or fiction, I know it will be a good read. Anyway, I'm really glad to have you on the staff. We desperately needed another female. I've been outnumbered now for months! I'll see you tomorrow in English," she said to me.

"You will?"

"I'm in your class," she reminded me, pushing her glasses up on her nose. "But you probably don't remember me. Since you're new, I'll bet you think we all pretty much look alike."

"Actually, that's true," I laughed. "So many new faces and new names that I can't remember them all."

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Don't forget we're having a quiz on Antigone." She gave a little wave and walked out, leaving Stephen and me alone in the office.

"You're not mad at me for suggesting the story, are you?" he asked, sliding his books off the table.

"No, not mad. It's a great idea, Stephen, but I wish it were somebody else's house other than mine. I don't know how we're going to approach it. Mom wouldn't want Max thinking that we live in a haunted house. He's an impressionable kid. If he thinks I seriously believe that we have ghosts up in our attic, he'll start having nightmares. My parents don't let him watch scary movies because he tends to think they're real."

"I hadn't even thought about what it might do to your little brother. So how do we get around all of this?" He was deep in thought as we headed for our lockers. I opened mine, and he groaned, then said, "Right now, nothing is coming to me. I have no ideas at all. My head is totally empty. But let's think
on it tonight and see if we can come up with a solution. I don't want to let this drop."

"Okay."

When we arrived at my house, I asked him, "More cookies and milk?"

"Not today, thanks," he said, shaking his head. "I've got to get right on my biology homework or I'll be up with it all night long. You wouldn't believe the work I have to do."

"Me, too."

He leaned on the gate, smiling down at me. "And I'll be thinking about our story. You think, too. There's got to be a solution to this one. And we could write a dynamite story together, I think."

"I hope so."

He waved and walked off down the sidewalk, then turned at the end of the street and headed for his house. Slowly, I walked into my house, thinking about the day, particularly the newspaper meeting.

"Mom, I'm home!" I called, laying my books on the marble table in the foyer.

Nothing.

"Mom!"

She called out, "I'm up in the turret! Come on up, and tell me about your day."

I raced up the staircase and down the hall, then clattered up the steps to the turret. The circular turret made a perfect studio for Mom, with plenty of room for her easel and paints, and still more room for her sculpting. When I entered, Mom stood at her easel in her old faded jeans and smock, cleaning her brushes. "I've been painting all day," she told me, pushing her curly bangs out of her face. "I don't know where the time went. I can't believe you're home
from school already."

"What have you been working on?" I asked, peering over her shoulder to see the easel behind her.

"Nothing much. Just a landscape."

I studied the painting. Green hills, a winding river, boats lined along the bank. "It's Frankfort, isn't it?"

"Mmm. I don't know why. I'm not sure that I like it."

"I do!"

She hugged me to her side. "How was your day?"

"Pretty good, I guess. They asked me to join the school newspaper staff today."

Her eyes widened. "Really? Haven't I been suggesting you do just that since the beginning of school? Didn't I say that you needed to be involved in one of the clubs?"

"Maybe. You might have." I pretended not to know what she was talking about. "I believe I heard that somewhere from someone."

"Anyway, I'm glad. You'll have a great time. Do you have a particular assignment yet?"

Now, I thought, was the perfect time to introduce Mom to the subject of a story about our house. "Well, yes, I do, but it's kind of silly. Stephen wants me to write a ghost story with him for the Halloween edition."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, good. I do love a good ghost story! Do you have any ideas?"

I chuckled, trying to make it sound like I considered it the most far-fetched idea anyone had ever thought of before. "Stephen thinks this would be a great house to write about. Not that our house is really haunted or anything... ." My voice trailed off.
"I don't know. Don't forget about that voice I heard yesterday."

"That's right. And we've got the big mice in the attic!"

Mom smiled. "At any rate, this house is suitably creepy. The whole family could probably agree on that. I think it's a great idea, Tasha. You and Stephen could make up a good story, I'll bet. You could begin the story with the want ad we read. Remember?"

She left to clean up and get dinner started, and I congratulated myself, glad to have the problem of approaching my parents about the ghost story solved.

Now all Stephen and I had to do was actually write the story.
CHAPTER SIX

That night, I lay in bed, wide awake and staring at the ceiling, until long past midnight, listening for suspicious noises from the attic. Every time the old house creaked, I jumped and sat up, clutching the blanket in front of me for protection. All kinds of questions raced through my mind: what would I do if I actually heard anything? Wake my parents? Rouse Max? Find Tess and take her up into the attic with me to find out what might be up there walking around? While waking Mom or Dad or Max sounded like a sensible plan, I knew myself well enough to know that I would take the coward’s way out and dive back beneath the blankets. Imagining that I possessed enough nerve to find the dog and investigate helped the time pass, but I knew that wasn’t even an option.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to make a choice. I don’t remember nodding off, but I must have, for the next thing I knew, Max was shaking me by the shoulders, and the sunshine poured into the room. The long night had passed, and nothing at all had happened. I felt vaguely disappointed and said as much to Stephen that morning on our way to school.

"You were psyched up and ready for something to happen," he said. "That’s why you felt let down."

"I was terrified," I confessed. "My whole body felt tense. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d heard the footsteps again."

"You know, maybe everything that’s happened has been explainable.
Maybe your dad is right, and it's squirrels up there. Or mice."

"Very heavy mice," I corrected him. "But let's say that it is. That still
doesn't explain the light in the attic, and you actually saw that. You weren't
dreaming at the time or imagining things. You were wide awake and staring at
the attic from your bedroom window."

"True, but it's possible that there's an electrical problem up there. After
all, it's an old house. Or, the light bulb might be loose in the socket. Maybe
everything that has happened can be explained away very easily."

I planted my hands on my hips and looked up at him, scowling,
exasperated with his suddenly rational course of thought. "Well, thank you
very much, Stephen Collier. You're the one who suggested we write a story
about a haunted house, and now you're full of nothing but 'maybe this' and
'maybe that,' and you think the house might not even be haunted! What are we
supposed to do now? Write a cute little ghost story and be done with it?"

"I'm not saying your house isn't haunted. And I'm not saying it is. I say
we have to find out one way or the other."

I knew enough about the newspaper business to know an interesting
story when one slapped me in the face. Snapping my fingers, I cried, "That's
what our story will be about! There's our angle."

He grinned that lopsided grin of his as it dawned on him what I meant.
"Tasha, you may be right. We can write an investigative story, examining all the
evidence we've collected up to this point. My seeing the light bulb burning in
the attic before you moved in. Your hearing the footsteps in the attic. Your
mother hearing someone calling her name when she was alone in the house."

"Tess barking at nothing in the corner of my parents' bedroom," I added.
"And the smell of lavender and sometimes rotting roses. And that intense cold
spot in the attic. And last, but certainly not least, the footsteps in the attic!"
We scuffed along through the leaves, relieved to have some focus for the story and scarcely noticing the cars zooming past us. "What would you think about bringing a ouija board in and asking it some questions about the house?" Stephen asked. "That might turn up something interesting. I don't really believe in the power of ouija boards, but it might open up some clues for us."

I shook my head. "No. I don't like the looks of those. Besides, they scare my mother. She wouldn't even allow one in the house. Something happened to her in college when she used a ouija board, and she's hated them ever since."

"What happened to her?"

"She and some of the girls in her dorm were using a ouija board one night, just for fun—you know, the lights turned out and all that—and the board spelled out that her girlfriend would die soon."

Stephen exhaled. "Wow. Did she?"

"Nope. She's still very much alive, and she and Mom talk on the phone a couple of times a year. But it put Mom off the idea of ouija boards forever. She said she didn't know where that thought had come from, and she didn't want to know. So, we're not allowed to play with them. Max borrowed one from a friend once, and she made him take it right back."

"Then that idea is out." Both of us were silent, thinking. Then he said, "We need to find out the history of the house. I wonder if we could find out some interesting facts about the previous owners at the public library in their archives."

I nodded. "That's a good idea. We could add some details, too, about the history of the town and what it was like back when the houses on Hawthorne Street first were built. And we might interview some of the neighbors. Is there anyone in our neighborhood who has lived here for a long time? Do you know of anyone who might be able to tell us the history of the house?"
"I'll bet Miss Jane Galloway knows something about it. She lives at the other end of the street. She must be at least 90, and she's lived in Prescott her whole life. Miss Galloway knows everybody in town, and everyone knows her. She used to teach grade school. I'll bet she's seen it all."

"So let's try to interview her first," I told him, as we passed the tennis courts. "And if we strike out with her, then we'll have to rethink our position."

"An excellent idea, Tasha. What do you say we drop in on Miss Galloway this afternoon after school?"

"I'd say that is a superb plan, Stephen."

"I'll meet you at your locker."

Jane Galloway may, indeed, have been in her nineties, but you would never know it by looking at her or listening to her. Petite, she stood ramrod straight, the carved mahogany cane in her right hand the only concession to age. She wore her silvery hair up on top of her head, a turquoise hairpin sticking out, and her skin was soft and smooth, almost translucent. She seemed surprised to find Stephen and me on her doorstep, but she ushered us inside immediately, her face wreathed in smiles.

There's a museum in downtown Prescott called the Sharlot Hall Museum that our family visited the first week we arrived in town because the museum displays the history of the town and the area, and Dad wanted us to know all about our new home. All I have to say is that if the Museum people ever need an annex with even more stuff about Prescott and the West, I suggest they contact Miss Galloway to see if she's interested in donating her house and all of its contents to them. Besides all of the framed pictures of early Prescott, showing hardy pioneer-types posing in front of old businesses and saloons, she had a vast collection of cowboy hats along one wall of her parlor—all types,
from the small bowler, black and kind of smallish and dapper, to large, wide-brimmed Stetsons in varying shades of brown. "These all belonged to my father," she explained, pointing them out to Stephen and me. "He never went out in public without wearing a hat." She also showed us her collection of spurs, some lumps of fool's gold, and handmade copper bowls displayed on the hutch in the corner, interspersed with books, each of the books pertaining to the history of Arizona.

After Stephen explained our mission to her, she clasped her hands together. "What a wonderful idea for a story!" she cried, after she'd supplied us with glasses of lemonade and a plate of Pepperidge Farm cookies and settled us onto an old horsehair sofa in the parlor. "What exactly has happened so far that makes you think your house is haunted, Tasha?"

"Nothing too obvious or really even very scary," I admitted. "But there have been some strange occurrences. Like there's an overwhelming scent of roses in the house, but no one seems to smell it but me. And there's a cold spot in the attic that I felt the other day when I was going through one of the trunks up there. And the night before last, I heard footsteps coming from the attic when everyone else was asleep." Taking a sip of the lemonade, I continued, "Even though I've tried to convince myself that there could be squirrels or mice up there, I don't see how the noises I heard could be anything as small as that."

I shrugged. "So, like I told you, nothing blatantly spooky, just--" "Thought-provoking?" she suggested.

"Yes, exactly. Thought-provoking. Which is fine by me, because I don't know how I'd react if something really scary happened. I've never had to deal with ghosts before, so this is all new to me."

Stephen addressed Miss Galloway. "I've seen some strange things in their house, too. Back when Dave Wright was fixing the place up and nobody
was living there, I saw a light in their attic. I've seen it since then, too, and Tasha assured me no one in her family turned the light on."

Miss Jane looked down at the braided rug. "I wouldn't be at all surprised. Nothing you could say about that house would surprise me."

Stephen and I exchanged excited glances. "Who lived there before we moved in?" I prodded. "What's the history of the house?"

She leaned back onto the sofa, letting her cane rest on her lap. "Your house has been in the same family since it was built, Tasha, that is, until your family moved in. The Mortons built it. There were just the three of them. Mrs. Cordelia Morton, her husband John, and their daughter Lydia, who was a little older than I, but not more than a year or two." Her fingers traced the carving on the cane's handle, and she seemed lost in her memories. "The Mortons were an odd family, to say the least. Of course, what was totally scandalous at the time was that one day Mr. Morton was simply gone. He didn't live there anymore. He just vanished."

Stephen leaned forward eagerly. "What happened? Was he murdered?"

Miss Jane smiled. "Nothing quite so grisly, Stephen. Rumor had it that he simply deserted his wife and daughter. No one really knew where he'd gone, and of course I never asked Lydia what had happened to her father, although I heard much later that he'd run off to San Francisco with a much younger woman from Prescott and had started a new life there. I have no idea whether that was true or not. But that's what I heard." She smiled. "You know how rumors get started. But, either way, Mr. Morton no longer lived there."

I frowned. "How horrible. There wouldn't have been any child support, I guess, for Mrs. Morton. Not back then."

"No support of any kind. As I said, he might have disappeared off the face of the earth for all anyone knew. And Lydia wasn't such a child when it
happened. She was 16, and I remember she could barely keep her head up in school, she was so upset." Miss Jane hesitated, looking down at her hands.

"Poor thing." She blinked, then looked up at us. "After Mr. Morton left, Cordelia Morton became even nastier than she had been before, if that's possible. Of course, she had always been such an arrogant woman, very la-de-da. All of us were terrified of her. She had a way of talking to you that made you feel you were something she wanted to scrape off her shoes. Shop girls used to run and hide when she'd do her shopping in town, rather than wait on her. She talked to them like they were dirt."

"How humiliating for her," I breathed. "To have been so proud and haughty and then to have had her husband desert her like that."

"If she was humiliated by it," Miss Galloway said, "she certainly took it in her stride. It would have been quite tragic if she hadn't been such a thoroughly detestable woman." She stopped and held up her hand. "No. I take that back. It was tragic for Lydia. We all felt terribly sorry for her, but I have to confess that most of us felt that Mrs. Morton had received some kind of come-uppance, that she'd gotten exactly what she deserved."

Stephen asked, "What was Mr. Morton like?"

"That's an interesting question, Stephen. You know, I haven't thought about him in decades." She rolled her cane between her hands, thinking. "He was a banker and very handsome and dapper. Quite a dandy in his style of dress. I remember he had the most luxuriant moustache I'd ever seen—thick and black and it curled up on the ends. I remember that he always played with it, much like the villain in a bad melodrama!"

"He positively doted on Lydia. They certainly had plenty of money, and he loved spending it on Lydia, buying her whatever she wanted. He was always buying her expensive
presents—a new velvet dress, a new pony, a new pony-cart. I think that was the most shocking part of the whole affair, that he would simply desert his beloved Lydia like that. I could certainly understand why he'd leave his wife! She must have made his life a living hell. I know she embarrassed him in the community. He was outgoing and friendly and seemed to like everybody, and she was exactly the opposite, making sure that no one forgot that they were the cream of society and better than the rest of us."

I asked, "What happened to Mrs. Morton and Lydia after he left for San Francisco?"

She looked directly into my eyes as she spoke. "Life went on for them. Mrs. Morton continued to rule society—such as it was—with an iron glove and did so up until she died. That was just before the war. World War II, of course. After her mother died, Lydia stayed on and lived in the house until just a few years ago, when she went into a nursing home. She'd broken her hip and wasn't able to take care of herself any longer. She died not long ago."

Miss Galloway raised her hands, helplessly. "As you can see, I don't know very much about your house, Tasha."

I disagreed. "That's not true. You've told us a lot more than I ever dreamed we'd learn."

Stephen set his empty glass of lemonade down on a coaster on the coffee table in front of us. "I wonder what Lydia Morton's personal life was like after her father left," he mused. "She never married?"

"No, and I really don't know why not," Miss Jane told him. "Not that I ever would have asked her, you understand, anymore than she would have asked me why I never married! After her father left, Lydia never seemed to have any fun. And after her mother died, Lydia seemed bent on doing good works about town. She was the total opposite of her mother. Very caring of
others, always handing food out to the homeless and doing a lot of work with her church groups." She gave a little laugh. "Who knows? Maybe she was trying to undo the bad feeling Prescott had toward her mother. Atonement for her mother's sins, if you like."

"Kind of like the good and the bad," I suggested.

"Yes. Lydia was the exact opposite of her mother," she repeated with a nod.

Suddenly, Stephen asked, "Did Mrs. Morton die in the house?"

"Come to think of it, she did. I remember that. I'd heard that Lydia went up to her mother's bedroom one morning to wake her for breakfast, and Cordelia was dead. Apparently, she'd died peacefully in her sleep."

I could feel Stephen's eyes on me, but I said nothing, afraid to ask the question in case I might discover that she had died in my very room. Even though Miss Galloway had said that she had died peacefully, I didn't think I would gain anything by knowing exactly where it had happened. I knew that I would never have another night's sleep in that house if I were to find out.

Stephen nudged me, then said, "Thank you for helping us, Miss Galloway. you've given us some good colorful background for our article."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't be of more help," she said, seeing us to the front door. "You two come visit me any time you like. I'm anxious to hear how your research progresses and if you find out anything more about the house. Drop by any time you like. I'm nothing at all like old Cordelia Morton! I love it when company comes calling, especially young people. And I want to see that article when your newspaper comes out! I can't wait to read it! Be sure to save me a copy."

"We'll be certain to let you know whatever we find," I assured her, as she took my hand in hers.
Her hands were soft and cool. She smiled into my eyes. "I'm so glad you've moved to Prescott, Tasha. We'll be great neighbors, I know."

"I think so, too," I told her sincerely.

Back outside, Stephen turned to me on the sidewalk. "You, Tasha Manning, were scared stiff that Mrs. Cordelia Morton might have died in your bedroom!"

"No kidding!" I laughed. "Would you want to know something like that?"

He considered it. "Not really."

"I know that people die in houses all the time," I told him, "but I don't want to know where, if you catch my meaning."

"I do, I do. Enough said." We slowly walked up the street toward my house. "Well, that's a heck of a lot more than we knew an hour ago," he said. "Still, I can't help being a little disappointed that old Cordelia Morton didn't murder her husband. That might have explained a lot about the vibrations in your house."

"A murder?" I shuddered, not even wanting to think about it. "I know I wouldn't want to live in a house where a murder had taken place. That would be too grisly! Too evil!"

Stephen and I sat down on our front steps. "How is it that you never knew about Lydia Morton?" I asked him. "How could you have lived in the house behind hers your whole life and not have known her?"

"I've lived in Prescott my whole life," he said, "but we didn't move to this neighborhood until three years ago, right before my parents divorced."

"Oh." Then I remembered that Miss Galloway had said that Lydia had moved from the house three years ago. "So you probably moved in right about the time that Lydia went into the nursing home."
Stephen nodded. "I guess so, but I remember that her furniture and everything stayed in the house until Dave bought it and started renovating it. It wasn't empty all that time. She must have hired someone to look after the house for her." He rubbed his forehead, then leaned his arms on his legs and looked out at the street. "You know, Tasha, I wouldn't be at all surprised if most of these houses were haunted. These old Victorian houses aren't exactly normal. Every single one of them looks like something out of the Addams Family."

I chuckled. "That's exactly what we said when we came to look at the house the day we read Dave's ad in the newspaper. Max thought Uncle Fester would like living in our turret."

"You do realize what we've got to do next, don't you, Tasha?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"What's that?"

"We've got to find out exactly what's going on in your attic. We're going to have to do some investigating of our own."

I shivered involuntarily. "You're probably right, Stephen, but I absolutely dread the whole idea. We'll have to do it in broad daylight, though. Nothing in the world could make me go up there after dark."

"I don't blame you. How about this Saturday? We could get an early start, look around the attic, then work on our article."

I sighed. "Okay. I don't want to, but okay. It has to be done."

He nodded. "Good. I'll see you tomorrow morning." With a jaunty wave over his shoulder, he loped off through our yard, heading toward his house.

The attic. I didn't want to go up there again and feel that dreadful cold descend upon me.

What, I wondered, still sitting on the steps, had I let myself in for? Was
Cordelia Morton still in our house, or could it be her daughter Lydia? Were Stephen and I stirring up trouble that was better left alone? I had no idea, but something told me we would soon find out. As soon as Saturday.
CHAPTER SEVEN

What with being on the lookout constantly for weirdness in our house, helping Mom unpack even more boxes, keeping up with my homework, and worrying about the upcoming exploration of the attic with Stephen, I completely forgot that I still owed Jenny a letter until Dad noticed that I hadn't given him any letters recently to mail from his office. Jenny kept up her end of the correspondence anyway, but her latest letter, which I'd received a few days before, still lay on my dresser. I told myself that I'd been much too busy to read it, but deep inside I suspected something else: her letters no longer really interested me all that much. When that occurred to me, I felt as though I'd somehow betrayed her.

Naturally, I hadn't written to Jenny about the strange goings-on in the house. It had been difficult enough for me to admit that to myself, let alone actually put it in words in black and white for anyone to read. I wondered what her reaction would be if I had told her that I suspected we had our very own ghost. If I could have told her face-to-face, or if she had even once set foot in the house and experienced something supernatural herself, she might have been able to understand. But if all she knew was what I told her in a letter, I figured she might think her oldest friend had gone crazy.

Over dinner on Thursday night, Mom remarked, "Tasha, I'm glad to see that you seem to be adjusting so nicely now."

What did that mean? "Am I?" I asked, pushing beef stroganoff around my plate. I detest beef stroganoff, but it's Max's favorite, so every once in
awhile I pretended to eat it. It wasn't easy.

Mom laughed. "At least you're not going around looking morose anymore. Your bottom lip nearly dragged the ground for weeks and weeks. What's the latest news Jenny sends from Frankfort?"

Surprised she would even ask, I admitted, "I haven't read her latest letter yet. It's hard to imagine that life goes on back in Frankfort, that she and all of my friends are actually doing things and having fun without me. It's almost as though if I'm not there, then Frankfort doesn't exist."

Dad spooned another helping of the stroganoff onto his plate and said, "Sounds a lot like Brigadoon to me." Seeing my blank expression, he went on, "Brigadoon is a mythical town in Scotland that emerges once every century. Don't tell me you haven't heard of it."

Oh. That Brigadoon. "We watched that movie together," I recalled, "a long time ago. Gene Kelly, I think, right? Wasn't it a musical?"

"Right. So Frankfort has become your Brigadoon and will only exist for you again when you go back to visit."

"When is that going to be?" I asked.

Mom shrugged. "Maybe next summer. It's a long way to travel unless you're going to stay for several weeks. Just thinking about that long drive wears me out. Your Aunt Maggie is talking about coming here to visit us next summer. She's never been any farther west than Colorado and wants to see what Arizona is like. I told her to get ready for a shock."

Mom's younger sister, my Aunt Maggie, was my favorite aunt. She wrote mysteries and was fairly exotic and dramatic. Leaving Aunt Maggie behind had been as hard on me, maybe harder, than leaving Jenny. Aunt Maggie had spent many evenings at our house and was almost always with us for dinner. "That would be great to have her out here!" I exclaimed. "Maybe
she'll move to Arizona, too."

"That would be the day," said Dad. "She'll never leave Kentucky."

I sighed. He was probably right. But then, I never thought we'd leave Kentucky either, and look how wrong I'd been.

Later that evening, as I sat at my roll top desk in my room, working and reworking an algebra equation that wouldn't turn out right no matter how many times I tried, I thought about Mom's remark at dinner, about how far away Kentucky was from Arizona. Her meaning hadn't escaped me—in her own vague way, she had let me know that we probably wouldn't be going back to visit Frankfort for quite a while. Just one short week ago, that news would have sent me into deep depression. But now—well, now I wasn't quite sure how I felt.

I picked up Jenny's latest letter, slit open the envelope, and read it. She had tried out for the cheerleading squad, she wrote, but hadn't made the cut. Three of the girls who made the squad I'd never even heard of, but Jenny assumed I knew them. She wrote, too, about a boy named Mason and said that he showed some interest in her, but I had never heard of him either.

I sighed, putting my head down on my desk. I knew what living in limbo was like: on the one hand, I no longer shared anything in common with the girl who had been my best friend for most of my life, and on the other hand, something inside of me wouldn't--or couldn't--accept Prescott as our new home. Even my favorite daydream of returning to Frankfort no longer comforted me like it once had--would I even fit in there anymore? Probably not. I'd been away too long. I sighed again, the gentle scent of lavender helping ease my loneliness.

Through the grapevine, word spread around Prescott High that I lived in
a haunted house. Heaven knows, I hadn't told anyone but Stephen, but he had announced it to the staff of the paper, and who knows how many people they'd told. Even my algebra teacher, Mr. Juarez, brought up the subject on Friday morning, commenting, as he handed out the tests, "You know, Tasha, I always thought those houses on Hawthorne Street looked like they should be haunted. I can't wait to read your article." I smiled up at him, only hoping that Stephen and I could deliver an article that wouldn't disappoint him and that maybe he would like it so much he might boost my algebra grade a little. Grimly, I set my mind to the test, determined to push all thoughts of ghosts out of my brain.

In the hall between classes, people I didn't know stopped to talk about ghosts, several of them even revealing that they, too, had seen ghosts. It was nice to finally be included at school, but I couldn't stop myself from wondering if I really wanted to be known, as one girl called me, "Tasha, the Teenage Ghost Hunter." Not quite along the same lines as being singled out for making the cheerleading squad or for snagging the lead in the school play! Still, it was a beginning.

That afternoon after history, Helen stood waiting for me by my locker. "How's your ghost story coming along?" she asked, as we headed for the newspaper room. "Have you and Stephen written it yet?"

"Not yet," I admitted, shifting my books to the other arm and raising my voice so Helen could hear me over the din of classes changing. "We're going to stake out the attic tomorrow and see if anything happens."

"You're braver than I am. But maybe there's safety in numbers. I know I couldn't do anything like that all by myself."

"What about you? Have you written your poem for the Halloween issue?" I asked.

She gave a rueful little laugh. "I tried. And tried and tried. But I
couldn't come up with anything that seemed original, so I simply gave up and let Edgar Allan Poe take over with 'The Raven.' It's a classic, and it's all I could come up with. Scary poems aren't exactly my thing anyway."

"I never thought haunted houses were in my line either, but here I am, up to my neck in the supernatural."

She smiled. "Life takes funny turns."

Jeff Armendarez, the photographer for the school paper, joined up with us when we passed his locker. "I can't wait until tomorrow, Tasha," he said, his voice an octave higher in his excitement. "If I can actually capture a ghost on film, it might make me famous. Everyone would want a copy--all the national newspapers, those TV shows on hauntings, scientists, everyone. So, come on. Let's get going and plan this thing," he urged, motioning us to walk quicker.

Wes and Stephen sat with their heads close together, talking, as Helen, Jeff, and I entered the newspaper office. "Ah, here's your co-author now," Wes said, waving me over. "Tasha, I was just asking Stephen about your story and wondering when I'll get to read it."

Off-handedly, Stephen told me, "I said that we will have it ready to hand in on Monday."

I arched an eyebrow. "We will?"

"Well, something has to happen tomorrow afternoon when we explore the attic. Either we find a ghost, or we don't. Either way, we'll be able to write our article, and I figure we can get it done easily by Monday and hand it in to Wes first thing."

"Yes, I'm sure we can," I mumbled.

Stephen gave me a curious look, but then Wes said, "That will work. You'll have to turn something in, and I'm counting on it being good. I'm saving most of the front page for your story."
Oh, great, I thought miserably. Wes turned his attention to Helen and her Halloween poem, and Stephen came over to where I stood studying the blackboard, which was covered in Wes's scrawling handwriting announcing story assignments. There it stared at me in black and white: Stephen and Tasha: Haunted House, Page 1.

"What's the matter with you, Tasha?" Stephen whispered, keeping an eye on the others. "Don't you think we can write the article that fast?"

I couldn't find the words to explain what I felt, that I fervently hoped that we wouldn't find one darned thing in the attic the next day. His eyes narrowed as he searched my face. "You're having second thoughts, aren't you?"

"Not second thoughts about the story," I told him. "I'm looking forward to writing that with you. I think the actual writing of it will be fun. It's just--" I shook my head at him. "Never mind. It's nothing."

"You're afraid?" he asked, softly.

I could only nod. Finally, I said, "Stephen, I don't know what we're going to find up there. You seem awfully set on seeing a ghost and, to be perfectly honest with you, I'd rather not. I don't know how you can be so calm about it all."

"Heck, I'm afraid," he said, cheerfully. "You couldn't be any more afraid than I am, mainly because I really think we're going to find something. I've thought for a long time that there's much more than meets the eye in your attic. Someone or something keeps turning the lights on." He paused. "But I guess I'm more curious than I am afraid, and that makes it all right somehow. What can the ghost do?" When I didn't answer him, he insisted, "Come on. Let's talk this through. Let's say that we see a ghost in your attic tomorrow. What can it do? What can something that's merely made of--of wispy air do to us? Why are we afraid? Have you ever heard of a ghost actually harming anyone?"
I thought about it. "No. Not physical harm."

"Neither have I. I mean, Tasha, look at it this way: we don't even know if such a thing as a ghost exists! This is our chance to find out for ourselves. You know, my whole life I've been reading ghost stories and seeing movies about ghosts and watching documentaries on haunted houses, and I've always wondered if they were real, or if someone was pulling my leg. This is a first-hand investigation that we're planning, Tasha! This is science!"

"Okay," I said at last. "Okay, you're right. It is."

He leaned close to me. "Isn't your curiosity killing you? Come on. Admit it. You're just as curious as I am to know if old Cordelia Morton is hanging around your attic. Or maybe Lydia. Or maybe even John Morton, the philandering husband. How do we know he really went to San Francisco? Maybe he's still up in your attic!"

I laughed and punched him on the arm. "Stephen, you almost had convinced me not to be afraid. Now if I have to worry about some ancient old man rambling around up there, I'll get terrified all over again."

"Imagine that headline! 'Ancient Citizen Found in Attic!' That would even make your dad's paper!" He nudged me. "Come on. Get curious. No fear."

"No fear," I repeated.

"Louder, please."

"No fear!"

Surprisingly enough, I almost felt that way. Tasha Manning, Teenage Ghost Hunter. It didn't sound half bad.

To provide the appropriate atmosphere for our investigation, Saturday morning should have dawned overcast and gray, with ominous clouds
billowing across the sky and thunder rumbling in the distance. Mother Nature, however, seemed unaware that Stephen and I planned to spend the day exploring the supernatural. The sun shone brilliantly, the sky a stunning deep blue with no clouds in sight. The attic would have to provide its own atmosphere if it planned on competing with a sunny Arizona day in October.

I needn't have bothered worrying about Max butting in on our ghostly endeavors, for he and Mom left early to go shopping at the mall and the grocery store, heading out shortly after breakfast. Dad had already informed us that he planned to spend most of the day closeted in the den, working on an editorial and listening to his swing music, and he wasn't to be disturbed for anything short of a natural disaster. "Even then," he warned us, "beware."

Stephen showed up right on time at the back door while I was cleaning up the dishes after breakfast. "Where is Jeff?" I asked, opening the door for him. "I thought our trusty photographer was coming with you."

"Jeff can't make it," he replied with a heavy sigh.

"What do you mean he can't make it?" I asked, as the door banged shut behind him. "Then what's the point of exploring the attic? There won't be any way to document what happens if we don't have a photographer with us. Why can't Jeff make it, and why didn't he tell us yesterday after school?"

"Believe me, he's as disappointed as we are. His mother told him that he has to go with his family to visit his grandmother. She lives down in Phoenix, and they're going to stay overnight and won't be home until late tomorrow night. He called a few minutes ago, just as I was walking out the door to come here." He flopped down into a chair at the table and leaned his head in his hands. "He wants us to wait until tomorrow night to do our exploring, but of course I told him we couldn't wait that long. We'll need tonight and most of tomorrow to work on our article. Tomorrow night is too late. So Jeff is out. It's
just you and me."

Sitting across from him, I said, "Well, at least we have each other. I couldn't do this by myself. I wouldn't do this by myself! I have a camera we can use, an old Olympus that my aunt gave me a couple of years ago when she bought a new one. I don't claim to be a very good photographer, though. Particularly if a ghost shows up." Somehow, I managed to grin. "If the ghost shows up, Stephen, you'll have to grab the camera and shoot. I plan on just standing there with my mouth hanging open."

He smiled. "I've been doing a little reading on ghost hunting," he said, "and one book said that you stand a better chance of capturing a ghost on film if you use a Polaroid camera."

"A Polaroid? I wonder why."

"The explanation was more technical than I could really understand, but it's got something to do with the chemicals Polaroid uses to make the images appear instantly. Polaroid pictures of ghosts are supposed to be more believable, too, because it's practically impossible to create a double exposure with a Polaroid, which means you can't fake it."

His expression was so somber that I had to laugh. "Really? Well, you learn something new every day. I hate to tell you, we don't own a Polaroid camera."

He opened his backpack and, with a flourish, produced an old camera and a flashlight. "But I do! Dad gave me this on my seventh birthday. And I just happened to have a pack of Polaroid film, waiting for a special occasion."

"And I suppose that searching for a ghost in a haunted attic is your idea of a special occasion."

"I've had this film for over a year and nothing else presented itself. This must be what I've been waiting for."
Now that the time to explore the attic had actually arrived, I found myself less and less willing to carry out our plans. "Would you like some cookies? Or some banana bread? Mom has been in a baking frenzy. I hope she settles back into her art soon because she’s spending too much time cooking and cleaning. Maybe I could fix you some breakfast? Pancakes? Eggs?"

"I know what you’re doing, Tasha," he said, standing up, the Polaroid dangling from a strap around his neck, "you’re stalling for time, and it’s not going to work. Come on. Let’s go up there and get it over with."

I followed slowly as he strode out of the kitchen and confidently began climbing the staircase to the second floor. "Come on," he said, motioning me up the stairs. "One step at a time. Come on."

He stopped on the landing and looked back down at where I stood, still on the bottom step, unable to move. "If you don’t want to come along with me, I’m going up by myself."

The grandfather clock seemed to tick louder as I imagined him all alone in our dark and spooky attic, being attacked by—by what, exactly? I didn’t know. But suddenly I knew he couldn’t handle it alone and that, for some unexplainable reason, I would feel even more afraid waiting for him alone downstairs than up in the awful attic with him. "Let’s just go," I said, pushing my hair from my face and racing up the steps to join him. "Let’s do it. I don’t want to stop and think."

"Ghosties, look out," he chuckled.

I tried to fix him with the same glare I used on Max, but he ignored it. I grabbed him by the arm. "Can you smell the lavender?" I asked him.

He sniffed. "No. Where’s it coming from?"

Shaking my head, I told him, "I don’t have any idea. It just shows up in the strangest places, and it’s not consistent. I’ve never noticed it right here
before. I've smelled it in the foyer, though, and the other night I could smell it in
my room. But never here. I just don't understand it." I kept sniffing. "It's
stronger up here," I said, as we reached the top of the steps. "I can't believe you
don't smell it."

"Well, I don't. Which way to the attic?" he asked, his voice husky. "I
want to do this right away before I lose all my nerve."

"Yes. This way."

I led him down the hallway, past my room and Max's, to the small door
that would lead us up to the attic. "This is it," I whispered, lifting the latch.

"Why so quiet? Afraid we'll wake whatever it is up?"

"Stephen, please," I groaned. "I could throw up."

"I'm sorry. I just thought that a little humor might lighten everything up
a little bit. Sorry."

I opened my mouth to comment when a faint scent of decaying roses
wafted around me, and I could feel the hair on the back of my neck prickling.

"Stephen," I quavered, "can you smell that?"

"What? Lavender again?"

"No, no. It's the rotting roses smell. It's not very strong, but it's here."

"You've got a great nose, Tasha. I can't smell a thing." He opened the
door to the attic, then reached out for my hand. "Come on."

Whether we were both so overcome by fear that we didn't have time to
think, I don't know, but before I knew what I was doing, he was leading the
way up the attic steps, and I was walking, like a sleepwalker behind him, my
hand still firmly clasped in his. I reached across with my other hand to switch
on the light.

Stephen turned on his flashlight and scanned it around the attic, shining
its beam into all the dark corners and in a wide sweep in front of us. Nothing
appeared to have been moved since Dad and I had been exploring up there the previous weekend.

Stephen caught his breath. "What is that?" he asked, pointing a shaky finger toward the window, where the mannequin stood outlined in the sunlight that struggled through the windowpanes.

"It's an old dressmaker's form," I explained, laughing. "Dressmakers use them to make their clothes. At least, they used to use them. I don't know if they still do."

"Thank goodness," he breathed. "I thought it was Marie Antoinette." He grinned. "Humor. Remember?"

"Right. What do you want to do first?" I asked him.

"I don't know. Explore, I guess. Look around." Pulling me along, he focused the beam of the flashlight into one of the corners. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," he sang. "We've got an article to write."

Just then the old rocking chair in the corner squeaked and, ever so slowly, began to rock back and forth. I stifled a scream. Stephen held the Polaroid up to his eyes, pointed it toward the rocking chair, and snapped. Then I admit that I ran as fast as I could down the steps, Stephen clattering behind me. At the bottom of the stairs, he slammed the door shut and leaned against it. "Man," he gasped. "Man. Tasha, something was in that chair!"

I could only nod, trembling, my legs barely supporting me. I managed to ask, "Did anything show up on the picture?"

"Let's look." Slowly he held the picture up in front of us, and as we watched, the picture began to reveal itself before our eyes. On the left were two old end tables standing side by side; on the right stood a massive picture frame. There in the middle of the picture was the rocking chair. But it wasn't empty. In the rocking chair sat a dark misty shape.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Sunday night found Stephen and me at our dining room table, yellow legal pads in front of us, great piles of wadded up paper everywhere, mostly on the floor. The grandfather clock chimed ten just as he stretched and leaned back in his chair. "We've done it," he groaned. "Tasha, we've finished the article at last."

I stifled a yawn with my hand. My back ached from leaning over the table for so many hours. We'd started the story in the middle of the afternoon, and we worked through dinner, Mom tiptoeing in with trays of ham sandwiches and homemade potato salad and iced tea so we wouldn't have to take a break from our work. "Do you think Wes will like it?" I asked him. I felt uneasy, since Wes had never had the chance to read anything I'd written.

"If he doesn't like it, he's crazy. We may have to commit mutiny and start our own newspaper because he is clearly not fit to be editor if he doesn't like it. What's not to like?"

After our brief encounter with the ghost—or whatever had been sitting in that chair and making it rock back and forth—in the attic the day before, Stephen and I separated to write our own version of the story, he to his house, me to mine, with plans to get together Sunday afternoon to compare and combine what we had written. Stephen's strength in his writing proved to be in his vivid descriptions, his words giving the reader a real feeling of having participated in the ghost hunt with us. He used words the way an artist uses oils, describing
everything just so, even down to the smell of the decaying roses that I'd told him about.

As for my contribution, Stephen told me that my writing held the whole story together and made it believable. "I like the way you write," he said simply, looking over the paper at me as he finished reading my version. "It's chatty, as though you're talking with a friend." Draping his arm across the back of his chair, he leaned his head back and said, "I can see the future now, Tasha. You a famous columnist with a national newspaper. Definitely syndicated. Me a famous something, I don't know what, but famous."

"A famous novelist, maybe."

"Maybe. Or maybe I'll write screenplays."

We didn't have a proper ending to the story, preferring to leave it to the reader to believe all that had happened to us or not. "I really don't see how we can end it any other way," I'd told Stephen. "There are those people who wouldn't believe their own eyes, anyway, not even if they'd been up in the attic and had seen everything for themselves."

Stephen was definite. "I like it. We can't take an idea like the existence of ghosts and force it down people's throats, not if they choose not to believe."

"Exactly my thinking." I took a long sip of iced tea, then asked him, "What do you think we saw upstairs?" Believe it or not, we hadn't had time to discuss what had happened to us. Writing the article had taken all of our attention.

"I'm not really sure," he replied. "A force. Something. A ghost. Past energy of somebody who once lived in this house. I have no idea. What really kind of fascinates me, though, is the way you smell things that I can't. Why did you smell lavender in one part of the house and rotten roses in another? Why not lavender in the attic? What was that all about?"
"I don't know. All I know is that there seem to be two distinct aromas in this house. The first one is the lavender, and I feel calm and peaceful when I smell it, and it makes me feel good. The other one—" I shuddered. "The other one is just the opposite. It's unfriendly and evil."

"And you smelled the roses in the attic."

"Yes."

"But the lavender on the staircase."

I nodded.

"Odd," he said. "You know, I wonder if two different ghosts might be haunting this house. One of old Mother Morton—the roses—and the other of Lydia—the lavender. It makes sense to me, in a way. Miss Galloway told us that Lydia spent the rest of her life doing good works, so the lavender might be the way she expresses herself, making you feel good. And the decayed roses might be something good gone bad, like Cordelia Morton. If she was ever good," he added. "We don't know that she was, but it's a theory."

"Two ghosts," I moaned, weakly. "And I can't even stand the idea of one."

"It's only a theory, but you have to admit that there seem to be two different things going on at the same time."

"One of the scents might even be John Morton. I don't know which one. The rotting roses? The lavender?"

"I wouldn't think either one would be John Morton, but I could be wrong. Don't forget that he left the house early on." He glanced down at his watch. "Yikes. I have to get home. I've still got homework to do, if you can believe that. I've let all of my studies slide this weekend. I seem to be obsessed with this article and with your ghost . . . or ghosts."

"Me, too."

He unfastened his backpack and crammed our article down into it. "We
can stop by the newspaper office first thing in the morning and leave this to be
typed." He stood up, stretched his arms over his head, then said, "You know,
Tasha, I'm kind of sorry it's all over. I've had fun."

"Fun? Well, I don't know if I'd call it that, but I have to admit it has been
interesting. I just hope everyone likes the story."

"Don't worry," he assured me. "They're going to love it. And we'll be
famous."

I saw him out then trudged upstairs to my room to get ready for bed
before tackling my algebra homework. Walking straight over to the window to
pull down the shades, I could see a light coming from the second floor of
Stephen's house, and I wondered if he felt as weary as I did. I yawned, then
turned to pick up my pajamas. Only when my gaze fell on the dresser did I see
the words, written in large red letters across the mirror: TASHA, LEAVE IT
ALONE.

I stared. Each block letter stood about four inches tall. Leave what alone,
I wondered.

Then an awful idea paralyzed me: Whatever is up in the attic knows my
name.

The next morning, I didn't even bother asking my parents or Max if they
had written the message to me on the mirror. I knew they hadn't. I didn't have
to ask. It wasn't their style. I didn't tell them about it either, knowing that the
dire message would only upset my parents and agitate Max. I did, however, tell
Stephen on the way to school, and he, too, did not like it that the force—or ghost
or energy or whatever we might choose to call it—knew me by name.

"What happens next?" I asked him.
"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "All I know is that we've been wrong in being so casual about this. Whatever it is, it knows exactly what we're doing."

"And apparently it doesn't like it! I slept in my clothes last night, Stephen, and didn't get any studying done after you left. When I saw that message scrawled across the mirror, I dove right under the covers and stayed there--with all of the lights on--until I fell asleep. I cleaned the message off the mirror this morning because I didn't want Mom to find it if she happened to come into my room while I'm in school."

"What was the message written with?"

"I don't know. It looked kind of like lipstick, but thicker. Greasier."

"We'll think of something," he promised me.

"What?"

"I don't know yet. I don't like this at all. We have to think of something."

Stephen and I went straight to the newspaper office to submit our article to Wes. He read through it rapidly, while we awaited his verdict, shifting our feet and pacing. An eternity seemed to pass before he looked up at the two of us. "It's a good story," he said, slowly and deliberately. "But I can't believe that you didn't stay in the attic any longer than you did." Receiving only stares from Stephen and me he went on. "Let me get this straight. You found a ghost, sitting in the rocking chair, and you ran out of the attic! I can't believe it! Where's your sense of story?"

Leaning both arms on his desk, I said, "I can't speak for Stephen, but all of my 'sense of story' vanished when I saw the rocking chair start moving all by itself. All I could think about was high-tailing it out of there!"

"Ditto," agreed Stephen. "When there's an empty chair rocking back and
forth all by itself, my gut instinct is to vamoose. What did you expect us to do, Wes? Interview it?" He held up an imaginary microphone and spoke to me. "I say, Ms. Ghost, could you please tell us exactly what it's like to be dead?"

"Well," I replied in my best from-beyond-the-grave voice, "it's a haunting experience. Quite deadly."

Our editor surrendered, half-heartedly. "I get your point. But, if you two ever decide to go back up there and investigate again, count me in."

Flatly, I said, "You don't like the story at all, do you?"

"Tasha, I love it," he insisted. "Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with this story, and it's very good. It's just that now I can see a second story, sitting there waiting for you. Literally. A follow-up."

"No way," I told him. "No how. Never in a million years. Get that idea out of your head. Banish it from your thoughts. It isn't going to happen."

He merely gave a little shrug. "Let's just see. Don't close the door."

"Literally," Stephen added with a wink, as we left to go to our first class.

If I'd wondered what it would be like to actually fit in at Prescott High School, I didn't have to wait long to find out. When the Halloween edition of the school paper hit the homerooms that Thursday morning with our story and Stephen's Polaroid snapshot on the front page (Students Find Ghost), Stephen and I suddenly found ourselves local celebrities, just as he'd predicted the night before. Changing classes no longer found me cowering against the walls. People I had never seen before patted me on the shoulder or complimented me on the article, calling out, "Great story, Tasha!" Even Mr. Juarez said, "Terrific story, Tasha. You and Stephen did a wonderful job." (And he gave me a 96 on the algebra test.) It was heady stuff, and I loved every minute of it.

Needless to say, I was walking on air when I arrived home that
afternoon. "Mom, I'm home," I called.

Max appeared from the kitchen. "She's gone to visit one of the neighbors," he told me, munching an apple. "I'm hungry."

"How can you be hungry when you're eating? Have another apple."

He grimaced. "This one is getting boring. I want something else. Apples only make me hungrier than I was to begin with."

I fixed us both a peanut butter and banana sandwich and a glass of milk and left him at the kitchen table, taking mine upstairs to my bedroom with me. While I was basking in the moment of fame, I thought it might be as good a time as any to write to Jenny and let her know all about our victory, even though I planned to keep the subject of the article to myself.

I opened my desk drawer, searching for my best stationery—the lilac paper with my name in deep violet script—when it occurred to me that the lamp that usually stood in the middle of my desk was not there. "What in the world?" I thought, looking around. I spied the lamp all the way across the room on top of my dresser. Gradually I began to realize that more than the lamp had been rearranged. My jewelry box, unopened, now sat smack in the middle of my bed. Several books had been knocked off their shelves and onto the floor. Slowly, I walked over to the books, picking them up and replacing them on the bookshelf where they belonged.

"Max!" I yelled, standing upright. "Max, you come up here!" I yelled down the stairs. "Now!"

He raced up the steps and into my room, holding his sandwich in his hand. "What's up? What's wrong? What did I do?"

I put my hands on my hips. "Max, did you come in here and move some of my stuff around? Tell me honestly!"

"No, Tasha." His eyes grew very wide. "I haven't touched a thing. I
don't come in your room without your permission, you know that."

I studied his face. He was terrible at lying, and I could always tell if he were telling the truth or not: his eyes would go all shifty when he lied and would dart around the room. "Okay. I believe you."

"What's out of place? Your room looks normal to me."

"Little things, Max. The lamp, my jewelry box, some books." Then I had an idea. "Let's go check your room to see if everything is where it's supposed to be."

He led the way across the hall and opened the door to his room. After a sweeping glance around, he said, "Nope. Everything is where it's supposed to be and ship-shape."

"How could you tell?" I asked, surveying the chaos that made Mom frantic when she tried to clean it.

"It may be a mess, but it's my mess. Nothing's been moved since I left for school this morning." Back in my room he said, "Maybe Mom moved your things around."

"Mom doesn't do that kind of thing," I told him. "And it doesn't make any sense anyway. Why would she simply come into my bedroom and move the lamp? I need the lamp at my desk, so I can see to do my homework and write. Why would she move it to my dresser? And why would she put my jewelry box on my bed? And why would she throw some of my books on the floor?"

"It doesn't make any sense to me, either," he admitted. "It was the only thing I could think of, though."

It made perfect sense to me, though, and I knew exactly who had done it. Or what had done it.

Max studied my face, closely. "You know who did it, don't you? Who
was it, Tasha?" When I didn't answer him, he said, "You think it's the ghost, don't you?"

I grabbed his arm. "What ghost?"

"You're hurting me," he whined, pulling his arm away and rubbing it, looking at me angrily. "You know what ghost I'm talking about as well as I do!"

"Just what have you seen, Max?"

"Well," he said, perching on my bed, "I haven't actually seen anything. But there's something weird about this house. I can feel someone watching me when I'm playing in my room by myself or sometimes when I'm in the kitchen drying dishes or fixing myself a snack. I can feel eyes on me, but when I turn around, there's nobody there. The first few times it happened, I thought maybe you were playing tricks on me, or trying to scare me, but after awhile I figured it wasn't you, but something else."

I moistened my lips, unsure of how much to tell him. "I haven't said anything to you, Max, because I didn't want to frighten you, but there are very strange things happening in this house, you're right."

He continued, "Sometimes, too, I've noticed the chandelier in the hallway starting to sway. If you look at it long enough, it will start swinging back and forth, like somebody's pushing it. And that chandelier is heavy, Tasha. It's not like the wind could do it. I don't even know that a hurricane could move it."

I could scarcely believe that my little brother had noticed all this. He's so much like Dad, so oblivious to everything going on around him, or so I thought. I asked him, "Do you think Mom and Dad know that there's something strange about the house?"

"I think Mom might, but I'm not sure. I have noticed that she doesn't like being alone here."

"She doesn't?"
He gave me a sad look. "You haven't really been paying attention to anything but yourself, have you? Well, I guess that's to be expected. Mom says you've been miserable."

"That's true, Max. I have been more than miserable."

"Mom is, too."

I laughed. "What? Since when? She's the one always giving the 'brave little soldier speech.'"

"I think she's been trying to convince herself of that more than she's trying to convince you. I've overheard her talking to Dad, when they think I'm not listening. She's having a heck of a time here with no friends. If Dad gave the word tomorrow that we were moving back to Frankfort, she'd pack everything by herself and carry it back there on foot."

I felt like a fool, worse than a fool. A heel. All the time I had spent wallowing in my own misery, and I hadn't even stopped to notice that my own mother's misery might well have equaled my own, maybe even surpassed it. I'd just assumed she was happier, now that she had her own studio once again and could resume her painting. Believe me, nothing can make you feel even more clueless than usual than to have your 10-year-old brother let you know what a total jerk you've been. "I guess I have been pretty selfish," I admitted. "I thought Mom was a lot better since we've moved into the house. She smiles again. I never noticed that she was still so unhappy."

"But you have a boyfriend, Tasha, so you're not paying much attention to the rest of us."

"A boyfriend?" I dismissed the whole idea. "What makes you think that? Stephen is a friend, Max, but he is most definitely not my boyfriend. He's a boy who happens to be a friend."

"What's the difference?"
I rolled my eyes. "There's a big difference, believe me. You'll find out when you're older."

"I hate it when that's the answer. He walks you to school every morning, Tasha. And I think that means he's your boyfriend. That's what Jeremy says."

"Who's Jeremy?"

"Jeremy is my best friend. You've met him. He's been to our house."

"Oh, that Jeremy," I said. "I didn't know he was your best friend."

"I've told you over and over. He likes the New York Yankees, just like I do, and he has a big sister, too. You don't even listen to me!"

"I suppose I don't. I'm sorry. I'll try to do better from now on."

"Okay." Max seemed to accept that, and he continued, "Anyway, Jeremy says that any time a boy walks you to school like Stephen does every day, then he is your boyfriend. But I think it's cool. I like Stephen. So does Jeremy."

"Let's just drop the subject of Stephen. I promise you that you'll understand some day. Look," I said, sitting down beside him on the bed, "don't tell Mom and Dad about all my stuff being rearranged in here. Okay?"

"If you say so. But why not?"

It took me a few moments to arrange my thoughts into words. "I don't want them to worry," I said at last. "It would just upset them." And, if Max were telling me the truth, and I knew in my heart that he was, Mom didn't need anything else to upset her just now. Poor thing. Considering her situation, I realized that it must have been ten times harder for Mom to adjust to a new city than it had been for me. At least I had some place to go every day where there were plenty of people around for me to meet if only I could. Where would Mom go to meet people? The grocery? The mall?

Max jumped down from the bed. "I'm going outside now to give Tess some exercise. I think she's getting a little fat."
"Good idea."

He clattered down the steps, leaving me sitting on the bed, still thinking. Only then did I see, lying on my pillow, a stack of aging, yellowed envelopes tied in a faded pink ribbon. Hesitantly, I reached over and picked them up. Lying on top was one hand-addressed in a spidery scrawl to a Margaret Springer. The return address read: Cordelia Morton, Prescott, Arizona. The postmark was 1908.

My hands shaking, I untied the ribbons. All of the envelopes were addressed to the same woman in Philadelphia. How, I wondered, had they come to be back here where they had originated, in Prescott? Perhaps ghosts can travel the ends of the earth to obtain what they want; more than likely, though, I figured that some relative had returned them to Cordelia Morton or to Lydia, maybe after this Margaret Springer had died.

I opened the first envelope and pulled out the letter. Almost immediately, the familiar coldness enveloped me, along with the now familiar stench of decaying roses.

Maybe one day I'll conduct a study of people who live in haunted houses, and I will find out if they felt the same way, but there comes a point when there's a ghost living in your house that you simply get fed up. There's no other way to describe it. You've simply had enough. That point arrived for me that very minute. The coldness and the smell of the roses I found almost too childishly predictable. Yes, predictable. A one-on-one conversation with a person is one thing, but the kind of sneaking around and moving things and conjuring up smells and cold dampness and writing creepy messages on mirrors I found very unfair and one-sided. Impatiently, I said aloud, "Cut it out! You wanted me to read these letters, didn't you? If not, then why did you go to such pains to make sure I wouldn't miss them?"
I shivered, glared around the room, and started to read:

"Dearest Sister,"

"I cannot begin to tell you how much I loathe and detest this little town. Prescott is simply too, too backwoods. There is not one civilized person in this entire community except for John and me. We literally have no one that we can socialize with, more's the pity. There certainly won't be a season here, and if there is, let me be the first to say that I want nothing to do with it!

"All the men in Prescott dress like cowboys, and they have the most dreadful manners. My dear Margaret, I've even seen them spitting on the sidewalks! As for the women--and you'll notice I use the word 'women' and not 'ladies'--well, the less said about them the better, but I daresay most of them are little better than common saloon girls with manners to match!

"How I envy you, my dearest and truest friend and sister. Living in Philadelphia with a man who caters to your every whim! I must love John very much to suffer so as I do for him.

"For now I must close, but I shall write soonest and pray that you will do the same,

Your loving sister,

Cordelia"

I refolded the letter and inserted it back into its envelope. The coldness had evaporated, although I hadn't been aware of its leaving my room. My thoughts centered on Cordelia Morton, who lived so many years ago and who had felt almost exactly as I did about Prescott. She, too, had been miserable, trying to adjust to western ways. Perhaps, I thought, that was why she had singled me out. Did she recognize a kindred spirit, one who would understand her feelings about Prescott?

Maybe Miss Galloway had simply read her wrong. Maybe all that had
been wrong with Cordelia Morton was that she was a lonely woman, stuck in a
town she not only hated but despised.

Poor thing, I thought. I certainly could sympathize with her.
CHAPTER NINE

I started off reading the letters in order, but after reading the first three and finding them similar in content, I skipped over the next few, reaching instead for one from the middle of the stack. The late afternoon shadows lengthened as I lay on the bed on my stomach, reading, swept back in time by the tale of Cordelia Morton as she related it to her sister.

All of the letters were written in the same delicate script as the first, and they kept basically to the same theme—how much Cordelia despised Prescott and how much she hated the West, although she had finally met a few people with whom she could associate, people who had moved to Prescott from the East. Being able to socialize with people "of her own standing" helped ease the burden considerably, she told her sister. "At last," she wrote, "there are civilized people here!"

Another bright spot in Cordelia's life had been the birth of her daughter, Lydia, who "was doomed to have been born in Prescott, living among the ruffians," as Cordelia called everyone else but her immediate family. "I have already long given up on my life amounting to anything at all," she wrote her sister, "and my regret now is that this lovely baby, my dearest Lydia, is as much a prisoner in this God-forsaken, desolate country as I am. If I only had the nerve--and the finances--I would come East again, with Lydia in tow, and set up house-keeping all by myself, two females against the world. But that will never be the case. Even if John were to agree to such an arrangement, which he most vehemently would not, the scandal brought down on our family by my leaving
him would be something that neither I nor the family could ever live down."

Poor thing, I kept thinking to myself, to have lived in a time when women practically could be held prisoners in their own households by the whim of their husbands. John Morton liked the West, and that was fine. But should he have forced his wife to live in a place that she despised so much? I sighed and picked up the very last letter in the stack, the one on the bottom, with the most recent postmark of December, 1926.

By now, everything had changed for the worst for poor Cordelia Morton. In that precise script she wrote, "The shame and shock of John's leaving me has left me stunned and angry. How could the man have had the unmitigated gall to leave me, the finest and best thing that ever happened to him in his whole sorry existence? How I wish he had never found me in the first place! In your last letter, you asked why I do not move back to St. Louis now that John has departed from my life. Well, dearest sister, as much as I long to be home again, I could not do that to Lydia. She is 16 and quite happy here with her little friends at school and knows, unfortunately, no other life. I have introduced her to the right people--and believe me, there are very few of them in town--and I fear that wrenching her from this spot at such a tender age might well do to her what it did to me when John brought me here so many years ago, and I would not wish that on the one I love so dearly. I am resigned to suffer the role of martyr and will stay here, only--and I emphasize this--only for her sake."

I refolded the last letter and rolled over on my back to stare at the ceiling for awhile. "Well, that must have been horrible," I thought. "How did that make Lydia feel, knowing that her mother was making herself miserable just so she could stay in school with her friends. How awful!"

The similarities between Cordelia Morton and one Tasha Manning did not escape me. Had I been as insufferable in my hatred of Prescott as she had
been? Was Prescott really all that terrible? Okay, so Prescott wasn't Frankfort. That was a given. No place other than Frankfort could be Frankfort. I suddenly remembered a small card that Mom gave me the first month we lived in Prescott: a bright reproduction of a Mary Engelbreit painting, it read 'Bloom where you're planted.' Mom told me at the time that I should take that advice to heart, and now I realized just how valuable that advice had been, not only for me, but for Mom herself.

Had I bloomed, I wondered? Well, maybe not bloomed, but there might have been a blossom or two appearing on the stem. Stephen himself definitely constituted a major blossom; if he hadn't walked me to school that first day in the new house, I wouldn't have joined the newspaper staff, and I'd probably still be cringing every single minute of every single day at school, dreading the weekdays and living only for the weekends when I could be home. The other members of the newspaper staff might be counted as little blossoms as well—they had immediately taken me in, probably because Stephen recommended me so highly, and they had made me feel a part of something, like I belonged. So, I supposed, in some small way I had accepted Mary Engelbreit's advice and had started to bloom where I'd been planted.

My thoughts turned next to Dad, who had patiently worked his way up the newspaper ranks throughout the years, starting as a beat reporter, then as a columnist, then a managing editor. Would I really have preferred him to remain back in Frankfort, where he could not bloom as he wanted, where he might very well have "played the martyr" just so I wouldn't have to leave Frankfort and my friends? The answer practically crashed inside my brain with a resounding "No!"

I grew increasingly impatient with Cordelia Morton, dead or not, for not having appreciated that her husband had moved West to make a better life for
his family, much as Dad had done with us. "So you hate this place," I said alou
to the thin air, hoping that she could hear me, wherever she was. "So get over
it! If you'd made any kind of effort to make a life for yourself, maybe it
wouldn't have been so terrible for you all those years."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than I heard a loud crash out in
the hallway—one that sounded like thousands of pieces of glass hitting the floor.
I bolted from the bed and rushed to open my door. There, in the middle of the
hallway floor, lay the shattered pieces of the chandelier, shards of glass flung
literally everywhere, from the attic door on one end of the hall to my parents’
bedroom door at the other.

I froze where I stood. Broken glass covered every inch of the hall rug, no
safe spot where I could avoid stepping on sharp splinters. I heard the front
doors open downstairs and Mom call out, "Yoo hoo! Who's home? Max?
Tasha?"

"I'm up here in my bedroom, Mom!" I answered. "Could you—could you
come up here, please?"

She bounded up the steps, looking more radiant than I'd seen her in the
months since we had moved to Prescott, her eyes sparkling, her lips in a broad
grin. "Tasha, Tasha, you'll never guess who I met downtown! I--""

"Stop!" I cried, as she reached the top of the stairs.

"My God!" Her expression switched instantly from happiness to puzzled
dismay. "Tasha, what happened?"

"I don't know, Mom. Honestly! I was lying on my bed reading, when I
heard this crash, and I came out here and saw--all this."

"Where's Max?" she asked, looking wildly in all directions. "Is he all
right?"

"He was out in the back yard, playing with Tess. He's probably still out
there."

Mom said, "We cannot stay in this house another minute! It's not safe! That chandelier should have been bolted down so that this type of thing could never happen. What if you'd been standing beneath it when it fell? You would have been killed! I'm going to call that Dave Wright. This is simply inexcusable." She snapped out of her anger just as quickly. "Go back into your room and put your shoes on, Tasha. I'll go get the broom and the vacuum cleaner, and we can start cleaning this mess up." She turned and headed back down the stairs, mumbling, "I've never seen anything like this in my life. Why did I ever think I wanted to live in an old house? Our old apartment is looking mighty good to me."

I opened my closet door and dug out my old loafers, the ones with the thick soles that were great for just knocking around in. As I slipped them on, I heard a faint, but ever so distinct, chuckle right behind my left shoulder. I turned quickly. There was no one there. But I knew exactly who it was. I could smell the decayed roses. "Not funny, Cordelia," I told her.

As Mom and I swept up the glass, she told me that she had gone downtown just to browse around the shops, and she had stopped in a lovely little shop, owned by Stephen's mother. "She makes all of her own jewelry, Tasha! She's an artist! We have so much in common. I haven't said anything to you about it, but I've been just miserable since we've moved. Even though I've set up my studio and I've been working, I still needed to get out of the house and meet some people."

I nodded. "I guess it would be almost impossible to get adjusted to life in a new town if you're stuck in the house all day. I mean, I haven't had an easy time of it, and I'm around new people every day at school, so there's always
something different happening in my life. But being stuck all day in the
house—" I whooshed the little dustbuster over some teensy slivers of glass,
"--you can only see the one perspective."

"I know you're right," she admitted. "I should have made some kind of
effort to get out and do something, but I can't tell you how difficult it is to move
into a huge house like this, and try to get it looking like home and make it as
comfortable for all of you as I can. And your transition has been so difficult,
sweetie--"

I stood with the dustbuster poised in one hand, the other hand on my
hip. "That's putting it mildly." Angrily, I grabbed the little whisk broom and
started poking it around in the floorboards, making sure that Tess wouldn't get
any little specks of glass in her paws. There was so much I wanted to say to
Mom, mainly that I had been so wrapped up in my own problems that I hadn't
even seen that she had her own problems to contend with. That it had taken
my little brother, for heaven's sake, to point it out my selfishness to me. I felt
tears stinging my eyelids, so I swept faster and harder, willing the tears to go
away and leave me alone.

I could feel Mom watching me, so I purposely ignored her. "Well," she
said, finally, "you're not as miserable as you were a few weeks ago, are you?"

"No. I'm not."

"And what's made the difference?"

I didn't have to give my answer any thought. "Stephen. If he hadn't
taken pity on me that first morning I walked to school from here, I doubt
anyone would be talking to me yet at school."

Mom laughed out loud, putting down the broom and resting on the top
step. "What makes you think Stephen took pity on you? Is that what he told
you?"
"Well, not in so many words."

"How did he put it, then?"

"He didn't put it into any words. I just assumed, that's all." I lifted my chin, defensively. Of course he'd taken pity on me. I'd taken enough pity on myself, envisioning what I looked like, a waif walking forlornly down the crowded hallways of school, smiling until my face ached, wanting to take part in things but not being invited by anyone. "He did say something about having seen me in school but that I never talked to anyone."

Mom snorted. "Stephen walked to school with you on that first morning we moved here because he'd noticed you in the halls at school and thought you were pretty, and he couldn't believe his outrageous good luck when you moved into the house right behind his."

Quickly, I looked up at her, trying to read her eyes. "You have to say that. You're my mother. Naturally you think I'm pretty. You have to."

"Really?" She picked up the broom again and smiled. "Granted, Tasha, I do indeed think you're pretty, and it isn't because you happen to be my daughter. But I happen to know that that is how Stephen feels about you because--" she leaned into my face and grinned--"because his mother told me so."

"His mother?" I squeaked. I squinted, suspiciously. "Why were you talking to Stephen's mother about the two of us? Couldn't you find something artsy to talk about? Did you have to talk about us?"

"Her name is Joanna. And naturally we'd talk about you and Stephen. You two spend so much time together."

"You're kidding, though, about Stephen."

"It's the honest truth and straight from the horse's mouth," she told me. "Or, should I say, straight from the horse's mother's mouth."
My mind reeled with this news, and I plopped onto the floor and leaned against the wall. Mother's tone was dry. "Don't tell me you had no idea, Tasha. He walks you to school every single day. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if he hadn't planned on you two collaborating on your newspaper article just so he could be near you."

"You think so?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm going to have to talk with you about boys, aren't I?"

"No! I know all about boys! But, well, he doesn't act like anything but a friend."

"What's wrong with that? That's a good thing." She gave me a funny little smile. "He really likes you, and that's better than all the other mushy stuff."

"It is?"

"Well, there's plenty of time in your life for the mushy stuff. But for now, this is plenty."

I could feel myself beginning to flush, and it wasn't from all the strenuous sweeping.

To say that Dad was mildly upset when he came home and heard about the chandelier would be like saying that the Titanic hit an ice cube. Dad rarely loses his temper, but when he does, the rafters shake and it's like something out of the Old Testament. He hadn't been home more than five minutes before he telephoned Dave Wright and started ranting and raving about shoddy workmanship and misrepresentation being illegal. I felt so sorry for poor Dave that I had to get up and leave the room, Max tagging along behind me. The two of us went out into the kitchen and shut the door behind us.
"I don't think the chandelier's falling was Dave Wright's fault, Tasha," Max said, pouring himself a glass of water at the faucet.

"I don't either."

"I think it was our ghost. Did you tell Mom about all that stuff being rearranged in your room?"

"No," I admitted. "But I should have."

"You're darned right you should have. If you had told her, maybe Dad wouldn't be in there right now, chewing out Dave."

I groaned. "Quit being so much brighter than I am, Max. You give me a headache sometimes. You really do."

We cut our conversation short, as Dad stormed into the kitchen, Mom in his wake, wringing her hands. "Jack, calm down," she kept saying.

"He's nothing but a cheap charlatan!"

"You're going to give yourself a stroke, and I'm not kidding." Mom told him in her stern, not-to-be-messed-with voice. "Dave said he would come right over and check out the chandelier to see what happened. So, let's just wait and see what he says before jumping to conclusions!"

"Con artist!"

"Jack!"

Max interrupted them, saying, "Mom, Dad, Tasha has something she has to tell you."

They both looked over at me expectantly, and I gulped. Now or never, I thought, plunging straight in. "I think this house is really and truly haunted and that the ghost knocked the chandelier down because I made her mad."

Dad ran his hands through his hair and groaned, "Tasha, please!" then stomped out of the kitchen, while Mom kept looking at me. "You don't really believe that," she said in a flat voice. "Tell me you don't really believe that,
Tasha. You're an intelligent girl."

"But I do believe it!"

"I know that you and Stephen wrote that story about the house, honey, but it's fiction. That's all it is. This house is not, I repeat not, haunted, despite the strange voice I heard, despite the fact that you smell roses and lavender. Despite all that! It can all be explained. For heaven's sake, this is the twentieth century, not medieval England! I can't believe a child of mine would believe anything so ridiculous." She threw up her hands and walked out of the kitchen.

I looked over at Max. "Okay, I confessed, Smart Boy. Now what? I could have told you how they'd react."

"It really makes you wonder how two such smart people can be so blind to what's really going on," he said.

"All of us but you, Max, are blind to what's going on. I should pay more attention to you."

He beamed. "I could have told you that."

Dad paced the kitchen, dining room, and entrance hall until the doorbell rang about twenty minutes later, announcing Dave's arrival. We all trailed up the stairs with Dave in front, just like a family of ducklings, then down the hallway and up the attic steps. He pulled his flashlight out of his pocket, then directed us over to a place in the floor and pointed toward it. "Right there is where the chandelier was braced."

"Where?" Dad asked. "I don't see what you see."

"Look here, Mr. Manning," Dave said, crouching down and motioning Dad to do the same. "That chandelier was braced on these 2X6's, screwed into it and braced within these joists right here. Everything is still here. It looks fine to me." He stopped and scratched his head. "No way that's shoddy
workmanship, Mr. Manning. This is exactly the way it's supposed to look."

"Then explain to me how the chandelier fell and shattered."

"Well, sir, I can't. Maybe there were some weak links in the chain that it was suspended from. I can't say. But nothing up here looks suspicious to me. Heck, call in another handyman if you like and get yourself a second opinion. But I guarantee you he won't think there's a thing wrong with the way that chandelier was braced up here." He straightened up. "Weak links in the chain, that's my guess. Or... no. Never mind."

Dad insisted, "Or what?"

"I guess somebody could have been up here and unscrewed the chandelier from its anchor, maybe. But that's kind of far-fetched."

"Is it?" Dad set his mouth in a grim line and looked off into the distance. Dave said, "That chandelier could have caused some serious damage if someone had been standing underneath it. I hate to think what might have happened."

Max let his hands fall to his sides. "It's the ghost!" he crowed. "I knew it!"

Dave said to me, "That's right. I read that article you had in the Prescott High paper. I thought it was pretty good."

"How did you see it?"

"My son Sam goes there, and he brought the paper home and showed it to me. Darned fine story. So maybe my ad wasn't as far-fetched as I thought!" He shone the flashlight's beam onto the stairs and said, "A ghost is about as fine an explanation as I can think of."

I merely nodded. Max and I had known the truth all along.
CHAPTER TEN

After Dave Wright left, Mom and Dad called Max and me into the den. Max and I obediently sat on the couch, waiting as Dad paced the length of the room, his hands to his lips. Mom perched on the arm of his recliner, staring down at Tess, who lay curled on the little rug in front of the fireplace, her head resting on her paws, oblivious to the excitement around her. The television was on, the volume turned all the way down. After a minute or two, Dad stopped and stood directly in front of us on the couch, smiling tentatively, his hair and shirt rumpled.

"I'm going to call in another handyman to make sure that what Dave said about the chandelier is correct," he said. "And we're going to check the links on the chain to see if one of them could have given way." Bending down so that he could look directly into our faces, he continued, "I don't want either of you to think that your mother or I suspect that you may have done anything wrong, but we need to make absolutely certain before this goes any further that neither of you has been tampering in any way with the chandelier. Your mother hasn't touched it, nor have I. We know neither of you had anything to do with it, but we still have to ask the same question we asked of each other. Did either of you touch that chandelier?"

Max and I shook our heads in unison.

"I'm telling you it was the ghost, Dad," Max insisted.

Dad said, "Right." He looked over at Mom, who nodded back. "Okay, you two can go now."
Max and I shot out of the den, running up the stairs two at a time to our rooms, the grandfather clock striking eight just as we cleared the landing. I shut my door, leaning against it. If they wouldn't believe in the ghost, they wouldn't, and I didn't know what I could do or say that would make any difference. Both of them had read the article Stephen and I wrote; the evidence was there for them to see if they wanted to see it, and obviously they didn't. Apparently, nothing short of a full-blown supernatural hurricane in the house would make them believe if they didn't want to. Who knows, I thought, it might happen yet.

I sorted through all of Cordelia Morton's letters, putting them back in order by date, then retied them with the ribbon, wondering where I should put them for safe keeping. A dresser drawer might be safe from Max's prying eyes, but if the ghost wanted them back, I figured she could find them, no matter where they were. Nowhere in the house would be safe.

Glancing out of the window, I saw Stephen standing in his yard, his face half-hidden in the moonlight, his hands in his jeans pockets, staring up toward me. I waved at him, then opened the window. "What are you doing out there?" I called.

"Come on out!"

"Just a minute!" I grabbed the bundle of letters to show him and shoved them inside the pocket of my sweater, then dashed out of my room and clattered down the staircase, stopping by the den to tell Mom and Dad that I'd be back in a little bit. They were deep in conversation and only nodded, not even bothering to look in my direction.

Once outside, I asked Stephen, "Why were you standing out in the yard?" Then I saw his face. "What's wrong?"

"The light was on in your attic again."

"It was legitimate this time," and I told him what had happened during
the past several hours since I'd been home from school. Handing him the packet of Cordelia Morton's letters, I said, "You need to read these. They let you know in no uncertain terms exactly how she felt about Prescott. She simply loathed it."

"Where did you find these? Did you go up into the attic again?"

I gave a little laugh. "Are you crazy? Of course not! I didn't find the letters, Stephen. They found me. A little present from Cordelia herself, for all I know. I found them lying on my pillow. Do you want to come inside and read them?"

He thought about it, then said, "I'll read them later, if you don't mind my keeping them."

"Take as long as you want. I didn't read them all, but I read enough to get her story. I don't plan to read them again." I shivered, whether from the thought of the ghost of Cordelia Morton or from the chilly night air, I don't know.

"Would you like to come over to my house?" Stephen asked suddenly. "You've never met my mother, and she's home now."

"I guess so. Sure."

We stepped carefully through the brush and brambles and straggly hedges in our yard and into Stephen's yard, past the dog house and walked into his kitchen, where a tall, slim woman with dark brown hair and dark lively eyes like Stephen's sat at the table. "You must be Tasha!" she exclaimed, before I had a chance even to say hello. "Stephen described you so well, I'd know you anywhere. It's nice to meet you at long last."

Joanna Collier looked like an exotic hippie, with her long, straight hair parted in the middle and flowing down past her shoulders. She wore loose baggy slacks and a bright yellow blouse, cinched in the middle with a silver link
belt. I wondered if she had made all the jewelry she wore: huge silver loops in her ears, much like I imagined gypsies would wear, a thick silver mesh choker around her neck, and loose silver bangle bracelets, at least twenty of them, clanking up and down on her arm.

"Come in, come in," she said, scooting me inside the kitchen. "Tasha, I met your mother this afternoon. What a delightful woman! I'm absolutely thrilled to meet another artist. And she's practically as close as my back yard!"

"She told me she'd visited your shop," I said. "I know she's as pleased as you are to find someone she can talk to."

She laughed. "It will be nice having someone to talk shop with. Would you two like some tea? I was just getting ready to make a cup of herbal tea and relax under the headphones. I'm thinking chamomile, but peppermint might be better. I'm not really sure what kind of mood I'm in." She tapped her foot impatiently, staring into the cabinet above the sink. "Maybe rosehips."

I declined politely, as did Stephen, then he said, "Tasha and I need to talk about some things, Mom."

"Why don't you go into the den?" she suggested. "You can have privacy in there."

Their den reminded me of Stephen's mother—brightly colored and airy—with framed Art Deco prints of different operas, La Boheme and Madame Butterfly and Aida, in vivid, splashy colors. "Mom collects opera posters," he explained, as I admired the pictures. "She loves opera. That's why I'm trying so hard to like it. She loves talking about opera, so I'm doing my best, but it's a struggle." I hadn't noticed that music was playing, but suddenly a soprano burst into song while he was talking. "That's Mimi in La Boheme. She's dying in a garret in France and complaining about how cold her hands are."

"How sad."
"It's one sad story all right," he agreed, "but then most of the opera stories are sad."

We sat in the middle of the floor on overstuffed red pillows, and he moved his books and notebook out of the way to stretch his long legs out in front of him. "Obviously, the message on your mirror was a warning," he said, "and now the ghost is prepared to follow through. The more I hear about your ghost's activities, the more I worry."

"Why?"

"The chandelier, Tasha. Somebody might have been hurt. Seriously hurt. Don't forget, I've seen that chandelier back when I was helping Dave with the house. It wasn't delicate."

"But nobody was hurt," I reminded him.

"The next time, you might not be so lucky. What's the ghost going to do the next time? Fling knives? Hurl you out of bed?"

"Stop it!" I shouted, cupping my hands over my ears. "You're scaring me!" Max wasn't the only member of our family with an overactive imagination.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't know what to do," I said. "I don't know what you're supposed to do when your house is haunted. I didn't think things like this happened in real life. Can't you think of something?"

He leaned forward. "Well, let's stop and think. In the movies, they always call someone in to exorcise the place. Usually a priest or someone connected with a church."

"Yeah, that would go over well at my house. My parents refuse to believe the house is even haunted! I told them it was. Max told them. They looked at us as though we were alien children dropped down from another
planet. So getting a priest in for an exorcism isn't even a possibility."

"Maybe when they're not home . . . ?"

"No. I don't want to sneak around like that. Besides, they'd kill me if they ever found out."

While Mimi continued singing and trying to warm her hands, Stephen and I sat together in silence, thinking. Finally, he told me, "We'll think of something. We have to. There has to be a way to stop all of this. There just has to be."

"What really worries me right this minute is wondering what my parents are up to," I said, hugging my knees to my chest.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never seen Dad so upset. Not in all the years I've known him—my whole life. After Dave left, he called Max and me into the den and asked each of us if we'd been up in the attic and tampered with the brace on the chandelier."

Leaning his chin on his hand, Stephen said, "You don't think Max could have done it, do you?"

"Of course not! I'm not even sure that he would know how to make a chandelier fall! I know I wouldn't have known how, and I still wouldn't. Besides, Max is never in the house by himself. Mom wouldn't have done it. Dad wouldn't have done it. I hope my folks believe I wouldn't have done it—that I couldn't have done it. Dad's calling someone in for a second opinion, and then he's going to check the links on the chain that held the chandelier."

"What would be the motive of your having made the chandelier fall? What would you have gained?"

I answered, levelly, "A believable ghost story, maybe?"

"But who would care?" he asked me. "Our story was a raving success as
it was. We couldn't gain anything more by creating more ghostly activity."

"I don't know. I'm grasping at straws here. All I'm saying is that when I left home to meet you outside, Mom and Dad were in the middle of a serious conversation. I haven't seen the two of them looking that grim since the night they told us we were leaving Kentucky for Arizona."

He sighed heavily and leaned over to turn off the stereo, finally putting Mimi to rest. "If your parents truly don't believe that your house is haunted, then they have to be looking at a much worse possibility."

"I don't understand, Stephen. What could be worse than a ghost creeping around your attic and somehow sabotaging the chandelier?"

"A human being."

The next morning, the bleak atmosphere at my house hadn't cleared up any by the time I made it downstairs for breakfast. Dad toyed with his oatmeal, stirring it over and over, not eating any of it, and dark circles rimmed his eyes. Mom didn't look much better, still dressed in her robe, stifling yawns, and sipping her coffee. Max's eyes met mine as I slid into my seat next to him.

"G'morning, everyone," I said, trying to sound cheerful. "At least it's Friday!"

Dad grunted.

The radio on the counter blared the morning news, followed by the weather report, as I mechanically spooned oatmeal into my mouth, the tension around the table unbearable. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. "What's wrong with you two? I've never seen you like this!"

Mom sighed and pushed her hair back from her face with both hands.

"We were up all night."

"Talking about the chandelier?"

"That . . . among other things." She looked meaningfully at Dad, who
shrugged, then nodded. "Tasha, Max... the editor's position in Frankfort is open, and they've called your father and offered him the job."

I choked on my milk. "What?" I spluttered, coughing.

"It's true," Dad said, motioning for my mother to refill his coffee cup. "Stan called me yesterday morning at work. I turned him down, naturally. Everything seemed to be going so well here. I love the Courier, your mom is finally settling in with her painting, and you and Max are beginning to feel at home. So, of course, I told Stan that I wasn't in the least interested in moving back to Frankfort and taking the position. But with the chandelier incident last night, I have to think that someone in this town doesn't want me with the newspaper."

"What?" His reasoning made no sense to me at all. "Who wouldn't want you to be with the paper?"

"I have no idea! I do know that when I got this job, there was some resentment with two of the guys at the paper who wanted to be editor. I know they resented an outsider getting it, but I thought we'd smoothed all that out. For all I know, one of them sabotaged the chandelier."

Max cut in, "Dad, I'm telling you! It was the ghost!"

"Max, I'm getting a little tired of your hauling out this ghost! I don't want to hear about a ghost again!"

I reached out and grabbed Dad's hand. "Dad, you've got to listen to me. There is something weird going on inside this house. I know you and Mom don't believe in ghosts, but you have to believe what I'm saying." Taking a deep breath, I plunged ahead. "When I got home yesterday, something had rearranged stuff in my bedroom. The lamp had been moved from my desk. My jewelry box had been moved. There were books off my bookcase. The night before that there was a message written on my mirror in lipstick or something."
"Good Lord," Dad moaned, burying his face in his hands.

"I'm not finished. I also found this stack of old letters lying on my pillow. They were dated from the early 1900s, and they were written by the old woman who used to live in this house."

Mother's eyes grew large. "Why didn't you tell me this yesterday?"

"I didn't even try to tell you because I know you don't believe in ghosts. Max and I haven't told you half the weird stuff that goes on in this house.

Mom, you heard the voice. What else do you need?"

"Coincidence," she muttered. "Where are the letters?"

"I gave them to Stephen last night. I knew he'd be interested in reading them because we've been investigating the history of this house. I can get them back if you want to read them."

Dad took a shaky sip of his coffee, then said, "I'm sorry, Tasha, but the idea of a ghost absolutely goes against everything I believe in. Ghosts don't exist. They are impossible to prove. Whatever is happening in this house is caused by a flesh and blood, living and breathing, upright human being. Not some ethereal spectre from the netherworld." He set his coffee cup down on the table so hard that coffee splashed out onto his placemat. "I'm going to call Stan as soon as I get to the office. I'm taking the job in Frankfort."

A mere two weeks before, that news would have had me leaping across the table with joy and kissing him on both cheeks, then rushing upstairs to pack my things and wait by the car until it was time to leave. But now I heard the news with totally mixed feelings. On the one hand there was Frankfort and what had once been home: Jenny, all my old friends, Aunt Maggie, the school where everyone knew me. On the other hand, here there was Stephen, and the school newspaper staff, and a bunch of kids at the high school who thought I was a great writer, and I was making a name for myself all by myself. People
were liking me for who I was and what I could do, not simply because they'd known me all their lives. I felt that in Prescott I was earning my keep.

"Dad, please," I pleaded, "before you do that, why don't you call in the police to check out the attic? Have them dust for fingerprints or something. If a human being is responsible for the chandelier falling, then they'll find out for you. If not . . . ." I let my voice trail off, afraid to mention the word 'ghost' to him.

"That's not a bad idea, Jack," Mom said. "If someone is sneaking into our house and causing all this havoc, then the police will soon find out. And I'd hate for you to suspect those men you work with, if they're innocent."

The grandfather clock struck 7:30, and I jumped up from the table. "I'm going to be late for school if I don't hurry," I said. "Please, Dad. Think about it. Don't be a quitter. Fight it."

"I'm not a quitter!" he protested. "I just want my family to be safe! I don't know what I would have done if anything had happened to you!"

Kissing him on the forehead, I repeated, "Call the police. Please. They can straighten this out."

Stephen knew immediately that something was wrong when I came flying out of the house, still pulling on my jacket. "I thought you might not be coming to school today," he said, as I banged the gate closed behind me. "What's wrong?"

"We might be moving back to Frankfort," I blurted, walking furiously. "What? Why? You can't. Stop walking away from me, Tasha! Tell me what's going on."

Feeling that I could burst into tears at any minute, I blinked furiously, then said, "Oh, it's just awful at my house, Stephen. They called Dad from
Frankfort yesterday and offered him a job at his old paper, and he wasn't going to take it, but this chandelier business has him all upset. He thinks somebody at the newspaper is sending him a message to get out of Dodge. Or Prescott." I managed a snide little laugh. "Oh, great. I've been out here so long I'm beginning to sound like a bad western."

"But I thought you'd be happy about moving back to Frankfort," Stephen said. "I thought you hated it here."

I sighed. "I don't hate it, okay? I'm just now getting used to it, and all of a sudden they're yanking the rug from under me."

"So you kind of like it?"

"Yes, I kind of halfway like it here."

"You might even be glad you moved here?" he asked.

I saw then that he was grinning, his eyes mischievous. "What do you want to hear me say?" I laughed. "I said that I like it!"

"I just wanted to hear you say it again."

"Well, you've heard it, so stop asking! But so what? If Dad wants to go back to Frankfort, then--we'll go back!"

"He really sounded serious?"

"Deadly." I tugged at his sleeve. "We'd better hurry or we'll be late, and I don't want to stay after school on a Friday. This day's going to be long enough as it is."

We trotted along, both of us deep in thought.

As we neared the high school, I told Stephen, "I did ask Dad to call the police, though, so I hope they can prove to him that no human being has been behind all the mischief in our house."

"That's a great idea! What made you think of it?"

"I don't know. I think I was desperate. I don't know how parents can be
so stubborn and so blind! If they would only believe in ghosts, Dad wouldn't even be considering moving back to Frankfort. Well, maybe he might want to move into another house, but he wouldn't be thinking about leaving town. But do you know what really burns me up about this whole thing?" I asked him, pausing on the front step of the school and stepping aside to let some girls in the door.

"What's that?"

"It's the fact that old Cordelia Morton is running us out! She hated Prescott and wanted to leave and couldn't, but with all of her hocus pocus stuff going on in our house, she's going to run us out of town! I feel like she's not going to be happy until someone leaves this town! Even though she's dead and can't leave, she's going to make sure someone else will."

The warning bell rang, and we sprinted inside the school. Right before we parted for our first class, me to English and Stephen to Spanish, I told him, "Stephen, I'm not going to let her win. And it's got nothing to do with whether we stay here or move back to Frankfort. I refuse to let a mere ghost send my family packing!"
CHAPTER ELEVEN

I couldn't concentrate on any of my classes that day, and small wonder. I kept wondering if this time next week would find me at Frankfort High School, once again having classes with Jenny and my old friends, instead of sitting in English class at Prescott High School. When Mrs. Fergusson assigned a two-page essay due the following Friday, the topic "My Favorite Way to Spend the Day," I almost couldn't be bothered to write it down in my assignment book: what was the point? Would I even have to write it?

What would Dad be doing now? Even as I sat at my desk, listening to Tabitha Clark give an extra credit book report on—of all things—that horrible book *Crazed for Love*, I rested my head in my hands, imagining Dad on the telephone right this very minute with Stan back in Frankfort, telling him to keep the job open, that we'd be back just as soon as we could possibly get there. Not knowing what was happening was driving me mad.

So distracted was I that I even toyed with the idea of pretending to get sick, checking out at the principal's office, and going on home; I probably should have, because I certainly learned nothing that day, nothing at all soaked in. The only thing that kept me at school was fearing that I'd return home to find Mom scurrying through the house, packing all of our boxes back up again, and I didn't think I could face that particular scenario. In some ways, not knowing was better than knowing. But not much better.

The school day seemed to last forever, each class dragging on for what felt like hours. But at long last it came to an end. When Stephen and I finally
turned onto Mt. Vernon Street after school, a police car sped past us, heading in the direction of our house. "Uh-oh," Stephen said, as we quickened our pace.

"Oh, great," I wailed. "Are they just now getting to our house? I was hoping it would all be over by now, and we'd know something!"

Stephen broke out into a run, and as I caught up with him, I asked, "What's the hurry?"

"If they're looking for a human intruder in your attic, I want to tell them all that I've seen. I'm kind of an eye-witness, you know. I've been seeing strange things in that attic since before your family even moved in."

"That's right! Good point. I hadn't even thought of that, but they'll need to know."

The policemen were standing in our foyer, taking notes as Mom talked to them, when we arrived. Mom introduced Stephen and me to them, and Officers Jensen and Thayer nodded toward us, smiling, not as stern as I'd expected.

"Can we tag along and watch you?" Stephen asked them.

"Sure."

Mom looked positively haggard, so I offered to show them the way to the attic. "Thank you, Tasha," she said in a weary voice. "Would you like some coffee? Or tea?" she asked the policemen.

They declined, and Stephen and I led the way upstairs. In the hall, Officer Jensen, a sturdy, red-faced man with thick silver hair and moustache, commented, "So you've had some strange things happening in your house, I hear."

"That's right," I said. "Very strange. One night when we first moved in, I heard footsteps in the attic."

"Is that right?" He jotted down something in his little notepad, and I was itching to see what he'd written, but he flipped it closed before I could peek.
I unlatched the attic door and went up ahead of the others. Funny, but I felt no fear whatsoever. Maybe it was the added protection of having the police with me, but I don't think so. My anger at Cordelia Morton's high-handed attempts to shape the destiny of our family overcame any fear I felt at the prospect of actually encountering her. In life, she'd succeeded in running off her own husband and now she wanted to do the same to us. Well, I'd decided, Cordelia Morton had better think again. It was high time she get on with her life--whatever that might be--and let us get on with ours, with no interference from her.

In the attic, Officer Jensen immediately headed straight toward the window and began to examine it. "Lots of footprints up here," Officer Thayer was saying to him.

"Those are probably ours," I told him. "My dad and I have been up here exploring, and Stephen and I have, too, and then the whole family was up here last night, along with Dave Wright."

"A dog, too, from the looks of it."

"Yes. Those would be Tess's."

Officer Thayer opened the big metal box he'd been carrying. "What's that?" Stephen asked.

"We're going to dust for fingerprints," he explained. "We'll have to get prints from all your family, too, so we'll know which prints we can rule out. You, too, son, since you've been up here," he said to Stephen. Officer Thayer brought out what looked like a big inkpad and placed my thumb on it. "Roll it around good, then stamp it right here on the paper." I did as I was told, and Stephen followed me.

When we'd finished wiping the greasy ink from our hands, Stephen whispered to me, "Do you think now is the time to tell them about seeing the
lights on up here when nobody's home?"

"As good as any, I guess."

He walked off to join them, and I crouched down and leaned against the wall, looking around. No smell of decomposing roses today, I noticed. It figured. The only time I felt absolutely no fear, and nothing. Only musty attic smells and dust itching in my nose. I sniffed again and sneezed, then sniffed again. Was that lavender? Up here?

I followed the scent, aware of how much I must have resembled a bloodhound. It led, like a little trail, back under the eaves where Dad had found the records. Much stronger here, I thought, sniffing around. If nothing else, maybe at least I could find out where the lavender scent was coming from before we left town. One mystery solved perhaps. Several cardboard boxes lay stacked on top of each other on an old trunk. I ripped the boxes open, not caring whether I tore them up in the process. What could it possibly matter at this point?

Nothing of any interest at all, only tarnished candelabras, tarnished platters, everything tarnished and of no interest to me. Using all my strength, I pushed them onto the floor, my curiosity now on the big metal trunk they had been lying on. It was a battered silvery trunk, heavy and thick and massive.

And locked. "Darn," I muttered, kicking it in frustration. The heavy scent of lavender let me know that something lay hidden in that trunk that I had to see. But how to get it open without the key? On all fours, I searched the floor, hoping to find the key, but there was no key in sight. What now? I pushed my hair out of my eyes, then tried the lock again. It didn't budge.

Maybe the policemen could help. I brushed myself off and went over to the window, where they stood talking intently with Stephen, who was pointing out the window in the direction of his house. "Excuse me," I interrupted, "but
would either of you have some kind of a lock-picker?"

Officer Thayer gave me an amused look. "A lock-picker?"

"You know," I went on, "something that will open an old lock. There's a trunk over there I'd like to open. It might be full of antiques!"

He removed the huge ring of keys that dangled from his belt. "Try this," he said, handing me a long, skinny metal rod. "Just jiggle it around in the lock. It works almost every time."

"Thanks."

It has to work, I thought, inserting it into the trunk's lock. It slid in easily, and I manoeuvred it in all directions. Nothing. I jigged it again, thrusting the rod in even deeper this time.

It clicked. My heart thudding, I slowly lifted the lid. The scent of lavender wafted out, as I peered in. For such a huge trunk, it certainly didn't have much in it. Carefully, I pulled out a smooth leather wallet, a black derby hat, an ornate stick with brass rings on it, and a pocket watch with a long chain. Was that all? I checked inside again. That was all.

I sat back on my heels, and, as I did, the smell of rotting roses enveloped me again, the cold black and intense. "Oh, go away, Cordelia," I commanded, pushing through it and standing up.

To my surprise, it did. It vanished, just like that.

I let the lid fall back onto the trunk, my disappointment almost overwhelming. Well, what had I hoped to find anyway? I didn't know, but I kicked the trunk again anyway, just for good measure.

Stephen came over. "Did you get the trunk open?"

"Yes, but it wasn't worth all the effort. Just some of Mr. Morton's stuff, I guess. Nothing important."

"Oh."
"Did you tell the police what you knew?"

"Everything. About the lights on up here before you moved in, and about the lights on after you moved in. I also told them I'd never seen anybody prowling around the outside, and you'd expect to see something if somebody had broken in. A ladder, anyway, to get up here."

"Unless someone came in one of the downstairs windows and got in that way."

"Yeah, they mentioned that, too."

"Did they seem interested in what you were saying?"

"Hard to say. They took notes. But they have a way of looking at you like they don't believe a word you're saying."

I nodded. "I suppose they have to be that way. They must hear everything. Lying murderers, lying robbers, everything."

I returned the lock-picker to Officer Thayer and thanked him. "Did it work?" he asked me.

"Yep. I didn't find anything, but it worked."

Stephen and I went downstairs and found Mom in the kitchen, staring out the window into the yard. Placing an arm around her shoulder, I asked, "Have you heard anything from Dad yet?"

She shook her head. "No. And I'm afraid to call. Afraid I'll find out that we're moving again."

"You don't want to go either?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I do and I don't. I've gotten used to being here. I love my new studio. And, even if weird things do go on in this house, I like it. Most of the time. Except when chandeliers are crashing onto the floor. But I've never seen your father like this. Never in all these years of being married to him." She sighed, then she noticed Stephen and smiled at him. "So
what are the police doing in our attic?"

"Dusting for fingerprints," he told her. "Doing their job, just like on television. They don't have much of a sense of humor."

"No, I imagine not."

Stephen touched my arm. "Let's go see Miss Galloway," he said. "She said she wanted us to keep her up to date on everything that's going on. We've got plenty to tell her now."

"That's a good idea. She'd probably like the company. Is that okay, Mom?"

Mom didn't even seem to hear me, only shrugged and went back to looking out the window.

"Boy, your mom is blue," Stephen said to me, as we took off down the street.

"I know. I can't stand it." I didn't tell him that I knew exactly how she felt.

"The history of Prescott is particularly fascinating," Miss Galloway was saying, leaning on her cane. "Have you learned your local history yet, Tasha?"

"Not really," I confessed. I didn't have the nerve to tell her that I hadn't been even mildly interested in how Prescott came to be nor the heart to let her know that we might be leaving town and moving back to Frankfort very soon.

She gave a little snort, thumping her cane on the floor. "If you've been transplanted, my dear girl, you owe it to yourself to learn a little about your new roots."

"I know." I remembered Mary Engelbreit's card: Bloom Where You're Planted. And learn your local history.
Miss Jane scanned the bookshelves with her forefinger. "Here. This is one you must read before you read anything else. It's a wonderful overview."

Handing me a copy of *Prescott: A History*, she said, "I want it back, of course, but take all the time you need to study it."

"Thank you." I just couldn't tell her the latest developments in our family and with the house itself and the ghost of Cordelia Morton.

Stephen could, though, and did, catching her up to speed on absolutely everything, leaving out nothing, sparing no detail.

Astonished, she breathed, "Goodness gracious." Then, "Good heavens."

"I can bring Cordelia's letters to you," Stephen offered, "if you'd be interested in reading them."

"Thank you, but I don't think I want to know Cordelia Morton that well."

She patted my hand. "I can only imagine how you must feel, Tasha. All up in the air, not knowing where you're going to be."

"That's exactly it. But I'm just so angry with Cordelia. Why is it that people who get a thrill out of manipulating other people always seem to get their own way? It just makes me furious when I think that she's running us off what used to be her property! She's dead, anyway, so why on earth does it matter to her whether we stay here or go back to Frankfort? How is it her business? Meddling busybody!" There's nothing quite as frustrating as wanting to throttle a ghost.

"It's too bad that you can't get your father and mother to realize that there's something supernatural going on inside your house," she said. "There must be some way to make them see what's happening around them."

"I don't know what that would be," I told her, glumly. "Mom even had a minor encounter when she heard someone say her name, but there was nobody in the house at the time. Even then, she just said it was a coincidence. She still
insists that's what it was."

"Well, you do have to admit that it's a far-fetched idea. And not everyone
believes in ghosts, that's for certain. But your poor father! He must be going
through his own personal hell, thinking that someone at his office is out to harm
him and his family. That's terribly frightening!"

"I know. He's beside himself. I've never seen him so upset." Then I
remembered something Miss Galloway had told us on that first day Stephen
and I had visited with her. "Tell me again about John Morton, please, and when
he disappeared from Prescott."

"I don't recall all that much, Tasha" she confessed. "Just that one day he
was simply gone. Vanished. It all happened so long ago." With a rueful
chuckle, she added, "And I'm afraid that my memory isn't all that it should be."

"He went to San Francisco," Stephen reminded me. "He ran off with a
younger woman."

"Now, Stephen," Miss Galloway chided him, "I told you that that part
was just gossip. We heard much later that there was a younger woman
involved."

"Who was the woman?" I asked.

She leaned back, reflecting. "I don't know that I ever heard a name. If I
did, I have no recollection of it now."

I persisted, sensing that it might be important. "But wouldn't you have
known her, Miss Galloway? Prescott couldn't have been all that big back then.
Wouldn't someone have been conspicuously missing one day? Wouldn't the
young woman have told someone--her family or her friends--where she was
going and who with? After all, John Morton must have been some catch,
moved or unmarried. He was a successful banker, and he was wealthy."

"But the times were different back then," she told me. "A young woman
running off with a married man would have been high scandal indeed, not like these days when practically anything goes. I would think that she wouldn’t have told a soul, not even her family."

"Still," I said, "it seems like someone would have known who the woman was. I don’t see how something like that could have been kept a secret for very long. Somebody would have spilled the beans. We all know that it’s impossible to keep a secret in a small town, even an important secret."

"What are you driving at, Tasha?" Stephen asked. "Do you know something that you’re not telling us?"

"I don’t know what I know, exactly. It’s just that something is bothering me. I remember last time, Miss Galloway, you said that John Morton was a dandy in the way he dressed. What does that mean, exactly?"

She chuckled, remembering. "Oh, he cut quite the figure walking downtown, nodding to all the neighbors, complimenting all the women on their appearance. I remember he had the most exquisite vest, dark and somber on the outside, just like you’d expect from a banker, but the inside was lined with the most beautiful turquoise silk lining. It sounds tame now, I know, but at the time, you can’t imagine how the heads turned. I can still see him in his derby, carrying that beautiful walking stick. He never went anywhere without that walking stick. Not that he needed it, mind you. He had gorgeous posture, very erect, very proud. No, he brandished that walking stick in front of him, just like an actor, posing his way across the stage. He carried it everywhere."

"Everywhere?" I squealed, suddenly excited.

She gave a firm nod of her head. "All the time. When I picture him in my mind’s eye, I always see him with that walking stick. Mahogany it was, with beautiful brass rings encircling it. John Morton should have been on the stage. He had such a flare for the dramatic."
"Would he," I ventured, "have run off to San Francisco without it?"

"Why, no, not that I can imagine. It was practically a part of him. I wouldn't imagine that he would leave it behind. There'd be no reason."

I leapt to my feet, unable to sit still any longer. "Would he have run off to San Francisco without his derby hat?"

"Not likely."

"Or his pocket watch? Or his wallet?"

"No, of course he wouldn't." She adjusted her glasses and looked at me. "Tasha, what is going on? What do you know?"

My words tumbling over themselves, I hurriedly told her and Stephen about the contents of the trunk in the attic.

Stephen stared, his mouth open as he gazed at me. "Then, Tasha--what you're saying is that John Morton--I don't know what you're saying. What are you saying?"

"Don't you see? What I'm saying is that John Morton didn't desert his family! And he didn't run off to San Francisco with a younger woman either, no matter what Cordelia Morton would have everyone believe."

Pausing dramatically, I looked first from Stephen, then to Miss Galloway. "John Morton couldn't have run off anywhere, because John Morton was murdered!"
CHAPTER TWELVE

Immediately, Miss Galloway accused me of jumping to conclusions, which, of course, I was. "Admittedly, Tasha," she conceded, "you have found what are more than likely John Morton's possessions. The derby hat and the walking stick sound like they could only have belonged to him and to no one else. The watch I'm not at all sure about. Perhaps I do remember him displaying a pocket watch, come to think of it, but that may be my imagination at work, since you have mentioned it to me. But I'm not at all sure that I remember him carrying one. At any rate, simply because you have found these items in a trunk in your attic does not mean that he was murdered! I'm not sure that they mean anything at all."

"But, Miss Galloway--" I began, as Stephen interrupted me.

"Why would he leave town without his wallet?" he asked. "That doesn't make any kind of sense to me. I could maybe see that he might leave his hat and walking stick behind, if only because he was starting a new life."

I shook my head, not catching his meaning.

Gently, he added, for my benefit, "If you're starting a new life, then maybe you'd want to leave behind all the remnants of your old one behind you. The walking stick and the derby might have been an important part of his life here. But not necessarily in San Francisco. Maybe he planned to project a completely different image there. And besides, he could buy new things there."

He ran his hands through his hair. "But the wallet doesn't make any sense to me. Why would he leave that behind him? I don't go anywhere without my
wallet, and I only buy a new one when the old one has fallen apart completely."

I was growing impatient with the two of them. "There's another bigger question here, if you ask me. If John Morton left Prescott for San Francisco, then why would Cordelia Morton bother to have locked his hat, his wallet, his walking cane, and his watch in a huge locker? Locked up tight. In a fortress of a locker that had to have had a key at one time. If I had been Cordelia and John had deserted me, I would have thrown those things away, along with all of his clothes. I wouldn't have wanted to keep them for any reason. I would want no reminders that he'd ever lived in my house!"

Miss Galloway tapped her cane on the floor as she thought. "Perhaps Cordelia didn't put them in the trunk at all, have you thought of that? Perhaps Lydia locked them up in the trunk and stored them in the attic. They were all she had left of her father, and she wanted them kept safe."

"I don't buy it," I told her, sitting down next to her on the horsehair sofa. "If my father—or my mother—were to desert my family, then if there were any of their personal possessions that I wanted as keepsakes, I'd keep them in my room in my drawer, where I could get to them easily. I wouldn't keep them locked way up in the attic, where I couldn't take them out and look at them again and remember."

"But, my dear girl," she said gently, laying her hand on my arm, "we don't know when those items were placed in the attic, do we? We have absolutely no idea whether they were put in the locker shortly after John Morton left town, or decades later, perhaps when Lydia was an elderly woman, clearing out some of the clutter in her house before going into the nursing home."

"But why would she do that—even then?" I asked. "I certainly wouldn't. Not even if I were an old woman. If those few things were all I had left of my
parents, then I would still keep them near me, not shut away in a horrible old attic like ours. I don't think I would ever view those things as clutter. Ever!"

Stephen stood up, his expression gloomy. "This speculation is getting us nowhere fast. All we have is a trunk that contains a few of John Morton’s items. We have absolutely no idea how they got into the trunk or who put them there. But meanwhile, the police are scouring Tasha’s attic and the outside of her house for fingerprints and footprints, and, as we speak, Tasha’s father is probably making plans to move the entire family back to Frankfort, Kentucky, thousands of miles away from here." He made a fist and pounded it into his other hand. "We're simply grinding our wheels here and coming up with nothing. We have to work fast. There's no time to waste."

"Work fast? At what?" I asked. "Believe me, Stephen, I'd work faster than I ever have in my life, if only somebody could tell me what it is I should be doing. Does anybody have any suggestions at all?"

While the Seth Thomas clock on the mantel ticked away precious time, the three of us sat there, silently thinking. Every so often one of us would open our mouths to speak, but nothing would come out. As for myself, I was totally stymied, my brain all cloudy and muddled.

"We have to see those possessions of his," Stephen said at length. "What's in the wallet, for instance? There might be a valuable clue there. The stub of a train ticket, maybe. Or the name of the woman he ran off with."

"But, Stephen," I said. "If there were a ticket stub inside, wouldn't he then have had the wallet on him when he left town? How could it be back in the attic if he'd taken it with him on the train to San Francisco?"

"Oh." Then he brightened. "Maybe someone mailed all of his things to Lydia after he died in San Francisco, years later."

"That's a possibility," I agreed, "but something tells me it's not right."
Miss Galloway turned to me. "Tasha, would you go get those things and bring them to me? Until we study those clues, all we can do is sit here and speculate about what may have been. Maybe I can help you figure this all out. After all, I'd hate to lose a new neighbor after such a short time. And surely," and here she gave a little laugh, "surely, three heads are better than two when trying to figure out a mystery of such magnitude?"

"I can try to get them," I said. "But how can I get them out of the house without Mom wanting to know what I'm doing?"

"I'll give you a garbage bag," Miss Jane said, standing up and walking toward her kitchen. "If you could, go up to the attic and put all of his things in the garbage bag, then just run back here."

"It will look mighty suspicious to my mother," I told her. "What am I supposed to tell her if she asks?"

Stephen assured me, "Your mother is so distracted by everything that's going on right now, she won't even notice that you're there."

Stephen's assessment turned out to be right. With Miss Galloway's garbage bag stuck in the back pocket of my jeans, I dashed up the street to my house and inside. The police cars were no longer parked in front of our house, and I didn't even bother calling out to Mom, for fear that she might ask questions I didn't particularly care to answer at that point. I ran up the stairs as quietly as I could, down the hallway, and lifted the latch of the attic door. No smell of lavender now, only the smell of decaying roses permeated my nostrils. "We're onto you, Cordelia," I said, through clenched teeth as I mounted the steps into the attic. "We've got to figure out what to make of these clues!"

I found the trunk in the corner, exactly as I'd left it, with the big boxes lying on the floor, just where I'd tossed them earlier. I leaned forward to open the trunk and found it would barely budge, as though someone at least as
strong as I was pushing down on the lid as I tried to lift it. I managed to raise it just a bit, but it slammed right back down. "Look!" I shouted into the air. "If you did in fact kill your husband, wouldn't you like a little peace and quiet after all these years? Heaven knows I would! I'd think you'd be bored silly, wandering around this house aimlessly after all these years, especially since you've hated this place from the moment you arrived! Why don't you haunt St. Louis?"

The lid opened easily, with barely any effort from me. I yanked the garbage bag out of my pocket and began stashing the contents of the trunk inside. I let the lid bang back down and, as I tied the garbage bag into a knot, the rocking chair beside me began squeaking as it rocked to and fro slowly. "A nice effect," I said. "But we're not moving from here. Not if I can help it."

I clattered back down the stairs, latching the attic door behind me, and was out of the house before Mom even knew I was there. Shortly afterward, out of breath, I stood in front of Miss Galloway and Stephen in her parlor, untying the loose knot. "Here's the hat," I said, carefully removing the black derby from the bag, "the walking stick, the watch, and the wallet. And that's it. All that was in there."

While they studied the items, I told them about the lid not opening and the rocking chair rocking by itself. Stephen mused, "You've come a long way in one week, Tasha. Remember how fast we ran from the attic when that chair moved all by itself? Now you're standing there talking to whatever or whoever it is." He grinned. "That's pretty impressive."

"My family's whole future is at stake," I insisted. "Maybe that's why I'm not afraid. I know this is a good newspaper job here for Dad, I've heard him say so. It's a real stepping stone for him, and up until last night, he's been really happy. I don't know that moving back to Frankfort would be such a good thing
for him or for any of us. If he wanted to move back there because he hated the job, that would be one thing. But he doesn't. Somehow going back to Frankfort under these conditions strikes me as going backward, and that's never a good thing. It's kind of like we're giving in to the ghost, and I simply refuse."

Stephen nodded, and I went on, "Besides, Stephen, I keep remembering what you told me in the school newspaper office that day."

He looked surprised. "What did I say? All I remember is that I had to keep you from chickening out of exploring the attic. I was afraid you were going to back down and refuse to go through with it."

"You reminded me that ghosts don't ever actually hurt anyone," I told him. "So I figure all I'm really dealing with is a cantankerous old lady with a nasty personality, who doesn't carry nearly so much weight dead as she did when she was alive. And I can deal with that."

Miss Galloway laughed. "Well, I think you're a very brave girl, and I'm so glad that you two are including me in your adventure." She picked up the glossy mahogany walking stick that had once belonged to John Morton.

"That's a mighty short walking stick," Stephen said. "How did it work?"

She tugged on the end of it, and it extended out more than a foot longer. "It telescopes. See?" She brandished it in the air in front of her. "Such memories of that man! What a character!"

Stephen reached out for the pocket watch. "This is a gem," he said, studying it carefully. "Real gold from the looks of it." He held it up for us to see. "Look, it's monogrammed too: JWM." The three initials were etched in a delicate script, with each of the letters overlapping the others. "No doubt, John W. Morton. I wonder what his middle name was." He squeezed the hinge on the front of the watch, and its top popped open. A little music box began playing.
Miss Galloway clapped her hands. "The Blue Danube Waltz! How charming!"

Stephen said, "There's a picture stuck in here inside the top, too. Lydia, maybe?" He held the watch out to her.

She took it from him and studied it carefully. "Yes, that's Lydia," she said softly. "From my memories of her, I'd say that she's around twelve years old or so."

I leaned over to look at the girl's face. The photograph had faded a little with time, but I could still see her long, spiraling curls, her anxious eyes staring straight ahead at the camera, and her mouth curved upwards in the hint of a smile. I found it difficult enough to imagine this sweet little girl as an old woman in a nursing home, let alone dead.

Stephen asked Miss Galloway, "Wouldn't the normal thing have been to have carried a picture of your wife inside your watch, too? Not just your daughter?"

She considered it. "Normally, yes. But since we knew the Mortons had anything but a happy marriage, I can't say that I find it very surprising that he didn't carry Cordelia's picture as well. I wouldn't imagine that he'd want any reminder of her."

"Even more proof of an unhappy marriage," I said.

Miss Galloway took the wallet and smoothed her hand over its surface. "This is very fine leather," she told us. "Very fine. Supple. European, I'd guess." She held it to her nose and inhaled deeply. "Beautiful."

"Is there anything inside?" I asked, scarcely able to contain my excitement.

"Oh, I think that discovery should be yours, Tasha." She held it out to me.
I opened it carefully. In the front, filled out in graceful script, was an identification card: John Washington Morton, 1313 Hawthorne Street, Prescott, Arizona. "His middle name was Washington," I announced, passing the card to Miss Jane. "And at least we know for certain that this was his wallet."

"What else?" Stephen breathed, crowding me and looking over my shoulder.

"Patience, patience." I pulled out some business cards, one from a haberdasher (Miss Galloway explained that a haberdasher was just a fancy name for a hat maker), one from a tailor, and one from a glove maker. "No clues here," I said, disappointed beyond belief. "No money, no nothing."

"All we know is that John Morton took his clothing seriously," said Stephen.

Miss Galloway reminded us, "And we already knew that!"

"So, where do we go from here?" I asked them. "We know absolutely nothing more about what happened to John Morton than we did before I discovered these in the attic!"

"I'm stumped," Stephen admitted, flopping down onto the floor beside me. "Miss Galloway, do you have any ideas? Anything at all?"

"Let me think, let me think. All right. I do admit, children, that your assumption is fairly astute. Why would John Morton take off for San Francisco without his wallet?"

"Maybe it was an old one, and he bought a new one before he left," Stephen suggested.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. This wallet is exceptionally well made. He wouldn't just leave it behind. Much too expensive. Hand-crafted, more than likely. And it's in fine condition. No. The hat and walking stick, maybe. Leaving behind the watch mystifies me even more, though. There is no
doubt in my mind that he worshiped Lydia. Even if he'd left the watch before going to San Francisco, he still would have removed that photograph and taken it with him."

"Unless he had another copy of the picture that he had already packed."

"Doubtful," she answered me. "My guess is that the photograph was one of a kind. Photographs were much rarer back then. It wasn't so cheap to have copies made, and you wouldn't have had hundreds of extras to distribute to all of your friends like you do now."

I chewed my fingernails, trying to keep my thoughts from galloping ahead faster than my brain could sift through them. "So, the big question here is just what exactly happened to John Morton? If you think I'm jumping to conclusions assuming that he was murdered, what else could there be? He left so quickly that he would leave his most precious personal items behind? I don't think so. Even if I were running away from home, I'd take my wallet and watch." I added, "The walking stick and hat I'd leave behind, but I'd still need money and I'd need to know what time it was."

"Where's the money?" Stephen asked, picking up the wallet again.

Miss Galloway and I looked at each other. "In another wallet," she suggested. "Perhaps he did have another one."

"Or," I said, "someone took all the money out of it."

She and Stephen now shifted their attention back to me, so I continued. "After Cordelia Morton murdered him, she removed all the cash. Well, why not?" I cried, looking from one face to the other. "No sense in leaving it in there. She would need the money, one way or the other."

"You're jumping to conclusions again," Stephen informed me.

"Then I quit," I said, exasperated. "I can't wrap my brain around this. My brain hurts."
Miss Galloway began thumping the floor again with her cane, a sure sign that her brain hadn't stopped working like mine had. "All right, then. Say John Morton was, in fact, murdered. How do we find out for sure?"

"We don't," Stephen said. "Not if Cordelia Morton got away with it. There wouldn't have been anything at all in the papers about it. If she murdered him, then she got off scot free and told everyone that he had deserted her and Lydia and had run off to San Francisco. End of story as we know it. End of story as she intended it to be known."

"If she murdered him," I said, "I don't want her to get away with it. Even if she is dead and can't be punished. I want the truth about her to be known, even generations later."

Miss Galloway's voice was soothing. "Tasha, dear, if she murdered him, then the very fact that she might be haunting your house might just be punishment enough. Think about it. Would you like spending eternity haunting a house? That's not my idea of any kind of peaceful after-life."

"I suppose you're right," I grumbled. "But I want some answers."

"Let's be patient," she said.

"I can't be patient! This whole mystery is tearing my family apart! I don't have time to be patient!" Pausing to catch my breath, I ducked my head. "I'm sorry, Miss Galloway. I didn't mean to shout at you. It's just that everything hinges on our being able to figure this mess out. I don't have several years to uncover the answers!"

"I know," she said. "And I should apologize to you. You're absolutely right. You don't have the luxury of time at your disposal. Not now."

Several minutes ticked past as the three of us thought of what to do next.

"Let's just say, for argument's sake," I began cautiously, "that Cordelia Morton did murder John. I'm not stating this as a fact, I'm just saying what if
she did."

"Go on," said Miss Galloway.

"Where is his body? What would she have done with it?"

Stephen's eyes met mine. "Obviously, she didn't call in an undertaker to have it carted off, not if she murdered him. If I had been Cordelia, I would have buried him myself in the dead of night. It would have to be dark, so that Lydia wouldn't have seen me. So that no neighbors could have seen me."

"Right. Where might that be?"

"In the basement," Miss Galloway suggested.

"We don't have one," I responded.

Stephen exclaimed, "In the back yard!"

I pointed my finger at him. "The back yard? Do you mean in the overgrown back yard that looks like a jungle? The big mess that no one can get through because of all the brambles and overgrown hedges?"

His eyes shone, and I jumped up excitedly. "That's the yard I'm talking about, all right!" he cried. "What a perfect place to hide a body!"

"Children, children," Miss Galloway cried, clapping her hands together to quieten us. "Grant, Tasha, your back yard may be the perfect place to hide a body. But what are you proposing to do? Dig up your entire back yard?"

That brought Stephen and me back to reality with a cold thud. "No way," I said, at length. "No way in the world. I can only imagine what kind of a reaction that would get from my parents. On top of everything else, all they need now is for their daughter to be digging up the entire back yard! Not only that, the whole process would take months!"

"I could do most of the heavy digging," Stephen offered.

"Thank you," I said, grateful to him, "but even that would take weeks."

Half-heartedly, I asked Miss Galloway, "Do you know any good psychics?"
"Not a one, I'm afraid. Psychics are completely out of my realm."

Shaking her head, she finally said, "I'm afraid you've stumped me. I can't think of a rational or logical way to approach this. Besides," she added, "we're not even certain that he was murdered. Thinking about this may be absolutely for naught."

I knew what she said made sense, perfect sense. But something deep down inside me told me that I was on the right track. Whatever the answer was, wherever the answer was, it had something to do with finding John Morton's body.

But where could it be?
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mom, Max, and I were waiting for Dad in the living room when he came home that evening from work. We listened as the car pulled into the driveway, then as he turned the ignition off. There was no cheerful bounding into the house tonight. None of the cheery "I'm home!" that we were accustomed to, nothing but the sound of Dad shuffling through the foyer. All he managed was a feeble "Hey" when he saw us, his shoulders hunched over and drooping. He looked ten years older than he had looked the same time yesterday afternoon.

Max, who never believed in beating around the bush, blurted, "Are we going to Frankfort, Dad?"

"I don't know." He threw his jacket onto the back of his recliner and unfastened his tie. "I haven't called Stan. I thought it could wait until we heard what the police reported." He looked at Mom, expectantly.

"Then you're going to have to keep waiting a while longer, I'm afraid, Jack," Mom told him. 'The police said they would have to get back to us."

Dad's shoulders sagged a little lower. Removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes, he said, "I suppose I should have expected that to be the case. They'll have to write up their reports, examine our fingerprints, compare them with what they found upstairs. Blah, blah, blah, ad nauseum. The entire process could take several weeks, as far as I know."

"They said they'd telephone as soon as they had something to tell us."

"Uh-huh."

Mom said, "Dinner's ready. Why don't you go take a shower and put on
some comfortable clothes, and then we'll eat." She was using the same perky
voice she used when I was sick, and she was trying to get me to eat something.

"I'm not hungry, Sarah," Dad replied. "I think I'll go upstairs to bed and
listen to the radio for awhile. I might eat later."

When he was out of earshot, Mom muttered, "Well, that's just great." To
Max and me, she said, "Come on, kids. I don't want all that food to go to waste.
Someone needs to eat it. And if we don't eat, we'll just get meaner and crosser.
So, let's go out to the kitchen and eat dinner, what do you say?"

The three of us ate in silence, which was a pity, because it was a very
good dinner of meat loaf and mashed potatoes, Dad's favorite. When we'd
finished eating, we washed and dried the dishes, still not saying anything.
After we were done, Max announced, "I'm going to go try to find some of the
guys and see if they want to get up a football game."

Mom yelled after him, "Don't be out too late!" but he had torn out of the
house before she finished speaking. She smiled wanly, her lips drawn tight, the
first time I'd seen her smile all evening. "At least Max is still happy. He seems
to be making some good friends here and at school."

With Max safely out of earshot, I said, "I'm really worried about Dad,
Mom. He's so depressed. He's going to make himself sick. And he looks just
terrible."

She sighed heavily and hung the damp dish towels back on the rack by
the sink. "I'm worried about him, too. He's utterly exhausted worrying about
all that's been happening in this house. He lay awake all last night. I'd nod off,
then when I'd wake up, I'd lean over and look at him, and he'd still be wide
awake and staring up at the ceiling. I couldn't get back to sleep for worrying
about him."

"He doesn't want to go back for Frankfort, does he?" I asked. "Not really."
"No. He's told me so many times that he felt like he'd done all that he could for that newspaper. My feeling is that if he decides to accept the position and move back, it would be like a dog returning with its tail between its legs. But he can't stay here, feeling the way he does."

"What would it take to make Dad want to stay here?"

She gave me a long, searching look. "I don't have the foggiest idea, Tasha. If the police tell us that no human being has been in the attic, then maybe he'd feel better. At least then he would know that no one at work had sabotaged him. Simply knowing that would make this job good again." She wiped her hands on her jeans. "But if the police come through with that verdict, then what are we supposed to think? What made the chandelier drop?"

I didn't have an answer that she would accept, so I made no reply.

Everyone in the family, except me, seemed to be finding solace in sleep that night. Max, exhausted from his after-dinner game of football, conked out on the couch a little past nine while watching television, and Dad carried him up to his bed. Dad and Mom went upstairs around nine, Dad carrying a cup of warm milk. By ten, all the lights in the house were out, except for mine.

I sat cross-legged on my bed, staring out the window, contemplating my future. Not that there was anything to contemplate, really. I was simply trying to imagine what returning to Frankfort would be like now.

We wouldn't be living in the same old neighborhood where I'd grown up, that was certain, not unless one of our previous neighbors had recently decided to move and had put their house on the market. Our old house had finally sold right before we left for Prescott. Moving into a new neighborhood would be quite an adjustment but easy enough, I thought.

Jenny and I would probably pick right up where we left off, no problems
there. As far as I could tell in her letters to me, she hadn't yet replaced me with another best friend. No adjustment there.

School work would be fine, too, since I'd found Prescott High School not too hard, not too easy, but just about what I'd been used to in Frankfort.

So, if we moved back, I could just erase the past four months of my life. Erase them as though they hadn't even existed.

I peered through the window at Stephen's house, where a light shone downstairs in his kitchen. Was Stephen seated at the table, doing his homework, drinking a soda? Had Mrs. Collier come downstairs for a late-night cup of herbal tea? Would it be chamomile, peppermint, or rosehips? Or were the two of them sitting there, talking about what kind of day they'd had?

Could I simply erase Stephen Collier?

No.

Impossible.

Picturing his head bent over his books as he studied at the table, his long dark hair falling around his face, I realized with a start that Stephen had replaced Jenny as my best friend. He had befriended me when no one else had seemed even vaguely interested in having a conversation with the new girl at school. He had introduced me to a new group of people—the newspaper staff—all of them potential new friends. He had watched over the house, and probably right now he was somewhere in his house, trying to figure out what to do to keep my family in Prescott and in this house. Would Jenny have done the same for me in such circumstances? I rather doubted it but couldn't be really sure, since nothing like this had ever sprung up in our relationship. I did recall, though, that once she had declined taking care of Tess when we'd gone to Florida for vacation because she thought looking after a dog would be too much trouble. Stephen, I knew, not only would have agreed to do it, he would have
offered before I'd even asked.

As I sat there, musing and staring out the window, stunned by this recent revelation of Stephen's importance in my life, I caught, out of the corner of my eye, a small glimmer in the overgrown garden in the back yard. It wasn't much of a glimmer, just barely enough to flicker as the wind blew and capture my attention. The moonlight reflecting on some trash, I thought, or perhaps an old soft drink can or a potato chip bag that had blown in from someone else's yard. I waited, watching, as the moon disappeared behind the clouds.

Whatever I had seen, it did not disappear when the moon did, still managing somehow to reflect through the darkness. Sliding my feet into my loafers, I opened my bedroom door as quietly as I could, listening to hear if anyone else in the house might be awake and hear me. Not a sound in the whole house, except for the ticking of the grandfather clock. I crept down the stairs and tiptoed through to the kitchen, carefully opening the back door and pulling it shut behind me, being careful to make no noise that might rouse my parents. They needed their sleep, and I sent up a fervent prayer that Dad's warm milk had helped him.

It's funny how everything looks so sinister in the dark of night, even the most familiar of objects, like the garbage toter. Telling myself I was just silly for being afraid, that nothing could be in the yard now that wasn't there in broad daylight, I ventured into the overgrown brambles, pushing them out of the way as I forged onward, trying to find the mysterious gleaming object I'd seen from my bedroom window.

The deeper into the overgrowth, the stronger grew the scent of the lavender. I reasoned that there must be several lavender plants growing there, although I knew that lavender plants in the yard would not waft their scent back to the house, no matter how many plants I might find. The brambles tore
at my arms and legs, but I plodded onward, too curious now to turn back and return to my bedroom. What could have been glinting?

Pushing a particularly large branch out of my way and standing in a small clearing in the thicket, I saw in front of me, bathed in moonbeams, a sundial, caked in verdigris. It seemed like a little oasis, totally obstructed from outside view by trees and hedges and the overgrowth, resembling a garden you would be more likely to encounter in England than in Arizona. I imagined rose bushes surrounding it, maybe a lilac bush or two, and some honeysuckle.

As I stood, landscaping in my mind, almost wishing I had a pair of shears so I could start whacking away at the weeds and hedges, I heard twigs snapping behind me. Quickly, I ducked behind a nearby tree, my heart pounding in my chest. Had someone followed me out here? Could it be the ghost of Cordelia Morton? Could a ghost make a twig snap? I held my breath, waiting, watching.

A cloud obscured the moon, and the beam of a flashlight swept around me, illuminating the sundial. Then I heard a familiar male voice: "Tasha?"

"Stephen?"

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, shining the light in my face.

"I could ask you the same thing!" I motioned for him to get the light out of my face. "You scared the life out of me!"

"I'm sorry. What are you doing?" he repeated.

I said, "I saw something shining out here from my bedroom window. How long have you been out here?"

"I just got here. I saw you leave your house, so I thought I'd come out here and investigate with you. What is it we're investigating, exactly?"

I said, "Something was glinting out here."

"Glinting?" he repeated.
"Glinting. No other word. Glinting like when the sun hits a soda can."

"We're investigating a glinting?" He sounded dubious.

"When the moon disappears behind clouds, and something continues to glint, I investigate. I'm funny that way."

"Apparently you are. I thought maybe you'd followed the ghost out here."

The moon emerged again from behind the clouds, bathing us in a peculiar greenish light, reminding me of an illustration of a fairy garden in a children's book I'd once read when I was much younger. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Stephen asked, his voice low.

I nodded. "Surreal. Like we're standing outside of time."

He pointed to the sundial. "Do you think Claudia or Lydia put the sundial out here?"

"Lydia. From what we know of Claudia, somehow she doesn't seem like the sundial type. Or that she could be bothered in creating such a beautiful little garden. I doubt it would interest her."

"I'll bet you're right. What does it say?"

"What does what say?" I asked.

"The sundial. Sundials always have some old verse of poetry on them that make you feel guilty for taking the time to look at them." I followed him over to the sundial, and he shone his flashlight onto its face. "Yes, I was right, Tasha. Look right here--" he traced the words with his finger and read aloud, "Snatch thy present hour, fear thy last."

"How gruesome!"

"In other words, 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.' I read that on a sundial once. Depressing, isn't it?"

"Very." I shuddered. "More like 'Live now because you're going to die
I looked at Stephen, and he looked back at me. "You want to dig right here, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

Turning, he walked a few yards back into the brambles I had just struggled through and returned with a shovel in each hand. "Here," he said, thrusting one at me. "I brought one for you, too."

"How did you know?"

"How could I not know?" he asked, grinning. "I figured if you were out here at night, then you'd had an idea, and it was time to dig."

"I had no idea about digging until you read the sundial," I told him. "If you hadn't come out, I would have just thought this was charming and gone back inside and gone to bed."

"We make a great team," was all he said.

What, I wondered, did that mean?

I didn't have time to think about it, though, as we began to dig.

We scooped out pile after pile of dirt. After what seemed like forever, I asked, "Do you know what time it is?"

Stephen stopped digging and shone his flashlight on his watch. "Ten past midnight." He groaned and straightened up. "I'm worn out. How about you?"

"I hate this." Wearily, I threw down the shovel. "We've been digging all this time, and it looks like we haven't even made a dent. If Cordelia buried John out here, how deep would she have to dig?"

"At least six feet would be my guess."

This time, I groaned. "I'll bet we're not even down two feet, let alone six."
It will be dawn before we’ve finished."

"Come on. We’re wasting valuable time." He picked up his shovel again.

"How could an old woman dig so deep when we’re having such a hard time?" I asked him, as he scooped up another shovel of dirt and pitched it over his shoulder.

He replied, "She was afraid. Fear gives you a lot of strength you wouldn’t normally have. And the ground might have been softer, too, especially if she’d been digging after the monsoons."

"Monsoons?" I asked. "What are those?"

"Big rains that come the end of June or July. You must have moved here after they came."

"I guess so. I don’t remember any big rains."

"You’d remember them, all right. The monsoons are monstrous storms with fierce lightning."

I picked up my shovel again and went back to work, telling him as I did, "We don’t have monsoons in Kentucky."

Exactly one hour later, as my eyelids drooped and I was just about ready to tell Stephen to forget it, that we were only wasting our time, he called out to me, "Tasha, my shovel just hit something."

But both of us froze as a voice behind us said, "What are you two up to?"

Stephen and I turned around slowly and looked up, shielding our eyes from the blinding light that shone in our faces.

It was my father.

Maybe it was because Dad hadn’t had much sleep in the past two days, or maybe it was because it was almost 1:30 in the morning, but Stephen and I found him strangely receptive to the idea of a ghost, especially when we
detailed exactly for him the events of the past several weeks. "And all of this has been going on, right under my nose?" Dad asked, when we’d finished.

"Yes."

He laughed. "You know, Tasha, I read the article that you and Stephen wrote for the school paper, but I just assumed you’d made it all up, that it was fiction. I never dreamed it all actually happened in our house."

"We didn’t make up any of it, sir," Stephen said, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. "It all really happened."

"I told Tasha that I thought it a fine article, but I don’t believe I told you, Stephen," said Dad.

"Thank you."

Dad peered down into the hole. "And where are we now? Have you found anything yet?"

Stephen replied, "My shovel had just hit something hard when you--"

"--interrupted you, yes," Dad finished. He took the shovel out of my hands, then said, "Let’s see what we’ve got, shall we?"

He and Stephen went hard at it, while I looked on, anxiously. Several minutes later, Stephen leaned into the hole and, thrusting his arm in deep, gave it several tugs. "I’ve got it," he panted. "Ugh. It feels weird."

"Let’s see it!"

He gave one final yank and pulled out a skull.

"John Morton!" I cried, clapping my hands.

"Well, we don’t know for sure," Stephen said, "but it sure looks like a human skull to me." He handed it to my father.

"I’ll be," Dad breathed, examining the skull in the moonlight. "John Morton or not, this definitely belongs to somebody. Or, should I say, belonged to somebody. I wonder how long it’s been buried back here in the yard."
"Over seventy years would be my guess," I told him. "At least it's been that long since John Morton disappeared."

Dad looked over at me, a huge smile on his face, his eyes shining. "You know what this means, don't you, Tasha?"

"What?"

"It means we've got a story here."
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the time Dad and Stephen had unearthed all the bones and placed them in a box on our back porch, it was well past three o'clock in the morning. Dad and I watched Stephen shuffle through the backyard and into his back door, then Dad turned to me. "I suppose I owe you an apology for not believing you and Stephen. And Max, too, come to think of it."

I stopped him, holding up my hand. "Dad, it's almost dawn. There's no need to apologize. You couldn't help it."

"No, you're right. I couldn't."

He closed the back door and locked it behind us. "I'll see you in the morning," he said, kissing me on the forehead. "You know, Tasha, I had no idea you were such an adventurer."

I yawned. "I don't feel like one."

"Get to bed." He sat down at the table, and I turned to look at him.

"Aren't you going to go to bed, Dad?"

"I need to think."

I pulled myself up the stairs, practically crawling into my bedroom, and fell flat onto my bed, all dissolving in blackness.

The next day being Saturday, I could sleep in, which I did, not surfacing until almost eleven. I found Dad downstairs in the den, in his pajamas and robe, reading the newspaper and sipping coffee.

Dad looked over his newspaper at me. "Good morning, sleepy head."
How did you sleep?"

Stretching, I replied, "Not so good. I kept dreaming about murder and skeletons in the yard. I can't imagine why."

"Mmm. I slept like a top and didn't have any dreams at all." He rubbed his neck, "Although I am sore this morning. Nothing like hard physical labor to remind me how soft and out of shape I've gotten."

"Where's Mom?" I asked. "And Max?"

"Your mother has gone to the mall. Some store is having a sale, but aren't they always? Max is out playing. By the way, I told your mother all about your ghost over breakfast this morning. Max corroborated bits of it. I had no idea he knew so much of what was going on in this house."

"Believe me, Dad, that kid knows everything that's going on, natural and supernatural. How did Mom react when you told her?"

"Oh, much as you'd expect," he laughed. "Much like I did until you and Stephen managed to persuade me last night."

"Max and I tried telling you earlier, but you wouldn't listen. And neither would Mom."

"I know, and I am sorry. But you have to admit that the story is more than a little unbelievable."

It cheered me immensely to hear Dad sounding so much better, just like his old self. He trailed behind me into the kitchen, where I toasted a cinnamon bagel, spread it thickly with peanut butter, and, pouring a glass of milk, sat down to a quick breakfast. "Any word from the police?" I asked, in between bites.

"Actually, yes. I telephoned before breakfast and was lucky enough to find Officer Jenson on duty. I told him about the bones we'd uncovered in the back yard, and he's sending someone over to pick them up this afternoon. But
about our attic and the chandelier, he said that, although they were still studying all of the evidence, they hadn't found anything that looked suspicious or out of the ordinary. And all of the fingerprints they found when they dusted matched ours exactly."

"Well, that should make you feel a little better," I said. "It doesn't look like anyone from the newspaper is trying to sabotage you for taking their job." I tried to keep the apprehension from my voice, when I asked, "Are you still thinking about taking the job in Frankfort that Stan offered you?"

He neatly evaded the question by asking another one. "How would you feel about moving back, Tasha?"

I swallowed the last bit of bagel, then wiped my hands on a napkin. "If you'd asked me last month, I would already have been packed and ready to go, and I'd be waiting for you on the front porch. Now . . . well, I'm not so sure."

"About what?"

"Don't they say you can't go home again?"

He smiled. "They do say that, yes. Whoever 'they' are. Why do you think we can't go home again?"

I shrugged. "It just seems to me that we've all come such a long way in the past month or so. Mom's got her studio, and she's back into her art, and she and Stephen's mother seem to have really hit it off. Max has made new friends and really likes it here. And, up until you started wondering if they were out to get you at work, you really loved your new job here, too, and all of your staff."

He reached out and took my face in both of his hands. "But what about you?"

"Me? I'm getting used to it."

"Does this Stephen have anything to do with that?"

I nodded. "He's been very nice."
"Speaking of Stephen," he said, looking past me, "even as we speak, he's walking through our yard and heading for our back door." In his best clipped English accent, he asked, "Are you at home, Miss Manning?"

With a curt nod, I replied, "Show him in, Jeeves."

"Yes, miss." Dad opened the back door for Stephen before he even had a chance to knock.


"We aim to please. You look well rested, considering all you went through last night," Dad told him.

"You, too, sir. I was out like a light. I thought you might all still be in bed, but I figured I should come over and see what was going on. Find any more bones? Any more bodies?"

"Not lately."

I motioned for Stephen to join me at the table. "Bagel?" I asked. "Juice? Milk?"

"No, thanks. I ate about an hour ago. I was wondering, Tasha, if you'd like to walk downtown and just hang out. Maybe get a hamburger at Kendall's. Go to the park. See my mom's shop. Any of that stuff. It's too pretty a day to stay inside, and I'm not in the mood for ghosts. I thought a change of scenery might clear our heads and give us a new perspective."

"Any or all of those things sound pretty good to me." I took my plate and glass over to the sink and ran some water in them, then said, "Let me get my purse."

I ran upstairs, leaving Dad and Stephen to talk about ghosts and bones. Which just goes to show you that you never know what a difference one day can make.
At Kendall’s, we managed to snag a table right in the window that looked out onto the courthouse square. Over hamburgers and chocolate milk shakes, Stephen, raising his voice to be heard over the 1960s music, said, "I tried to find out from your dad if he planned to move you back to Frankfort, but he didn't say anything definite. I should have just come right on out and asked him point blank, but I tried to be subtle. It didn't work."

"I don't think he knows for certain yet, but he asked me this morning how I felt about the move," I said, stealing one of his french fries.

"What did you tell him?"

"That I thought it would be a mistake. Somehow, I think he feels better about everything since he's finally realized there's a ghost involved."

Something about this comment Stephen found funny. "What?" I asked. He chuckled again, then said, "I don't know. Finding a ghost reassuring just strikes me as funny."

"It beats thinking there’s a human being out to get you."

"Yeah."

We finished eating and dumped our trays in the trashcan, then wandered over to the courthouse square and sat down in the grass beneath a tree near the statue of Bucky O’Neill, the late October sun beating down upon us. Some small children were throwing a frisbee to their dog, and on one of the picnic tables a man with long hair and beard played his guitar, while his girl friend looked on. "Did you know that the brother of the sculptor who made this statue of Bucky O’Neill carved Mount Rushmore?" Stephen asked me.

"Really?" I closed my eyes and turned my face up to the warm sunshine. The food and now the warmth and the guitar music were making me incredibly sleepy.

"Yes. Just one of those little Prescott facts that you need to know if you're
I asked him, "Did you know that Daniel Boone is buried in Frankfort?"

"I knew that, actually."

I opened one eye and looked at him. "You did? How?"

"I've read about Daniel Boone." He bit off a piece of grass and chewed it.

"Believe it or not, I know a little bit about Kentucky. And I know a lot about Daniel Boone. He's one of my heroes."

"His grave sits high on a bluff and overlooks the Kentucky River."

"Have you ever seen his grave?" he asked.

"Sure have. My scout troop went up there once. Tell me what else you know about Kentucky."

"Let me think. Okay. Louisville Slugger baseball bats are made there. And I've seen the Kentucky Derby on television when everyone sings My Old Kentucky Home."

I told him, "If you're a true Kentuckian, you cry when you hear that song."

"Really?"

"I've known it to happen."

Stephen sighed. "If we sit here much longer, I'm going to fall sound asleep and won't be able to get home."

"Let's do something."

"How about going to see Mom at her shop?"

"Okay."

Stephen helped me up, and I brushed the grass off of my jeans.

A voice called out to us, "Stephen! Tasha!" We turned to see Helen Bittman jogging toward us. "Hey, you guys!" she greeted us. "Where are you
two going?"

"Nowhere in particular. We're just hanging out and looking at all the people," Stephen told her. "What brings you to town?"

"Mom and I are doing some shopping. I'm so glad that I saw you two. My mom has finally agreed that I can have a Halloween party next Friday night, so consider this your official invitation. You have to wear a costume, though, or you can't come." She frowned and continued, "I had a Halloween party last year, but nobody dressed up except me, and I felt like a total idiot. So the rule this year is no costume, no admittance."

"And you really want to be admitted to Helen's parties," Stephen explained to me, "because her mother is a caterer and the very best cook in Prescott. She makes the best food you've ever tasted, especially her shrimp rolls."

Helen laughed. "It's true, if I do say so myself. Do you think you'll be able to make it?"

Stephen looked down at me, his eyes questioning. "I would absolutely love to come," I said. "Provided I'm still living here, of course."

"What do you mean?" Helen asked, frowning.

"My parents are thinking about moving back to Frankfort."

"Oh, no! That's impossible!" she cried. "You have to stay here. The school paper needs you. I need you. Just having you on the staff has civilized all the boys. And your story on the ghost had the whole school talking! I'll call your father as soon as I get home! I'll tell him you simply cannot leave Prescott." She sounded as though she meant it, too. "There's my mom. I've got to go. I plan to see both of you next Friday!" She pointed to me. "And you especially!"

"If you're still here, what should we go as for Helen's party?" Stephen
asked. "John and Cordelia Morton?"

"No one would know who we are," I protested, laughing and giving him a shove. "I know! I'll go as Bucky O'Neill, and you can go as that cowboy with the horse standing on his back!"

"Too uncomfortable," Stephen said. "Nothing like having a horse on your back while you're trying to have a good time at a party."

"We can snoop around in some of the trunks up in the attic. Maybe we'll find something we can use for costumes."

A few doors down from Matt's Saloon, an old bar complete with swinging doors, stood a tiny shop called Silver Dreams. "This is it," Stephen said, holding the door open for me. Silver jewelry of all shapes and sizes was displayed behind glass counters—earrings, bracelets, brooches, necklaces, belt buckles—and the store smelled like patchouli incense. "How nice!" she exclaimed, looking up from her desk in the back when we entered. "You're the friendliest faces I've seen all day! The best looking, too!"

"Bad day?" I asked her.

She made a face. "My least favorite customer came in this morning, but I suppose I shouldn't really complain. She treats me like hired help, but, seeing as how she always buys several hundred dollars worth of my jewelry, I can tolerate her obnoxious personality."

I immediately thought of Cordelia Morton and wondered why some people had to make themselves feel better by making other people feel worse. "There have probably always been people like that around," I said. "For centuries."

"You're right. Some days it bothers me more than others, and this morning I dreaded the sight of her. I wanted to duck behind the counter. The old witch. She really is detestable."
Stephen and I laughed, then she said, "Stephen told me all about your
discovery last night. Or should I say this morning?"

"More like this morning. It was late."

"Quite a find. In honor of that, Tasha, I'm making you a piece of jewelry.
It's not ready yet," she added, mysteriously.

"Can't you give me a hint?"

"No. You'll just have to wait."

"Whatever it is," Stephen assured me, "you'll like it. Mom's never made
anything that isn't beautiful."

"Ha! Tell that to some of my customers."

"They just don't have any taste," I said.

"No, they don't. What are you two going to do today?"

"Nothing," Stephen told her. "It's too pretty to stay inside and do
homework."

"And too pretty to dig around for bones," I added.

We waved goodbye, then set off down the street.

By the time we arrived back at my house, the late afternoon sun cast
angular shadows onto the sidewalk. "Do you want to come up to the attic and
look for costumes?" I asked Stephen.

"Sure."

I stopped by my room to pick up the bag of John Morton's possessions.
"I want to put these back where they belong," I told him. "It gives me kind of a
creepy feeling to have them in my room, especially now that I know he was
murdered."

"We don't really know that he was murdered, Tasha," he reminded me,
holding the attic door open. "All we know is that there were bones out there.
We don't even know that they were his bones."

"All I can say," I said, switching on the attic light, "is that I hope the police can give us some kind of clue about how old the bones are. That would be a big help. There's probably not any way we can prove they're his bones. Did they have dental records back then?"

Stephen shrugged. "I don't know. They have those machines that can date bones."

"Not in a small town like this one, they don't. And that would probably be too expensive anyway."

"Where should we begin looking for costumes?" he asked.

"I've only opened two of the trunks up here. That one over by the window is only full of old black dresses, all of them mildewed, so that won't be any good." I shuddered. "Black dresses. Ugh. Probably the mourning clothes Lydia wore when her mother finally died."

"I didn't want to wear a black dress anyway. I'd pictured myself in something more manly."

"Well, let me put these things of John Morton's back where they belong, then we can start looking. It would be nice if we could find some old cowboy hats or some spurs or something."

I walked over to the trunk beneath the eaves, and Stephen lifted the lid for me. I placed the derby, the wallet, the walking stick, and the watch carefully inside, just as I'd found them. Stephen examined the trunk. "Boy, this trunk is air tight," he said. "No wonder everything remained in such good condition."

I left him there, wondering where to begin looking for costumes. Then he said, "There's something funny about this trunk, Tasha. Come here."

I trotted back to him. "What is it?" I asked, crouching down to see.

"Look." He put his left hand on the floor. "The bottom of the trunk on
the outside is here." Then he took his right hand and put it inside the trunk. "But the bottom of the inside is here." His right hand was about five inches higher than his left. "See?"

"Is that unusual?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'd say so. Why aren't they even?" He started groping around the inside of the trunk with both hands.

"What are you looking for?"

"I think there's a false bottom in this trunk," he told me. "If not, the difference in heights doesn't make any sense."

My pulse quickened. "Just rip it out!" I cried.

"No, no. It's coming. Hang on a minute." Finally, he said, "Ahh, just as I thought. Look!" He pulled out a long piece of flannel-covered board.

"Is there anything else in there?"

"I don't know. I can't see very well . . . and . . . wait a minute." He held up an envelope. "Just this."

"Open it, open it!"

"Hold your horses." He removed the paper from within the envelope. The envelope was marked "Cordelia" in black ink, script.

"What does the letter say?" I breathed.

Squinting in the dim light, Stephen read:

"Cordelia--

By the time you get home, I will be dead. You will find me in the attic. No mess, never fear, for I shall use a rope. You may well wonder what has brought me to this untimely end. For some months now, I have been removing money from different accounts in the bank into our account. That by itself is not what I am so ashamed of. But I have compounded my sin by arranging it so that one of my co-workers will be blamed for it. It is too late to undo what I
have done. Within a few short months, he will be accused of the crime I have committed, I have no doubt. I see no way out for him and cannot live with what the outcome surely must be. To watch him suffer for my folly would prove more than I could bear.

"I have no regrets leaving you, but I do regret leaving my darling Lydia. Tell her what you like. All I ask is that you shield her from the truth.

--John"

I simply sat there, while Stephen refolded the letter and put it back into its envelope. "So Cordelia didn't murder her husband at all," Stephen said. "He killed himself."

"It can't be true," I said. "It doesn't make any sense. If John killed himself, if Cordelia wasn't guilty of murder, why wouldn't she simply call the police? She would have nothing to lose. If her dead husband was hanging in the attic when she returned home, they couldn't very well accuse her of murdering him."

"I don't know."

"Why would she bury him in the back yard? Why did the whole town think that he had run away to San Francisco with a young woman?"

Stephen repeated, "I don't know. Funny, isn't it, but wouldn't you think a suicide letter would clear the whole thing up instead of making it even harder to understand?"

"Yes, I would."

"What do we do now?"

I had only one suggestion: "Let's take the letter to Miss Galloway. Maybe she knows more than she's been telling us."
"I don't mind telling you," Miss Galloway said, "that this news comes as quite a shock. Yes, indeed. Quite a shock!" She put her fingers to her lips as she reread John Morton's suicide note, then shook her head from side to side in disbelief. "All those years we thought John Morton had deserted Cordelia and Lydia and run off to San Francisco with a floozy, and all the while the poor man had embezzled from the bank and then killed himself! My, my, my!"

The three of us were sitting in Miss Galloway's kitchen, sunny and cozy. The walls were covered with different chili recipes, all of them in bright yellow frames, all of them her own recipes that she'd had published in various magazines throughout the years: Five-Alarm Chili, Yankee Chili, Meatless Chili, Arizona Chili. I hadn't known chili came in so many forms. Stephen had already told me that if Miss Galloway really liked you, you would soon get the opportunity to sample all of her many variations, since she liked making chili almost as much as she liked delivering it around the neighborhood to her favorites. Stephen had also warned me that even her mildest chili would clear your sinuses after the first bite. "It's always as hot as a pistol," he said. With a sidelong glance at me, he'd added, "I'm not sure that a Southern girl can handle it. Make sure you have plenty of water on hand."

I had assured him that Kentucky wasn't all that Southern.

Miss Galloway roused herself now from her reverie, placing the tragic note back in its envelope and setting it gingerly on the table in front of her. "And you say you found his remains in your yard last night?"
"We found the remains of somebody," I told her. "A human skull and all the rest that goes along with it. Dad turned the bones over to the police this morning. They told him that they'll start in on their own investigation now."

"Or not," Stephen cut in. "Do you think they are really going to bother investigating a crime that happened so long ago?"

She nodded. "Why, I'd think they would have to make some attempt to identify the bones. You can't just have skeletons turning up in your back yard, with no one knowing who they belonged to."

"What I still don't understand," I told them, all my frustration about the case welling up inside me, "is why would Cordelia have buried John's body in the back yard? What was she thinking of? Wouldn't it have made more sense to call the authorities? If he had been my husband, and I'd found the note, I would have called the police before I even checked the attic to see if he'd truly committed suicide! I wouldn't have wanted to have found him hanging up there all by myself!" I grimaced, the mental image of John Morton's body dangling from our ceiling all too vivid before my eyes.

"Ah, Tasha," said Miss Galloway, "but you didn't know Cordelia Morton! Picture this, if you will." Stephen and I leaned forward expectantly. "You are the haughtiest, proudest woman in town. You rule society . . . or think that you do. Your husband is the president of the most prestigious bank in town. Your sole pleasure in life, other than making everyone else in town feel subservient and inferior to you and yours, is in planning your only daughter's future."

"And that would be Lydia," Stephen broke in.

"Yes, Lydia. Lovely Lydia, who at sixteen is a little shy, a little backward, mainly because her father treats her like a small child and lavishes her with expensive and wonderful gifts, anything she could possibly desire. But that's beside the point, although it does help explain why he embezzled. You have
this lovely daughter, Lydia. All of your dreams are wrapped up in her. You want nothing else for her but a good marriage."

I interrupted, "A good marriage? One that was happy and lasted until both of you died?"

"Well, preferably one that lasted. Only because the scandal brought about by divorce would be socially unacceptable. And it didn't matter one whit if it were a particularly happy marriage or not. No, what I mean by a good marriage," she went on, "is one with an acceptable boy from a proper family. In the Mortons' case, they probably would have envisioned young Lydia marrying another banker's son, one who'd been back East to college, preferably Yale or Princeton."

Stephen held up his hand to get her attention. "What if she didn't fall in love with someone from a proper family? What if she fell in love with the town bum and wanted to marry him instead?"

Miss Galloway merely chuckled. "Falling in love would have had absolutely nothing to do with it, Stephen. I'm sure that you two young people can't begin to imagine what it was like back in those days, but Lydia would be expected to marry whoever her parents picked out for her, provided he had the right credentials. And if she had fallen in love with the town bum, as you say, then too bad for her. Not acceptable. No match. She would have to get over him and marry the man they had chosen for her. You need to understand that Lydia would have had no say in the matter."

"Well, that's lousy," I commented. "Times must have been awful back then! No child support. No marrying for love."

"We didn't know times were awful at the time," she said, with a brief nod of her head, "and in certain ways they were better. None of this hurrying to and fro and being too busy working to spend time with your family. Life was more
leisurely back then. There are good and bad aspects to every age, Tasha. But that's neither here nor there. Let's get back to the way it was for Cordelia Morton: you've worked hard to maintain your place in society, with all of your hopes for this girl's future pegged on whether or not you keep that place in society."

I began to see where she was leading with her story, and I said, "So, in other words, it would have been more socially acceptable for Lydia to have had a father who deserted the family than it would have been to have had a father who embezzled from his bank and then committed suicide. If everyone believed that John Morton had deserted his family and fled to San Francisco, then Lydia would still be considered highly marriageable. So that might be the reason that Cordelia kept her husband's suicide a secret, instead of letting the truth be known. Is that right?"

"Exactly!" She patted my hand, pleased that I understood.

Stephen didn't accept this notion at all. "How can it be worth covering up the truth like that? It's living a lie!"

"Well, of course it is," Miss Galloway acknowledged, "and they did live that lie for years and years. Stephen, dear, I'm not saying Cordelia did the right thing. Not at all. I would never condone such a thing. All I'm saying is I can see why Cordelia handled his suicide the way she did, and why she covered it up. She had worked much too hard to have all of her plans for Lydia go down the drain, simply because her feckless husband had taken the bank's money, then killed himself."

Stephen shrugged his shoulders but said nothing.

Pressing my fingers to my forehead, concentrating as hard as I could, I said, "Then this is the way it must have happened. Tell me if you agree, okay?" The two of them nodded. "Cordelia comes home from shopping one day or
from having tea with a friend and finds the suicide note. After a few minutes of panic, she probably goes upstairs to the attic to see if he has told her the truth in his letter and isn't just playing some horrible trick on her. Alas, it was no joke. He's hanging there in the attic, the rope thrown over one of those big beams in the ceiling. Then, she--" I looked up at Stephen. "Then what does she do? You're the one who's going to be the novelist. What does Cordelia do next?"

"I've got it!" Stephen took over for me, his dark eyes eager. "Then she rants and raves, storming through the house, crazy with rage, shaking her fist at heaven and cursing her dead husband."

I rolled my eyes. "Kind of heavy on the melodrama, Stephen, but where's Lydia?" I asked. "Wouldn't Lydia wonder what's happened to make her mother carry on so?"

"Lydia is out. Visiting a friend. Still at school. Pick one. Okay?"

"Yes. She's still at school. Continue."

"Okay. Cordelia is crazy with rage. What should she do? Call the police? No, no, no! The scandal! Lydia's future! What to do? Who can she turn to? Absolutely no one, not even her sister in St. Louis. The burden of John's suicide is all on her, and she can't let another living soul know what her husband has done. Then she hatches a plan. It has to work. It's got to. Lydia comes home from wherever it is that she's been all day and asks where her father is. Cordelia replies that she has no idea, she hasn't seen him all day. He must still be at the bank, working late. Already, you see, she's come up with the desertion scheme. So, Lydia goes off to bed that night, innocently thinking that her father is working late at the bank and that she will see him in the morning at breakfast."

He paused for breath, took a quick gulp of lemonade, then jumped straight back into his story, while Miss Galloway and I sat spell-bound, hanging
on his every word. "So, very late that night, after Cordelia has made certain that Lydia is sound asleep, she checks all of the neighbor's houses to see if anyone living near her house is awake. As luck would have it, no one's lights are on, and everyone has gone to bed. Perfect, for no one can see what she is about to do. She tiptoes out the back door and into the garden and starts to dig. She digs like a mad woman, because, in fact, she is. She digs a hole deep enough to hide John's body. Then she goes back into her house, sneaks up the stairs, pausing long enough to make sure that Lydia is still sleeping, and she goes up to the attic, cuts John down from where he's hanging, and takes his body down the stairs . . . ."

"Hold it, hold it!" I cried, shaking my head. "No way. I'm with you up to a point, then your story just doesn't hold water. How could this middle-aged woman get her husband down the stairs without waking Lydia? He's heavy. He's dead. He's dead weight, Stephen. Literally."

"She flings him over her shoulder, just like a fireman," Stephen suggested. I looked at Miss Galloway. "Possible?"

She replied, "She was a sturdy, well-made woman. I think she would have been physically capable of it."

"And," Stephen said, considering it, "she had dropped a little sleeping pill into Lydia's warm milk that night, so that Lydia, who isn't accustomed to taking drugs to help her fall asleep, is out like a light. Not a dangerous narcotic, mind you, because she had no intention of harming Lydia, just a little something to make Lydia sleep soundly, to ensure that she wouldn't wake up in the middle of the night."

"Ooh, I like that," I told him with a huge grin. "That way, Cordelia could drag John's body down from the attic and down the main stairs—thud, thud, thud—and Lydia never hears anything and never stirs an inch! Lydia sleeps like
a baby throughout the whole thing!"

"Either way," he said. "She carries his body over her shoulder like a fireman, or she drugs her daughter. Which do you like better?"

"The sleeping pill version." I added, "It sounds sneaky, just like something Cordelia would have thought of."

"Okay. So, Lydia not being a problem for her, Cordelia drags her dead husband's body down the stairs, through the kitchen, out into the back yard, and on through to the garden, where she heaves him into the hole she has dug, then she covers it all back up with dirt." He sat back in his chair, his chest puffed out, proud of himself. "How's that?"

"I love it," I said. "It works for me."

Miss Galloway agreed. "I think you've done an admirable job piecing it together, Stephen. I felt like I was there! I could see it all."

"Thank you."

"But then what happens the following day?" she asked him. "Lydia comes downstairs for breakfast the next morning, expecting to see her father at the table, and he isn't there."

I took over the story, letting Stephen's imagination rest. "By then, Cordelia is ready with the story she will tell not only Lydia, but the entire town of Prescott. She tells Lydia that her father never returned the night before. She acts only mildly distressed, but says that perhaps he worked so late he just decided to sleep in his office at the bank. Well, Lydia doesn't buy that and insists that her mother call the bank. Cordelia calls the bank that very minute and is told that her husband is not in his office. By now, Lydia is close to hysterics, but Cordelia soothes her and tells her to go on to school, that there's a perfectly reasonable explanation. Lydia doesn't want to go to school, but she must, so off she goes. Then, that afternoon when she returns home from school,
Cordelia tells Lydia that she has received a telephone call from John and that he is in Albuquerque—"

"--or Las Vegas or Reno or Bakersfield," Stephen added.

"Yes. Any town other than Prescott, Arizona. Cordelia tells Lydia that her father has deserted them and has moved away. Lydia, being not particularly bright and having no reason not to trust her mother, accepts her story immediately and is heart-broken. Soon, Prescott being such a small town, before long everybody knows what has happened, and it's accepted as fact. So, the police don't bother to investigate. Nobody has found a body. No one even suspects anything other than the story Cordelia has made up. Everybody believes it happened just as Cordelia said because she is so unlikable and difficult to get along with that no one can blame John Morton for having run off to another city. Some people probably cheered him for doing it and wondered why had hadn't run off and left her a long time ago . . . ."

"I wonder if anyone was ever arrested for the embezzling," Stephen mused.

"Yes," answered Miss Galloway.

Stephen and I looked at her in astonishment. "What do you remember about it?" he asked.

"Anyone my age could tell you about it. It made very big headlines indeed. There was a huge trial involving a man named William O'Hara, who went to prison for embezzling from the bank where he worked. The trial dragged on for days and days, and we would read about it in the newspaper every morning. O'Hara maintained his innocence throughout the length of the trial, but it didn't make any difference to the jury. They found him guilty, and they sent him to prison for five years. It absolutely ruined him and his family."

"So John Morton told the truth about that, too," I breathed. "He had
pinned it all on someone else."

"Apparently so. William O'Hara's family left town shortly afterward, and I swear I haven't thought of him—or them—again until this very minute. That poor man and his poor family."

"But, wouldn't somebody have put two and two together?" I asked.

"Here John Morton leaves town, then a short while later William O'Hara is arrested for embezzling, all the while crying out that he's innocent. Wouldn't O'Hara have thought, 'Wait a minute. Maybe John Morton did it'? Wouldn't somebody have thought to go out to San Francisco to find John Morton, if only to see what he knew about it?"

"Who knows?" Stephen commented. "Maybe they did investigate. Maybe they had the San Francisco police looking for him, but they were never able to find him there."

"Wouldn't that arouse suspicion all by itself?" I asked.

"Probably not," he answered. "Just because he supposedly called Cordelia from San Francisco, it wouldn't necessarily mean that he stayed there. He could have been in any large city. The police might have considered that he could have changed his name, too. I'll bet it was a lot easier to shake off your real identity back then, since the police didn't have any electronic gizmos that could help track a person down."

Miss Galloway listened to us intently, and said, "I think you're right, Stephen. And, as I recall, the two events--John Morton's disappearance and the William O'Hara embezzlement trial--weren't back to back. Enough time must have lapsed to put a safe distance between the two."

I exhaled, worn out from trying to piece everything together logically. "Just imagine, though! Cordelia Morton sat back and watched another man go to prison for a crime her own husband had committed, and she didn't speak on
his behalf. She was probably the only person in town who knew that William O'Hara's cries of 'innocent' were true, but she did nothing at all to help save him."


"It's absolutely horrific," Miss Galloway said. "An innocent family was ruined because she wouldn't go public with the truth."

"What? And ruin Lydia's chances of a good marriage?" I snorted. "CORDELIA's priorities were certainly not those of a decent human being."

"Of course," Miss Galloway remarked, "the ultimate irony is that Lydia never married at all, so Cordelia's elaborate cover-up was for nothing."

"You're right," I said. "I'll bet Cordelia was heartsick that Lydia didn't marry."

"Or not," she said. "I don't know about that. Cordelia had Lydia living at home with her the rest of her life, more than likely waiting on her hand and foot because that's just the kind of person Lydia was. Cordelia didn't lose a daughter, she gained good help."

Stephen said, "And either way, the Mortons kept their social status in the community. Absolutely none of these facts have ever come to light until just now, with the three of us, and both of the key players are long dead."

"So what do we do now?" I asked. "Tell the police?"

"Tell them what, Tasha?" asked Stephen, gently. "That we've fabricated this entire story, based on the sketchy evidence that we have? We don't know that one single word of what we've come up with is true."

"If only Cordelia had written to her sister about her husband's suicide," I lamented. "Then we'd have real evidence to show them. Actual proof in hand, straight from an eye witness."

Miss Galloway shook her head. "Cordelia was forced to take that secret
to the grave with her. She couldn't afford to let anyone else alive know the true facts. She and Lydia had too much at stake."

"Well," I told them, "I do think that we need to give John Morton's suicide note to the police, and they can do what they want with it. If we hang onto it, then we're just as guilty of covering the whole thing up as Cordelia was."

Stephen said mildly, "Not quite. Everyone is dead."

"But still--oh, I don't know--at least we'd be letting someone in a position of authority come to their own conclusions, just as we have. The police may decide to throw the letter away. Who knows? But it can't stay hidden away in our attic for another fifty years!"

"What do you intend to do with the bones after the police return them to you?" Miss Galloway asked me.

"I don't know," I said, a bit startled. "Will the police return them to me?"

"After their investigation."

I hadn't even considered that the bones would find their way back to me. "Give them a decent burial, perhaps. I don't see how we can attach a name to them, though. We'll never know for certain if they belong to John Morton or to someone else, unless the police can discover whose they are."

"Highly unlikely," Stephen said, "at this late date."

"I think a proper burial for the bones would be just the thing," Miss Galloway assured me. "And a little tombstone. I'd like to pay for that, if you don't mind. If the bones do belong to John Morton, then I'd like to do it for Lydia's sake. I know she would like knowing that her father finally had a resting place. And if the bones don't belong to him, they still need to be buried."

"I'll mention it to Dad tonight when I get home," I promised her. "He'll know how to go about getting that done, I'm sure."
"Well, Tasha," Stephen said to me as we left Miss Galloway's house and headed toward mine, "you should feel better. Case closed."

"Is it? The only evidence we really have is the suicide letter. That's it. No proof about the bones. There's no way to know how Cordelia Morton really handled her husband's suicide. All those questions are still up in the air."

"Not up in the air. I think Miss Galloway's perspective on life back then helped us piece it all together."

I was glad Stephen felt so pleased with our work that afternoon, because I didn't. Not much had changed, as far as I could see. A resident ghost still lived in my house, and my dad still hadn't made up his mind whether to stay in Prescott or return to Frankfort. So, other than admitting that I had spent a wonderful afternoon inventing stories with Stephen, I couldn't see that we had accomplished much of anything.

But maybe, I thought, that's the way it is with ghosts.
Stephen and his mother ate dinner with us that night to celebrate our staying in Prescott, and it proved quite a festive occasion, Mom having gone all out for company by making her famous lasagna (famous in Frankfort, that is, maybe soon to be famous in Prescott), a delicious tossed salad with sprouts and tomatoes and black olives, and rolls. Mrs. Collier brought a bottle of red wine and dessert, a coconut cake. "I didn't bake it myself, of course," she admitted. "I bought it in a bakery downtown. The whole idea of baking a cake makes me break out in hives."

While we ate, Dad told us that the police had found absolutely nothing suspicious in our attic, no sign of human intruders, nothing. And he was arranging for every single chandelier in the house to have new extra thick chains attached and to be bolted and rebolted, although Max and I knew that all the bolts and heavy chains in the world couldn't keep a chandelier on the ceiling where it belonged if a ghost wanted it down on the floor. But we thought it wise not to mention this little fact. It would have ruined the mood.

Mom made Stephen and me take turns telling the story we had concocted that afternoon with Miss Galloway, and everyone took a lively interest in it except for Max, who couldn't let go of the fact that Dad, Stephen, and I had spent hours and hours after dark, digging for a skeleton and excluding him from all the fun and excitement. "It's not fair," he said. "Someone should have got me out of bed. I could have helped you guys. Tess, too. She digs!"
"And how!" Mom agreed. "Usually in the flower beds."

We all laughed, as Tess thumped her tail on the floor and seemed to grin at us.

"That's some story," Mom said, sipping her wine and looking first at me, then at Stephen. "I don't know if I like the idea of living in a haunted house or not, although I am glad to know that I'm not hearing voices like Joan of Arc."

She shivered, rubbing her arms.

I shrugged. "Other than the chandelier, I suppose it really hasn't been so awful. But I have a feeling, if those bones do belong to John Morton and we can get them buried properly, we won't hear anything else from Cordelia or John or Lydia. Whoever it was."

Stephen said, "I still think you have more than one ghost."

"Oh, great," said Mom. "Thank you, Stephen, for reassuring me. What makes you think that?"

"The lavender and the roses," he told her. "Tasha smelled two distinctly different aromas. My guess is that the decaying roses smell is Cordelia Morton."

"Why roses for Cordelia?" Dad asked. "Roses are beautiful flowers."

"But these were decaying roses. It makes some kind of sense, doesn't it? I mean, even though John Morton committed suicide, it was Cordelia who buried him in the back yard and stuck the sundial over him. By doing that, she doomed him to wander this house for eternity until his bones are buried in consecrated ground."

Mrs. Collier exchanged looks with Mom and Dad. "The boy watches too much television."

"No, I read about ghosts, Mom," he said. "This has been almost a classic haunting. History doomed to repeat itself."

"Good grief."
Stephen continued, "The lavender is much gentler and kind of led you to the clues. Like a gentle spirit who wanted you to find out the truth about John Morton. My personal opinion is that the lavender scent is either a sign that you're dealing with Lydia or with John himself. Either one of those two would have wanted the truth to come out."

"Of course," I said, "the lavender may just permeate the house all on its own and may not belong to any particular spirit. All I know for sure is that the lavender can't be from Cordelia. It's so gentle and calming."

"I wouldn't mind sharing my house with a gentle spirit," Mom said. "At least, I don't think I would. It would be kind of like The Ghost and Mrs. Muir."

"I love that movie!" Mrs. Collier exclaimed. "It was perfect!"

Dad smiled, then said, "As long as my wife doesn't fall in love with a dead sea captain."

I said, "Maybe burying John Morton's remains will settle all the ghosts in our house."

"But what," Dad asked me, "makes you think that Cordelia and her decomposing roses have left the house? I would think that only the spirit of John would be gone."

With my forkful of lasagna poised midway to my mouth, I said, "The truth about Cordelia is out now, Dad. We know what she did. We know her crime. Her crimes because she committed more than one. First, she covered up the truth about her husband's suicide. Second, she could have saved the O'Hara family by telling the truth that John had embezzled, but she made absolutely no attempt to."

"So?" Dad remarked. "So we know what she did, so what? I'd think that now she would be angrier than ever."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I would think that having her sins
uncovered would put her to rest, too." I knocked wood. "That's what I'm hoping, anyway. She was one pesky ghost. I got really tired of her interference with our lives. She almost ran us out of Prescott! The main thing she probably needs to know is that she's forgiven for what she did."

"We forgive you, Cordelia Morton," Dad said, staring up at the ceiling. "Wherever you are."

Just then, the heady scent of roses—fresh ones—wafted across the table. I looked up, but no one else seemed to notice it, so I said nothing, only nodded. "Goodbye, Cordelia," I whispered.

Mrs. Collier snapped her fingers, stood up from the table, and went into the living room. She came back with her purse. "I finished that piece of jewelry I told you I was making for you," she said to me. "Close your eyes and hold out your hand."

"Ooh, just like Christmas." I did as I was told and felt her drop something smooth and cold into my outreached hands. Opening my eyes, I saw that I was holding a silver necklace with a cartoon-looking ghost pendant, more like a smooth silver sheet with two big black eyes—on a silver snake chain. "I love it," I told her, slipping it over my neck so that the ghost hung perfectly at the base of my collar. "It's perfect. And it will always remind me of our adventure."

"That's one word for it, I guess," Stephen remarked, grinning. "It looks good on you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Collier."

"You're more than welcome."

Several weeks later, the police returned the bones, dropping them off at Dad's newspaper office downtown. Just as Stephen had suspected, too much
time had lapsed for them to know quite what to make of them. All they could
tell us for certain was that the bones were those of an adult male and they were
old. That was good enough for Stephen and me. We knew those bones
belonged to John Morton, even if no one else did.

Several days later after school, Stephen and I carried the box of bones
down to our church. Reverend Willis had told me after church on Sunday that
he would be glad to bury the bones on consecrated ground and "put the poor
soul to rest."

Beneath a cottonwood tree in the old cemetery behind the church,
Reverend Willis placed the box into the ground, then opened his prayer book.
Stephen lowered his head, and I started to, but then I smelled the most
overpowering scent of lavender I had ever smelled. Raising my head, I looked
across the old graves to a bench several yards away and saw a man sitting there,
a sad smile on his face. I saw him clearly: his black derby hat, his fancy vest,
his walking stick, and a huge black moustache that curled up on the ends, just
as Miss Galloway had described.

I nudged Stephen in the ribs, but I was too late. The spirit of John
Morton had gone. Forever.

Oh, and Stephen and I both went to Helen's Halloween party, my first
ever party in Prescott. Stephen and I wore dark coveralls and army boots, and
big tanks on our backs. "What in the world are you supposed to be?" Helen
asked when we arrived.

"Ourselves," I told her.

She looked puzzled. "I don't get it. You look like exterminators!"

"In a way, that's what we are," Stephen said. "We're ghost busters!"

Needless to say, we won first prize.
After walking home from the party, Stephen dropped me off at my house. "I'm really glad that you're staying in Prescott, Tasha," he said.

"I am, too," I told him.

As he opened the door for me, I bent down to pick up a sprig of lavender lying on the threshold.

Apparently, we were staying with John Morton's blessing.
Works Cited


