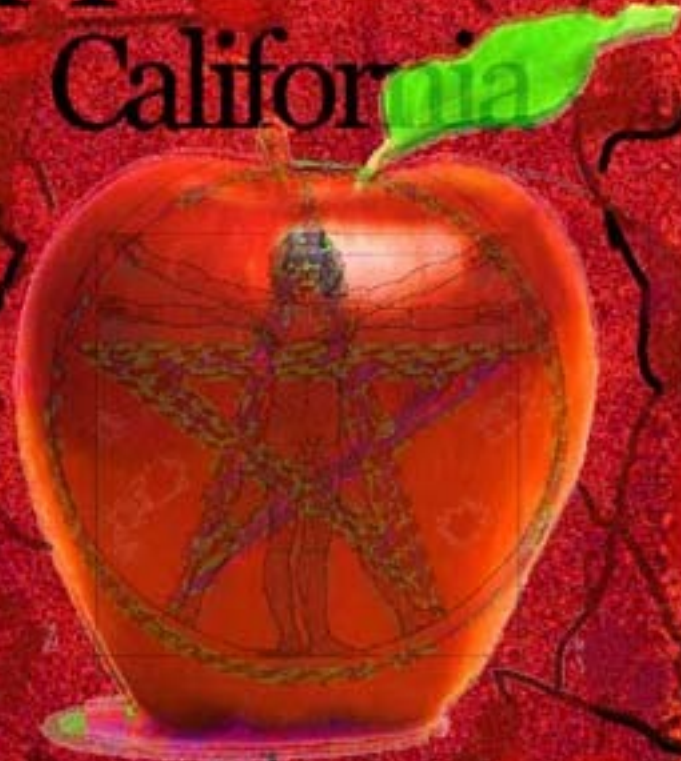


Apple Town,
California



by
Grace Divine

**APPLE TOWN,
CALIFORNIA**

By

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SECTION I
THE DARKEST NIGHT

Chapter 1

VOICES IN THE WINDS

The dawn shook off the night as the sun led the clouds with shimmering abandon. The effervescent, never-ending baby blue sky, defined an ever-lasting eternity in the frame of my mind's eye. I, who like all people on earth, can only see that which is limited by the boundaries of my eyelids. My name is Lettice Foussard, and I grew up in a small town in Northern California called Apple Town.

Apple Town was a perfect little town. We enjoyed flawless weather all year round, nippy during the fall and winter months and warm during the spring and summer. I grew up with Grannie, Antoinette Lesfango, and my twin cousins, Peter and Manny. The reasons why my cousins and I lived with Grannie weren't obvious.

Peter and Manny were left at Grannie's doorstep by Mary, Grannie's daughter. Mary had become addicted to drugs as a teen and had run away from home. Then, she turned to prostitution to support her drug habit. When she left the twins at Grannie's doorstep, she left a photo of her holding them at the hospital. She didn't leave a note, however, so we never learned their exact date of birth. For newborns, they looked tiny and malnourished. They must have been preemies.

Peter and Manny were extraordinarily pale, almost albino. They had many ailments. The doctor said that they had been exposed to drugs in utero and this is why they were a tad slow. Because of this, Grannie cut them lots of slack and they spent their days playing. Manny, for instance, enjoyed playing outside scratching the dull cracked white paint from the wood on the exterior of Grannie's Victorian house.

One day, as he was scratching a wall he became agitated. And rather than use his fingers, he used Grannie's screwdriver. When suddenly, a jagged piece of dry paint ejected forcefully from the wall and thrust itself into his right eye. We rushed him to the hospital but his eye couldn't be saved. Grannie cried for days.

But children are resilient. Manny was given an eye patch to wear and soon became very fond of it. He ended up becoming the town's one-eyed curious wonder. And overtime, as he told the story of how he lost his eyesight, it changed becoming ever more incredible. Last I heard him tell it, a run-away pellet from a BB gun has caused the injury to his eye.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Apple Town was a wonderful place to grow up in. It was an idyllic Northern California mountain escape surrounding a great prairie. Grannie's property comprised about two hundred acres of land. There was only one other home within walking distance of ours belonging to Minnie, Grannie's best friend. Located inland, our home was about 25 miles from down town Apple Town and about two hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean shore. And this is where the story begins.

I was eleven years old and one week away from my twelve birth-day. Grannie had planned a big birthday party. She wanted to make up for all previous parties that had been small family-only celebrations. She invited every teacher and sitter who'd taken care of me since I was a baby, and all of the students that I'd attended school with in every grade.

The party was to have a Mexican motif. In her twenties, Grannie had spent time doing missionary work in Mexico. She had been impressed by the experience and wanted to expose Peter,

Manny and I to some of that country's culture. She wanted the party to be as authentic as possible and bought twelve piñatas, one for each year of my life as the tradition requires. And the party was to be catered by Guadalupe's, the only Mexican restaurant in Town, owned by Grannie's good friend, Lupe.

As far as Grannie was concerned, the party was going to be the biggest thing we had ever had in Apple Town and she even announced it in the Apple Town Observer, the local newspaper. She wanted everyone to be there, including the local police and fire department. And it was important that someone from the police department showed up since thirty years earlier, she'd been married to the then chief of police, Chief Bologna (whom we all referred to as Chief Baloney since he was obese and talked mostly gibberish.) The marriage only lasted two years since Grannie couldn't put up with his drinking.

A week before the party, we began to receive packages. The town's landscape artist, Mr. Julios, cleared several thousand square feet of brush in front of the house by a big jacaranda tree. Years back, we'd named this tree Mr. Strudel due to its gnarled and twisted branches being wrapped around each other like the pastry. Mr. Julios prepped one large branch to hang the piñatas.

The day before the party, I sat on the stairs by the front porch and watched people come and go all day long. The sky was clear and it was hot. In the landscape, dry skeletal bushes nestled inside giant cracks of dry earth. Then, I ran down the porch stairs. At the bottom, I realized I'd forgotten my shoes. The dirt under my feet felt like warm powder and I started to play.

And as if in slow motion, the day passed. It became the darkest night I'd ever seen. Unusually strong winds began to blow. Inside the house, Grannie, the twins and I sat in the living room waiting for the winds to die down. Grannie had lit the fireplace, which was unusual in summer. Then she sat on her rocking chair and began to knit. Peter laid on his stomach and played with a miniature soldier set that dated back to the nineteenth century. Manny cleaned his BB gun. And I sat on the floor by Grannie cradling my legs as I rocked back and forth.

The warmth of the fire and colorful spectacle made by the flames kept my attention, but the fierce cold winds outside grew stronger and began to shake the house. Reluctantly, I listened to the angry winds crash against the walls and windows of the house. Incredibly, after a while, I began to hear voices in the winds. Startled and frightened, I wanted us to get into Grannie's truck and get as far away from home as possible.

Instead, I walked over to a window and listened. Some of the voices were crying, begging for help. Others, were uttering curses and evil words. They spoke of cruel sadistic tortures taking place somewhere, in a far away distant place. Sick and shaking, I clutched my stomach. Then, the voices grew louder, and every cell in my body became paralyzed with fear.

At that moment, I tried to move away from the window, but couldn't. Something inside me compelled me to listen. I knew that the voices carried messages and I wanted to make sense of them. But words went unfinished and irrational sentences went on without ending.

Then, I wondered where they were coming from. Were these echoes from a source nearby or more like recorded sounds, messages carried here by the winds from a distant place, or both? I didn't know. But what I did know, was that the voices were evidence of a place where unutterable sufferings pervade the universe and that they had crossed the boundaries of time and space to reach us here, in Apple Town.

Then, suddenly, a scream startled me. I turned. Manny was standing over Peter holding a wooden log over his head and threatening to crash it over Peter's head. That morning, Grannie had taken out her antique bible to show it off at the party. It lay on the dresser next to me. Without

thinking, I grabbed it and with all the power I could muster, threw it at Manny.

The bible hit Manny on the right temple. His head went back from the force of the impact and the log fell behind him without injuring Peter. Then, Manny fell to the floor unconscious. The old book, which had served the ultimate purpose of saving a life, had disintegrated into a thousand pieces that now lay scattered over the floor. Without saying a word, Grannie picked up Manny and carried him into his and Peter's room, the room behind the fireplace. Then, she came back, picked up Peter, who had also fainted, and carried him to the room.

Then she went to the kitchen. I followed. There, she took out rope. I wondered what she was planning to do with it. I stared at her anxiously, but as if in a trance, she ignored me. She took the rope to the boys' room. There, she tied Manny's arms and legs to the bedposts. She did the same to Peter. Shocked, I stood under the doorway watching her. Why would she tie Peter to the bed? Then, without saying a word, she passed by me as she exited the room. Worried, I ran to the living room and dialed 911.

The operator answered, "Emergency."

I said, "Operator." My throat feeling suddenly very dry.

"911 Operator, *emergency line*." She repeated.

I said, "Operator... *We need help!*"

"What?" She said sounding annoyed. "Speak louder. Do you have an *emergency?*"

"Yes!" I said.

"One moment..." She said, "I will put you through to a deputy. Oh, we're having a high number of emergencies tonight so you'll have to hold."

I waited on the line for a long time when finally, a deputy answered, "Police department. If this is not an emergency call our regular number."

I said, "Deputy, we need help."

"What?" He said. "I can't hear you, too much static."

I said, "Deputy, it's Letti Foussard at Grannie Lesfango's place."

After a moment he said, "Yes, I hear you but too many people are speaking at once. Are you having a party? Tell everyone to be quiet." There were no other people in the room with me.

I said, "Deputy it's just me. Please help."

After a long silence the deputy then said, "Letti, we have a bad line. I'll send a deputy over. But you're going to have to wait cause all hell's braking loose in town."

Then the deputy hung up. My stomach turned. I would have to handle the situation by myself. I had to find Grannie and bring her to her senses.

I looked downstairs for her but didn't find her. Then I ran to the front door. Maybe she stepped outside. When I opened the door the cold winds hit my body chilling me to the bone. It was pitch black out, the porch lights were off and I couldn't see. Suddenly, I heard creaking to the right of me as if someone were walking on the porch. I looked. There was no one there. A sudden dread came over me as a cold stabbing chill ran down my back. In a flash, I stepped back inside the house and slammed the door shut.

I ran upstairs. No one lived in the second floor of the house. The four bedrooms were used for

storage. There were two bedrooms on each side of a central hallway with a large bathroom at the end of the hallway on the opposite side to the stairs. I ran to the bathroom. There, I found Grannie naked and unconscious, lying in the tub. The faucet was on. Water was overflowing the tub and wetting the floor. I turned off the faucet.

Grannie's body, except for her face, was entirely submerged in water. Then, I reached for her hand in the water. The water was freezing cold. I grabbed her wrist and felt a faint pulse. Relieved, I thanked God that she was alive and I reached into water and removed the plug.

The water began to drain. Looking like a corpse, Grannie laid in the tub frozen, cold and pale. I looked for a towel and found one in a cabinet. I put the towel on her to warm her and began talking to her while trying to wake her. A few moments later, she started to come to.

She acted and moved around as if she were drunk. Then, she looked around perplexed and in a slurred English stuttered, "What... I'm cold. Letti, where am I? This bathroom's unclean. Let's get out of here." Then she slowly got dressed and we left the room. I was crying. Grannie was back.

On the way downstairs, I said, "Grannie, we need to check on the boys." Grannie gave me a look that she understood, and nodded in agreement.

Chapter 2

THE SEARCH PARTY

The boy's room was freezing cold. Icy cold winds were blowing into the room through the open window. I flipped the switch but the light didn't turn on. Still, enough light streamed in from the living room through the open door for me to see inside. Still tied to the bedposts, Peter was sleeping in his bed. But Manny wasn't in his bed. He had wrestled with the ropes and freed himself. His bed sheets were messy and bloody. Wondering where he'd gone, I followed the trail of blood from his bed to the window and saw that Manny had exited the house through the window. Worried that he could get hurt I said, "Grannie, Manny's missing and--"

"Where has he gone?" Grannie interrupted me, "Lets wake Peter. He can help us look for Manny." I helped Grannie untie Peter. Peter was sleepy and was having a hard time waking up. Grannie then said, "Letti, lets take him to the bathroom." With his arms over our shoulders, we carried Peter to the bathroom. For such a skinny boy, he was surprisingly heavy.

Peter was sitting on the toilet, whining and complaining, while Grannie pressed a wet towel against his forehead. He said he had the worst headache ever. And then, he began to pull out his hair. I shouted at him to stop. He was acting crazy. Then Grannie slapped him on the face twice. Shocked, he looked at her and said, "Grannie, I told you that I have a terrible headache."

Grannie said, "Take these aspirin. You'll feel better." and handed him a glass of water. Then Grannie said, "Peter, your brother's missing. We need to find him." Then she turned to me and said, "Letti, we're experiencing some kind of weather event. Go through the house and lock all the windows. I will check the front and back doors. If the weather gets worse, we may have to hide in the basement."

I looked at her startled, "What basement?"

"Oh," she said. "The entrance to the basement is just below the rug in the living room."

I was surprised, I never new we had a basement. Then I was off. Starting in the boy's room, I was closing the window when the front door bell rang. I ran to see. Grannie opened the door. It was Deputy Johnson responding to the 911 call I made earlier. Deputy Johnson was a friend of the family and I'd known him ever since I could remember. I ran to him and embraced him. He took me by the shoulders and said, "All right little lady, what's all the fuzz?"

Grannie said, "Deputy, Manny's missing. We must put together a search party to find him."

For a moment, the deputy scratched his head under his hat, then said, "Well, it's going to be near impossible putting together a search party at this hour. And everyone's busy. Something in the weather is affecting people. So far we have fifteen people incarcerated for weird conduct. That's more arrests than we've ever made at any one time. And other police departments in the vicinity are experiencing similar problems."

"Deputy," Grannie said in a stern tone, "I understand that you're having problems, but Manny's small and he could get hurt."

He said, "I'm sorry, but our police department is small. I have no one to back me up. We'll have to make due with... just us."

Then Grannie paused. An instant later, her countenance changed and she asked, "What can we

do?”

The deputy went to his car and brought back two large flashlights. He put them on the porch. He said, “Now everyone, start looking, but don’t wonder off too far. I’m gonna circle the house in my car.”

Then, when he was done speaking, the deputy got into his car and drove in ever widening concentric circles around the house. Looking sad, Grannie turned to me and said, “Letti, I have to call people to tell them that the party’s cancelled.” When Grannie said this, I realized that because of my concern for Manny, I had completely forgotten that my birth date party was going to be the very next day! I was speechless.

Then Grannie looked at me tenderly and said, “I’m sorry honey. Now, go look for Manny.”

I was too worried about Manny to think about the party. Then, I remembered the blood on the windowsill. I picked up a flashlight and ran to the boys’ room. Once there, I saw that the blood trail continued from the windowsill to the porch outside. Hesitating, I thought, I have to go outside. Then I climbed over the windowsill and followed the trail of blood around the house to the back door which led back into the house through the kitchen.

In the kitchen, there was a faint trail of blood on the floor. I followed the trail through the kitchen and to the living room by the stairs. From there, the trail went up the stairs and into a back room in the second story. There was blood on the door handle. I opened the door and peaked inside. It was dark. I flipped the light switch but the light didn’t turn on. I then turned on the flashlight and went inside.

The room was large. Grannie used it for storage and it was filled with boxes and furniture. There was a large window to the far right. With the flashlight, I could see thousands of specks of dust flying around. The dusty bed sheets covering the furniture had been disturbed. And there were boxes and things thrown around the room as if someone had kicked them. I got excited. Manny must have gone into the room causing the commotion. And maybe, he was still inside.

Carefully, I began to look for him when I noticed strange graffiti like markings on the walls of the room. Curious, I approached. The markings were painted in a bright red color. And then, I touched one. Amazingly, it was wet. I thought, Manny must have made them. Then I smelt my fingers. They smelt like blood. And like a deadly avalanche, it dawned on me. The markings were painted in Manny’s blood! I stepped back aghast.

I raised the flashlight to get a broad view of the walls. The markings were all over the walls. I felt the world cave in on me. Where was Manny? I worried. Manny had lost a lot of blood. I wondered if he was still alive. And then, I lost it. With some kind of super-human strength, I threw things around the room looking for him. When suddenly, I spotted what looked like a boy’s leg under an empty carton. It was far from me. Moving, pushing and bumping against all kinds of objects, I got hurt and bruised. When I made it, I removed the cardboard and found him!

His eye patch was missing. His face was pale and bruised. I shook him. He didn’t respond. I grabbed his wrist, and detected a faint pulse. Joy overcame me. Manny was alive. I pleaded, “Manny, Manny, wake up.” But he wasn’t responding. I knew that I needed to get help, but I didn’t want to leave him. I screamed. Desperate, I screamed for a long time. But no one answered.

Manny was dying and I had to save him. I thought about carrying him out but I was smaller than him. Then, it occurred to me that I could drag him out. I grabbed a bed sheet and laid him on top of it. Then, I wrapped the sheet around him and knotted the ends. With the flashlight, I looked for the easiest way out. There was a pathway adjacent to the blood stained walls.

It was about two feet in diameter. I wondered if Manny made the space while he was painting the walls with his blood. And I thought, how ironic, the same space Manny had used to empty his blood, would be the same space that I would use to drag him back into the world of the living.

I grabbed one end of the sheet, draped it over my shoulder, and began to pull. The first pulls were hard, but then, we gained momentum. We were traveling along at a good pace and were almost to the door, when Manny moaned. I stopped to look. I had covered his face with the edge of the sheet.

I removed the sheet. His blind eye was bleeding and he was gasping for air as his mouth foamed green bubbly vomit. He was going into shock. Not knowing what to do, I covered his face with the sheet and pulled him into the hallway and towards the stairway. When I made it to the stairway, I screamed for help.

Peter ran up the stairs. He looked annoyed. But when he saw Manny's body wrapped inside the bloody sheets, he realized what was happening. He grabbed the other end of the sheets and said, "Let's go."

I said, "Be careful, he's beat up bad."

We carried Manny down the stairs and into the living room. Manny was lying on the floor still wrapped in sheets when Grannie came into the room. She unwrapped him. She gasped when she saw him and said, "Call 911. We're going to loose him."

I ran to the phone and dialed 911. I told the operator that my cousin was bleeding to death. She told me to stop the bleeding and that the ambulance was on its way. By the time I hung up, Grannie had laid Manny on the sofa. Then, she went to the kitchen.

I checked Manny's body for injuries. There were severe lacerations on his wrists and ankles from where Grannie had tied him to the bedposts. But these weren't large enough to substantiate a massive amount of blood loss. I looked for other wounds. Then, I noticed something wrong with his right eye, the eye he had injured as a child. It looked hollow.

I pressed on the eyelid. There was no resistance. Shocked, I realized that the eyeball was missing. And what I had thought earlier were bruises all over his face, were actually dry bloodstains. I gasped in horror. Manny had lost his blood through his eye hole. But on the upside, it was no longer bleeding.

I went to the kitchen to look for Grannie. She was standing over the stove staring at the lighted burners. She appeared frozen, so I gently tugged on her elbow. "Grannie," I said, "are you ok?" She looked at me with a vacant look in her eyes. I continued, "Grannie, I called the authorities. They should be here soon. We should get Manny ready."

Then, her face, forehead and eyebrows tensed anxiously as she said, "Letti, I haven't told you--" Tears were streaming down her face.

I interrupted her, "Grannie, Manny's beat up. You need to clean him up. I'll clean his room." I put a towel in her hand. And then, I ran to the boys' room. Once there, I took off the bloody sheets from Manny's bed. Then, I cleaned the blood on the bed frame, floor and windowsill. I was about to take the dirty sheets to the laundry, when the front door bell rang. I threw the sheets down and ran to the living room.

Peter opened the door. It was deputy Johnson. He said that the ambulance was on its way. When he saw Manny, he asked where we found him. Peter told him we found him upstairs. Then, the siren from the ambulance was heard in the distance. Within moments, it grew louder, drowning out

the howling winds.

When the ambulance arrived, it parked by the front of the house. The paramedics stormed into the house and surrounded Manny. Using all kinds of gadgets, they listened to his heart and said it was faint. They said that he had lost a lot of blood and was critical. Afterward, they laid him on a gurney, loaded him into the ambulance, and drove away.

After the ambulance took Manny away, Grannie said that we would visit him in the morning. Then she sent us to bed.

Chapter 3

THE HOSPITAL VISIT

Following the dawn, the sun's shimmering rays warmed the earth. The land was shaken and in disarray in the aftermath of the previous windy night. Parts of bushes, broken and torn branches from trees, rocks and debris were scattered everywhere. I got up expecting to be the first one up, but Grannie was already in the kitchen calling people to cancel the party. I poured myself a bowl of cereal with soy milk

I said, "Grannie, how's Manny?"

She looked at me surprised "What?" Then went back to dialing phone numbers.

It wasn't like her to be uncaring. Annoyed, I said, "Grannie, I wanna know how Manny's doing. Can we go see him?"

She looked at me. A moment later, she shouted into the hallway, "Peter, get ready, we're going to visit Manny."

A few seconds later, Peter shouted back from his room, "For crying out loud, what did you say?"

Leaning on the frame of the kitchen door I shouted, "We're going to the hospital to see Manny. Get ready."

Some time later, we got into Grannie's truck and left. I was sitting in the back. The dirt road from Grannie's house to the main road was always bumpy, but this morning, it felt like a wild carnival ride due to the unusual amount of debris on the road. And as we rode, the day got hot. Grannie's truck didn't have air conditioning. I opened my window.

It was a clear day but the air tasted dirty and my throat felt raw and dry so I decided to take a nap. It must have been ten in the morning when we made it to the hospital. I was tired and sweaty from being inside the hot truck. And when I got out of the truck, the sun hit my face like a ton of bricks.

Grannie was rushing. I followed her through the parking lot as she walked towards the hospital. Standing by the front door of the hospital was an old homeless looking man, a Hobo. Grannie went into the hospital. Then, when I was about to enter, the Hobo said, "The boy will part the earth and hearts will fall inside it." His words startled me and I stopped.

A second later, I realized that Grannie was already half way down the hall and I ran to catch up with her. For some reason, I felt violated by the Hobo's words and I decided to confront him if I ever saw him again. Then, Grannie stopped by the information desk. The nurse there gave her instructions on how to get to Manny's room.

We traveled down several flights of stairs and through several hallways and finally made it to the room. Manny was sleeping. Grannie walked to the foot of the bed, pulled his medical chart and read it. Peter sat down on an old lazy boy chair on the side of Manny's bed. He pulled out a yo yo from his pocket and began to play with it. I looked around.

Manny's room was dark and cold. It gave out a gross musty smell. I looked for a window to open to let in fresh air and more light. There were old blankets hanging from a wall where curtains should have been. I was sure that there had to be a window behind them. I walked over and tugged on

the blankets to move them. Instead, they fell on the ground. Much to my astonishment, there was a window, but it had been filled in with bricks.

Wow, I thought, Manny's room sucks! I wondered why he wasn't in the pediatric ward with other children. And I wondered what Grannie would have to say about this. Then I turned to her. She was crying. I asked her what was wrong. Without looking at me she said, "Letti, get the nurse and tell her that I would like to speak with the doctor on call."

I ran out of the room glad to be out of the stinky damp darkness. Just like the other rooms in this ward, the hallway was deserted. I walked down several hallways looking for a nurse and finally, I found one. She must have been in her to mid forties. Her skin was white like the color of rancid milk. She was obese. Her blue nurse's top cut into the flesh under her arms. I imagined her body bruised with red rashes as her fat folds brushed up against each other.

She looked surprised to see me and said, "Why, ain't too many people who come down here."

She had a strangely beautiful voice accentuated by a lovely southern accent. I was out of breath. I wondered what she meant? I said, "My cousin got hurt and they brought him here." I paused to breath. Then, I continued, "But why?"

"Why what?" She retorted.

"Why don't people come down here?" I asked.

"Ah" she said smiling, "This is the oldest part of the hospital and no longer in use. I don't know why they brought your cousin down here." For some reason, her voice was lulling me to sleep. But the thought of falling asleep in that creepy place kept me awake.

Then she said, "Little girl, I'm Mary Anne Dwight, but you can call me nurse D. What's your name?"

"My name is Lettice Foussard, but everyone calls me Letti." I answered.

The nurse smiled and curtsied as she said, "It's nice to meet you little Miss Letti. I reckon you're the first Letti girl I've ever had the pleasure of meeting." Then suddenly, she got serious. She leaned towards me and said, "I'm gonna tell you a secret." She then paused and looked to both sides of the hallway to make sure that there was no one there to overhear her. But that was odd, since she knew this place was practically deserted.

Then she whispered, "There are more people down here than is obvious to the naked eye. But then, most people can't see no matter how good their eyesight."

I didn't know how to respond to her weird comment. Moments ago, she had seemed normal. Nervous I said, "I..." But unable to finish my sentence, I bolted out of there running in the direction of Manny's room.

I was out of breath when I got there. There was a man inside the room talking with Grannie. I stood under the doorframe watching them. Then Grannie said, "Why Letti, what took you so long? Oh pardon me Nurse Raymond, this is my granddaughter Letti. Letti, this is the nurse in charge of your cousin Manny. They put Manny down here because of his eye. It's bad. He's missing an eyeball."

Then, she turned to Nurse Raymond and asked, "How much blood did he get?"

"Several pints." He answered. "But he's all right now. Although, he seems withdrawn. Which reminds me, we found lacerations around his wrists and ankles. Do you know how he got them?"

Grannie's face paled. She was about to speak when I interrupted her, "Manny and Peter were playing a western rope game. They aren't very smart you know."

"Oh," Nurse Raymond said, "Children's games. That explains it." Then he jotted a few quick notes on the chart. "Well," He said, "I'm done. I'll check up on him later. Nice meeting you both."

After the nurse left, I approached Manny and looked at his face carefully. His skin looked transparent. I could see veins, blue, green and red, spreading throughout his skin. There were also lots of broken capillaries. I felt that if I got any closer, I would be able to see red blood cells traveling in the blood stream. I wondered what was happening to him? Lost in thought, I forgot that I had put my face right up to his when suddenly, his one good eye opened. I bolted back in shock almost knocking over a chair behind me.

Grannie said excited, "Look, Manny's waking up."

Peter stood up and said to Manny, "It's about time lazy ass. We canceled the party because of you, troublemaker."

Manny, managed a response, "Well, you know how it is... OUCH." He screamed. "What's wrong with my eye?"

Grannie touched his arm, "Don't worry honey. It's just a headache. How are you?"

"Tired," Manny said, "I think I'm going to take a nap."

"Sounds like a good idea," Grannie said. She turned to me and whispered, "Lets go. Manny needn't worry about anything. He needs his rest." Then, we left his room.

The trip back home was even longer than the trip to the hospital. I felt like I was in a giant oven. And I was hungry. I was thinking about eating when I saw a fast moving flock of black birds approaching from the right. They looked like a giant black cloud. Moments later, they were on top of us.

I was looking at them amazed, when I noticed one bird that was glaring at me. It's giant black eye was surrounded by a red circle. Mesmerized, I stared back. Then, for an instant, it seemed as though it was flying in slow motion and it began to squawk. Incredibly, I understood what it was saying, "The time has come for your fate to rise from the ground and awaken the twelve. Watch your dreams."

Thinking out loud I said, "What?"

I was sitting in the back. Peter was sitting in the front in the passenger seat. Grannie glanced back and said, "What?"

I Looked at her. Then she said, "You said 'what.' Did you have a question?"

"Oh... no." I said, wondering if she'd noticed the giant flock of black birds that had just flown over our truck.

Chapter 4

A GRAVESTONE

A few minutes later I said, “Grannie, what happened to the people who were coming to the party?”

“Oh, Minnie took care of everything. She’s such a great friend and an even better neighbor!” Grannie said. “And kids, when we get home, I’m gonna need your help. The winds left a mess. Peter, you can help by cleaning the debris around the house.”

Peter looked at Grannie amused. He probably thought that she was kidding. Grannie had never asked him to help around the house. When we got home, I got down from the truck and was walking home when I noticed a black bird sitting on the highest peak of the roof. He stared at us intently. A chill ran down my back. Then he flew off in the direction of the old tree.

On Grannie's property, about a mile from the house, was a huge ancient tree. The ‘Big Tree’ as we called it, measured about 100 feet around and 300 feet in height. It must have been several thousand years old. Its great canopy must have given solace and shelter to many a people and animals throughout the centuries. And it was beautiful. Its branches looked like thousands of arms reaching up to the heavens in prayer.

The roots of the tree were also something to behold. They erupted from the ground, wriggled and coiled as if breathing in air and returned to the earth like Orca whales eagerly diving back into the sea. Peter, Manny and I played for countless hours in, on and around the tree. We would hang from its protruding roots and I would climb its universe of expanding branches. At one point, we even planned to build a tree house near the top, but Peter and Manny were afraid of heights so our tree house became a dream house.

Soon after we got home, Peter began to pick up debris on the outside of the house. Grannie gave him a large trash bag. Inside the house, I went about the awesome task of piecing Grannie’s bible back together. Periodically, I would glance out the window and see Peter dancing and throwing stuff around rather than picking it up and putting it into the bag. He had difficulty finishing tasks and staying focused.

When suddenly, Peter screamed out my name. I ran outside. Peter waived for me to come. When I got to him, he said, “You won’t believe this, but I found an old gravestone right next to our house!”

“What?” I didn’t believe it, “It’s a prank.”

“No Letti, it’s real.” Peter said, “I kicked it. It didn’t move. I’ll show you.”

I followed him until he stopped. Then I looked at him angrily and I said, “Ok clown, where is it?”

“You’re standing on it.” Peter said as he pointed at my feet.

I jumped up. Then I knelt down and looked at it carefully. It was a gravestone and amazingly, it blended perfectly with the dirt around it. “How did you find it?” I asked.

He answered, “I was picking up stuff. I noticed a weird looking branch shaped like a crooked cross. The branch was stuck on the ground by the stone. Here!” He pointed at a spot by the edge of the stone. He continued, “There were some other things around it: broken glass, a junky metal

locket, and--”

I interrupted him, “How did that stuff get here?” Peter shrugged his shoulders signaling that he didn’t know.

I said, “Mm... Let’s see... We had awfully strong winds last night. Maybe it got blown here from somewhere else?”

“Right by the gravestone?” Peter screamed.

“Well... Yeah...” I said. “It’s possible.” Peter stared back at me with a vacant gaze.

I continued, “Ok, show me the other stuff.” Peter reached into his leather pouch and pulled out a bundle wrapped in a white handkerchief. He laid the bundle on the gravestone and unwrapped it. Inside was a conglomeration of strange objects. The first one to get my attention was a rusted old gold locket. It didn’t have a chain. I picked it up and looked at it from several angles. In the front it had the initials ‘LM’. Then I tried to open it. But it was rusted shut.

I said, “Peter, lend me your pocketknife.”

Peter took the pocketknife out of his pouch and handed it to me. I carefully put the locket on top of the gravestone. I laid it on its edge and held it tight with my left hand. I then carefully inserted the knife into the lip with my right hand. Delicately, I began to apply pressure on the locket with the knife. Suddenly, debris under the locket gave way and the locket slipped from my left hand. As it did, the knife which was inserted into the lip slipped out and dug into my left hand thumb cutting it severely. I began to bleed profusely. The gravestone and ground around it became wet with my blood.

“Oh... I’m bleeding.” I blurted, “Give me something.”

Peter grabbed his handkerchief letting his newfound treasure tumble unto the ground and gave it to me. I wrapped it around my thumb.

I said, “I have to wash.” And I ran into the house. In the kitchen, I took off the handkerchief that had now turned red. The blood was spilling and getting all over the sink. I saw then that the cut was the length of my thumb’s width and deep. Then, I called out for Grannie but she didn’t respond. I was wrapping a kitchen towel around my thumb when Peter walked in.

“Letti, what’s wrong?” He asked.

I said, “You need to find Grannie. I need stitches.”

“But...” he said, “Grannie’s truck isn’t outside.”

“Oh, no!” I said, “What should I do?” I was thinking out loud.

Then Peter said, “Minnie will give us a ride.”

Chapter 5

THE DREAM

Half an hour later, we were in Minnie's car going to the Apple Town Memorial Hospital. I was sitting in the front.

Minnie asked, "How'd you get cut?"

"I was trying to open a rusted locket and the knife... well, you know." I said.

"Oh no, young lady, I don't know!" She looked baffled and exasperated as if she couldn't phantom how I could have been that stupid. "I'm glad you called when you did. I was getting ready to go into Town for an appointment. I'm sorry, but I can't stay at the hospital with you. You'll be fine." She patted me on the shoulder.

Minnie dropped us off at the hospital entrance. We watched her drive away. Inside the hospital, the admitting room had a large nurses station. There were numerous armchairs for patients opposite the nurses' station, but there were no patients waiting. The nurse was alone.

I said, "Ma'am..." The nurse was busy doing something and did not acknowledge our presence. I repeated, "Ma'am, I'm injured."

This time she stopped what she was doing, angled her face down, and looked at me over her glasses. The way she looked at me she made me feel like a small ant being observed by a bug exterminator.

"Where are your parents?" She asked annoyed.

"I don't know." I said.

Angrily she said, "What's wrong with you?"

I didn't know if she meant what was wrong with me physically or what was wrong with me mentally for not knowing where my parents were. I felt like saying *what's wrong with you?* Instead, I showed her my injured hand. By now, the towel was blood red.

When she saw my hand she exclaimed, "Fine, can you read?"

I nodded 'yes'.

Then she said, "Fill out these papers. When you're done, you'll see a doctor." She threw the papers on the counter in front of me.

We were about to grab the papers when suddenly, the nurse became distressed and began gasping for air. Peter and I looked at each other not knowing what to do. Then I ran out of the room looking for other hospital personnel.

A second later though, I heard Peter scream, "Letti, come back, nurse admissions is ok." Peter had a difficult time remembering names so he developed a habit of calling people names related to their jobs. When I got back, he seemed annoyed. I sat down next to him and he whispered, "Maybe now she'll take care of us."

Then I noticed that there was a man sitting in the waiting room. He had his back to us. I thought it was strange since I hadn't seen him come in. Then, I began to spell out words for Peter who was filling out the forms for me since I couldn't write because of my injured hand. But I kept

wondering who the man was. When all of a sudden, the man stood up and turned.

It was the Hobo! I shrank back into my chair. Quickly, I glanced at the nurse. She was typing. And when I looked back, the Hobo had moved and was sitting on a chair facing me.

I stood up and walked towards him. He watched me and cracked a patronizing smile. This man, with long oily clumped hair, ragged clothing and sun-chapped skin angered me. He seemed like a waste of a human being. And as I got closer to him, my face felt hot and red. Then, standing in front of him I said, "Those who aren't inside when the earth opens, will be devoured from the inside out." Immediately after, I stepped back startled by my own strange words.

I blamed the weirdness on him and I said, "You, who are you?"

In a quiet and solemn voice he answered, "I am the sentinel who watches over the tower in the East and announces the coming of the light travelers; those who travel to and from all edges of eternity measuring the matrix of time and space; those who are soldiers in the war for good and are on the lookout for God."

What? I thought, this man is the looniest sci-fi freak who got lost on his way to a star trek convention. "Man," I said, "you're a nut." Then I turned around and walked to my chair.

When suddenly, the nurse called out, "Psss..." She was motioning me to come. I walked over. Then she leaned over the counter and whispered, "What's your name?"

I said, "Letti."

She said, "Letti, best you stay away from that man." She pointed at the Hobo. "He's a resident of our psychiatric ward who comes and goes as he wishes. And there's no point in talking to him. He won't answer you. He hasn't spoken for over twenty years."

What? I thought. He had just spoken to me! I turned to look at him. And he was gone. Then I looked at the nurse. She was back quietly typing away at her computer. And just then, I remembered why I was there. I looked at my bloody hand. The towel was blood soaked and blood had smeared all over my clothing and was dripping on the ground. I said "Nurse." She looked up. Just then, I felt intense pain and I screamed, "OUCH!" Immediately afterward, I remember coming in and out of consciousness while laying on a gurney. I don't remember what happened after that.

When I regained consciousness, my vision was blurry. This bothered me. I was laying in bed in a hospital room. I wondered why the room was so dark. I saw a figure in the corner of the room. I thought it was Peter. I motioned him to turn on the lights but he didn't move. Then I tried speaking, but no sound came out.

I was thinking about this when suddenly, Nurse Mary Anne barged into the room. I tried remembering her last name but couldn't. She walked to the window and fiddled with the curtain. Then she came by my bed and fussed with the sheets.

"Hello young lady!" She said in a happy tone. "So you decided to come back to the world of the living." She had a contagious smile.

"Nurse..." I said. She didn't respond. I repeated, "Nurse..."

She looked at me. Her countenance becoming solemn as she said in a grave voice, "Letti, my name is Nurse Mary Anne Dwight. Remember it! You might need it later." Then, she relaxed and said tenderly, "What's wrong? Are you wondering why you're so tired?" I was exhausted. Then she continued, "You lost so much blood that half of your body went to sleep. But you're fine now. Go back to sleep."

Her southern accent and the tone of her voice lulled me to sleep. Sometime later, I remember waking up. There was a gray mist all around. The air felt cold and wet. And suddenly, I became very thirsty. Looking for water, I walked to the bathroom and I turned on the faucet.

The gushing water made a symphony of gurgling noises that contrasted sharply against the empty silence of night. I splashed water on my face. I looked in the mirror. Oddly, I looked transparent like a ghost. Then, I remembered my thirst, but the thought of drinking hospital tap disgusted me, so I left the room looking for something to drink.

Except for occasional startling noises, the hospital hallway was eerily silent. Then, amidst the gray darkness, I saw a light under a door at the end of the hallway. I walked to the door and grabbed the handle. Strangely, the handle felt warm. And as I opened the door, a blinding light shone into the hallway from inside the room. Then I heard an echo of a familiar voice calling me, "Letti, wake up."

I opened my eyes. Grannie was standing next to me. It was morning. I was laying in bed at the hospital. Wow, I thought, I'd been dreaming! But the dream felt like a real life wake experience. I looked up at Grannie and I exclaimed, "Grannie, I just had the strangest dream--"

She interrupted me, "Letti, it's all right."

"But Grannie, I want to tell you--" I protested.

"Not now." Grannie said, "Letti, the doctor gave you stitches. You went through an ordeal. But you're fine. We're going home as soon as you can get up."

Moments later, as I was being wheeled out of the hospital, Grannie told me that when they admitted me into the hospital they injected me with pain medications that knocked me out. I then wondered if the strange dream had somehow been caused by the medications.

Chapter 6

DANCING SHADOWS

When we got home, I was groggy. Grannie and Peter carried me to my room and I fell asleep. I slept for the rest of the day and into the night. Finally, the pain woke me. I looked at the clock. It was nighttime, two thirty a.m., and something was tapping at my window. I got up to see. I moved the sheer fabric covering the glass and looked outside. The night was black except for a full moon. The light of the moon hit the trees and made dark eerie shadows on the ground.

I looked in the direction of the gravestone. There were strange shadows around the gravestone. I looked at them carefully. They looked like they were moving around clockwise in circles. The shadows reminded me of Indians performing a ritualistic tribal dance. I strained to see what was making the shadows, but the few sparse trees in the area were too far from the gravestone to be causing the shadow effect. A creepy feeling ran through my body.

I grabbed a flashlight and ran out of my room. My intention was to go to the gravestone and figure out what was going on. But then, when I opened the front door, I couldn't go out. Something invisible was preventing me from going outside. And then, that something, pushed me back inside the house and the door shut close in front of me. Stunned, I wondered if I was dreaming.

Then, I ran back to my room and to the window and I looked at the gravestone outside. The shadows were still dancing around the gravestone, but now, they were moving counter clockwise. And then, the shadows began to disappear. The light from the moon was beginning to disappear as well. I looked up. Thick black clouds were moving towards the moon and covering it. I then looked down at the gravestone and as the last glimmers of light began to fade, a dark shadowy shape rose from the gravestone. My blood froze. And then, the world went into darkness.

I jumped into bed and screamed out "Popo." Popo was our dog, a standard poodle. Grannie had adopted him from a poodle rescue organization. He had a beautiful silver coat. He had reached the incredible age of 21. The vet was baffled by Popo's longevity. He kept telling us that Popo was no ordinary dog.

Grannie always said Popo had lived so long because he was adopted on February 10, the day that Grannie's mother had past away. She said that Popo was her mommy's gift to her and that he was never going to die, or at least not before her. So Popo continued to live year after year in spite of all odds against it.

A few moments later, Popo came into my room and laid his head on my bed. He wanted to be petted. His soft coat felt good against my skin. Afterward, he laid down on the floor next to my bed and fell to sleep. I looked at the clock. It was three thirty three in the morning. I was tired. I laid my head on my pillow and fell asleep.

Chapter 7

FOUND TREASURE

The next day, I woke up to the sizzling smell of scrambled eggs. I could hear Grannie singing in the kitchen. She was in a good mood. I put on my robe. As I walked by the living room on my way to the kitchen, I spied a big bouquet of flowers on the coffee table.

In the kitchen, Grannie was cleaning. I asked, "Who sent the flowers?"

"Oh" she answered, "They're from the Bologna clan. They felt bad that we had to cancel the party and they heard about what happened to Manny."

Then I stretched and said, "I'm famished. Can I have eggs please?"

"But of course." Grannie said, "I made them just for you. You look like you're feeling better." Then she placed a plate topped with freshly scrambled eggs in front of me. When suddenly, she froze. Her face suddenly contorted and confused and said, "Letti, I saw something strange last night... I was lying in bed and when I opened my eyes, there, by the side of my bed, were your Mammy and Pappy staring at me." Amazed, I stopped eating.

And perhaps, realizing that she'd gotten too serious, her consternation quickly turned into a smile as she said, "Manny's coming home tomorrow. If you're up to it, do you think you could help me clean up his room... and the walls?"

I nodded yes.

When I was done eating, I went to the boys' room. I brought a bucket of water and a towel and set the bucket down. I looked at the walls of the room wondering why Grannie wanted me to clean them and I made a complete turn. Then, I made another turn. Soon, I was going around and around in circles like I used to when I was six years old. It was fun. And then, I allowed myself to gently fall on the ground. I remained on the ground as my mind went on spinning.

After my mind stopped spinning, I looked around the room from that vantage point. I noticed a piece of wood sticking out of the floor from under Manny's bed. Curious, I pushed Manny's bed to the side. The piece of wood was cut into a perfect square, about two feet on each side. I tried to lift it, but it was stuck. Then, I used Peter's knife to dig into the crevice between the square and the rest of the flooring. Soon, the wood came unstuck and I removed it. There was a hole under it. Excited, I looked inside.

Inside the hole, was a black velvet fabric. I tried pulling it out but it was heavy. It was wrapped around something. Finally, when I was able to pull it out, I unwrapped it. Inside, I found several interesting items including a large old book. The book had a thick leather binding. It was made from irregular pieces of leather that were hand sewn together. The leather pieces resembled geometrical shapes, letters or symbols. And burnt on the leather, were large case words that read: "THIS PORTAL IS POWER." Below them, small case letters read: "Light Catchers open your eyes. See the universe that lives inside. Nothing is everything and the other way around."

Amazed, I opened the book. Incredibly, it had over one thousand pages made of parchment. The pages were dated. The oldest page was dated to 963 A.D.. The newest page was dated to 1899 A.D.. The writings represented a span of over 900 years! In addition, the writings, drawings, paintings and symbols illustrated in the pages were in different styles and languages. Obviously, the book had been written by different individuals. And as I looked at the book, it dawned on me that it

reminded me of magic books that I had read about in fairy tales. It was an awesome find and I wanted to read it, however I set it down to investigate the other items.

The first thing that caught my eye was a big beautiful deep purple amethyst ring mounted on a silver setting. On the mounting, on both sides of the stone, were symbolic figures. On one side was a lion's head surrounded by the outline of a castle. On the other side were a pair of cherries floating over a daisy.

Next, I picked up a small silk pouch. Inside it, I found a small bird's egg. It was two toned, black in color with greenish spotted accents on one side and creamy pastel in color with tiny black spotted accents on the other.

Then I picked up a large silver pouch made of fine silk and tied with a red bow. It looked like a precious gift. With care, I untied the bow. Inside was a set of miniature cutlery which included a silver spoon, fork and knife. They were precious. Also inside the pouch, were two ornate keys, one silver and one gold, three rosaries, (one made of blue opal, a second made of pink moon stone, and the third made of black obsidian), several beautiful and colorful feathers, and also a small white pouch. Inside the white pouch were several small bones.

I felt inside the hole to make sure nothing had been left behind and felt a flat cold surface. I pulled out a black obsidian box. The box was flat on all sides except for a wide bevel on the edges at the top of the box. The box had a beautiful ornate golden lock. I remembered the keys I found earlier. The silver key didn't fit, but the golden key was a perfect fit and the lock opened.

Inside the box was a treasure of jewels. There were over fifty rings with gemstones that included amethysts, sapphires, emeralds, rubies, turquoise, pearls, diamonds, jades, moonstones, corals, and others. I also found a pearl necklace, two amethyst necklaces, several bracelets, pendants and other jewels. My Gosh, I thought, Peter thought he found a treasure, but I'm the one who found it! I carefully put all of the jewels back into the box, closed the lid, and locked it.

And searching inside the hole, I found yet another precious jewelry box. I tried the silver key on the lock but it didn't fit. But, as I fiddled with the lock, it came unlocked. Inside the box were several fabric bundles tied with string.

The first bundle had three gold coins. One was a solid bright yellow gold coin with silver cord wrapped around it. It was big and heavy. It had the profile of a roman emperor on one side. The next coin was gold in color with a touch of copper. On one side it had the image of a triangle with an eye inside it. On the other side it had a circle with Asian writings inside it. The last coin was the biggest coin. It was finely polished and glowed in a beautiful deep golden tone. It was decorated with geometric edgings on the outside and the center of the coin was filled with what looked like Arabic writings. The coin was unusual as it was fat in the center.

The next bundle was filled with small animal figurines, snakes, elephants, turtles, tigers, lions, gazelles, cats, dogs, etc. The majority were made of silver and ivory. A few were made of bright red coral, turquoise and mother of pearl.

The next bundle was filled with beautiful pearls. One was a large and lustrous Tahitian pearl in the shape of a teardrop. It was opalescent black with shimmering pearlescent colors that reminded me of peacock's feathers. There was also a yellow pearl with the unique shape of a donut. I also found an astonishing perfectly round unblemished huge white pearl. There were other pearls in the bundle of different and beautiful colors but none as astonishing as the first three that caught my attention.

In the next bundle I discovered something which made my blood curdle. It was the mummified hand of an infant. I was shocked and put it back. In another bundle I found what looked like beef

jerky. Strangely, when I touched it, it vibrated. It occurred to me that these were the mummified vocal chords of a human being. I put them back. I didn't want to open any more bundles afraid of what I might find and I closed the box.

I felt inside the hole. It was empty and I replaced the lid. Looking at the boxes and the book, I knew that I had found an invaluable treasure. I then took them to my room and was hiding them in my dresser when suddenly, the front doorbell rang.

Chapter 8

MS. DIANA STARWICK

I heard Grannie's voice greet Ms. Diana Starwick, Apple Town's self-professed psychic and astrologer. She was eccentric and dressed like a carnival psychic. Then Grannie called out, "Letti, bring tea and cookies. Have Peter help you." Yeah, I thought, Peter's going to be a lot of help. Forgetting about the gray mist in the mirror, I happily ran out of my room. I stopped by the boy's room. Peter was cleaning his pocketknife.

I said, "Peter, lets prepare a tray of tea and cookies for Ms. Starwick."

Peter looked up and said, "Oh, ok."

In the kitchen, I showed Peter how to make tea and arrange cookies. Then, I realized that I was still wearing pajamas and I told Peter that I had to change. I ran back to my room, changed, and ran back to the kitchen. By then, Peter had finished preparing the tray. The cookies were broken and there were crumbs all over the tray. Also, the teacups didn't match the saucers and the water was lukewarm. Overall, it was a disaster. But I wanted to listen to Ms. Starwick's and Grannie's conversation so I grabbed the tray and we went into the living room.

Then, as I was offering cookies to Ms. Starwick, she looked at me and said, "My, you sure have grown Letti." She had a beautiful smile. And underneath all the circus make-up she was a beautiful woman. Then, she looked at Peter and shrugged her shoulders as if there was nothing that she could comment about him. Afterward, she went back to conversing with Grannie. She called Grannie by her middle name, Antoinette.

"Well, have you heard?" Ms. Starwick asked Grannie, "City hall is putting a YMCA where the old train station used to be. Great for our youth. Keep them from mischief." She paused to eat. Then she continued, "And it would help build muscle on some boys." She said that as she glanced at Peter. He made a cookie face. I thought her impertinent.

Then Ms. Starwick leaned close to Grannie, "There's something strange going on in Apple Town. There's an odd conglomeration of stars above us. Also, I've been having weird dreams." Grannie's face paled. I wished she would comment about her dream when she saw my Mammy and Pappy. "What I mean Antoinette," Ms. Starwick continued, "is that you need to be on the look out for strange happenings."

Ms. Starwick was trying to get Grannie to admit to something but Grannie remained tight-lipped. Then, I interrupted, "I've seen strange things."

Ms. Starwick's eyes opened wide as she said, "It's about time someone spoke up. What have you seen?"

I answered, "The other night, I saw shadows dancing by the light of the moon. Then, when I tried to go outside, the front door shut in front of me."

Grannie screeched then quickly composed herself and said, "Come sit by me Letti. Let's hear what Ms. Starwick has to say about that."

Ms Starwick stood up and spoke with solemn and ominous voice, "Letti, I had a dream about you. It was night. The sky was filled with black ill-boding clouds. You, floated over this house as the house burned, engulfed by giant angry flames. Incredibly, the flames grew and rose high surrounding

you, but not touching you. And then, powerful lightning began to strike down all around you. But it too didn't harm you.

Suddenly, you opened your eyes. A bright green light shone out of them. And then, you pointed at me and said, 'IDIOM LATINUM FARIBORUM CLAPIUM.' And as your voice resonated everywhere, the mountains surrounding Apple Town's great prairie, crumbled into pieces. It was awesome and terrifying."

After Ms. Starwick was done speaking, she sat down seemingly exhausted. Her head fell on her chest like a wind up doll whose string had run out.

Visibly frightened, Grannie asked, "What does it mean?"

Having regained her strength, Ms. Starwick suddenly became angry, "It means what it means Antoinette. Sometimes it's difficult to see truth when it comes wrapped in a package of a child. But I will tell you this, if I were you, I would plant rose bushes around the house. They offer psychic protection. And also, get this house painted, it looks like an abandoned manor."

In response, Grannie straightened her back indignant. I got up to go to the kitchen. Afterward, Grannie and Ms. Starwick continued to talk. Then Ms. Starwick left. The following day, Mr. Julio planted over 100 rose bushes around the house. Grannie also hired Mr. Julio's friend, El Señor Pepe, to paint the exterior of the house.

Chapter 9

FORMALDEHIDE JARS

That afternoon, we went to pick up Manny. On our way to the hospital, Grannie told us that she had errands to run. First, we stopped at Minnie's and dropped off a beautiful miniature pink rose bush in gratitude for her help. Minnie was pleased with her gift and wrapped a pretty pink bow around the pot. She smiled as we drove away.

Next, we stopped at the grocers. We stocked up on rice and vegetables. Afterward, we drove down Town to the Apple Town Observer. Grannie had prepared a statement that she wanted printed in which she regretted having to cancel the party and thanked everyone for their support. While she did this, she sent Peter and I to get gelato down the street. By the time we walked back to the Apple Town Observer, Grannie was walking out of the building. We got into the truck and headed to the Hospital.

When we made it to the hospital, the sun was setting. I wondered if we would see the strange Hobo. I wanted to ask him why other people didn't hear him speak when I did. But he was nowhere in sight. When we made it to Manny's room, Manny was already on a wheel chair. He was drugged. His head kept bobbing up and down as he dozed off.

I said, "Hey Manny!"

Manny didn't respond, so I said it in a louder tone, "Hey Manny!" His head straightened a bit as he was trying to look at me. Then, his lips moved but no sound came out. Instead, drool fell on his shirt. Peter began to laugh. Instantly, Manny smiled and did a thumbs up. I was relieved. At that moment I knew that Manny would be all right.

Then, an orderly walked into the room. Grannie politely declined the orderly's offer to push Manny's wheelchair. The orderly told Grannie that the regular elevator wasn't working and that we would have to take the service elevator located on the other end of the hospital. He also said that that area of the hospital hadn't been used for years. In the meantime, a nurse walked up to them and then both of them tried to explain to Grannie how to get to the service elevator. When they were done, they joked that if we got lost they would never be able to find us.

We walked for a long time. I began to wonder what we had gotten ourselves into. Then, while traveling down one hallway, I began to feel a strong sense of déjà vu. It felt as if I'd been there before. But I knew this was impossible. Then, it dawned on me that this hallway, including the numbers on the doors, looked exactly like the one I'd dreamt of when I stayed overnight at the hospital. Then, at the end of the hallway, I saw the door of my dream.

Suddenly, an overwhelming feeling of dread came over me and I began to hyperventilate. Then, as we got closer to the door, my heart and chest began to hurt. A second later, I couldn't walk anymore and had to lean up against the wall.

It took Grannie a few steps to realize that I'd stopped walking. She turned and said in a sweet yet impatient tone, "Honey, why are you stopping?" I couldn't answer. She continued, "Ok, I have to sign Manny out. Why don't you follow as soon as you can."

Oh no! I thought, Grannie was leaving me in this horrible place alone. I wanted to tell her to stop. I wanted to shout that I needed her but I had no strength to speak. Then, Peter walked past me humming. He had his headphones on and was listening to music. I began to slide down the wall until I was sitting on the floor with my knees up against my chest.

And then, they disappeared, as they turned right into another hallway. Sick, I laid my head on my knees. I sat for what seemed like an eternity. But what I wanted to do was to run away from that dreadful place. I wondered if I could retrace my steps and go back the way that I had came in? But when I looked left, the lights down the hallway were flickering and suddenly, they died, leaving that part of the hallway in complete darkness.

I had no choice, but to find the service elevator. But the more that I looked at the door from my dream, the more that I felt compelled to open it. Then, the lights above me began to flicker signaling that they too would shut down soon. And with a strength unknown to me, I picked myself up and walked over to the door and opened it.

The room had a long rectangular shape. There were three long tables spanning the length of the room, one on each side of the room and one on the center. Over the tables were hundreds of glass jars of all different sizes. Some jars were filled with formaldehyde and human body parts, hands, hearts, heads, etc... Other jars contained deformed human babies. In one small jar, there was an eyeball. Its iris was the same color as Manny's.

I tried to remember if we ever found Manny's eyeball. I don't think we did. Peter and I concluded that some animal probably ate it. But this similarity between the eyeballs was uncanny. Then, I breathed in the formaldehyde. Even with the jars closed it was potent and was making me sick. I had to get out of the room. But as I turned, inadvertently I hit some jars that fell to the ground and shattered. Pieces of glass and their contents scattered everywhere.

Some of the formaldehyde had splattered on my skin and was burning. Then, the smell became unbearable and I became dizzy and disoriented. I ran to the door and tried to open it but the handle kept slipping from my hand. I panicked. Frantically, I continued to try to open the door when finally, it opened. In the hallway, the lights were still flickering.

I saw the service elevator at the end of the hallway to my left. I ran towards it. Then, the lights began to shut down behind me. I kept running as fast as I could in an attempt to stay ahead of the darkness. But strangely, the more that I ran to the elevator, the more that it moved away from me. When finally, I made it and pressed the button.

I looked behind me. Most of the hallway lights had shut off. Then, just as the elevator doors opened, the hallway became black. I jumped in. As I stood inside the elevator and watched the elevator doors close, I looked into the empty darkness of the hallway, oblivion.

The elevator took me to the first level. I found Grannie by the nurse's station getting Manny released. Peter was sitting next to her. He was still listening to music. Manny was sitting on his wheelchair, sleeping. I looked out the front glass door. It was nighttime. Then, I sat next to Peter. A moment later he asked, "What took you so long?"

"I got lost." Exasperated, I blurted without thinking.

He said, "Guess who you just missed?" I glanced at him annoyed. He continued, "You know that weirdo that hangs around the hospital. The guy that bugs you?"

He was talking about the Hobo. I nodded yes.

He continued, "He came over and put his hands on Manny's head. It looked like he was praying. Then, he began to cough. Still coughing, he ran to the trashcan outside the front door and began to throw up. And then--"

I got up and left Peter mid-sentence as I ran outside to look for the Hobo. He wasn't there, but perhaps he was nearby. I was still looking, when the hospital doors opened and Grannie walked out.

She was pushing Manny's wheel chair. And this is when it hit me, I was mentally and physically exhausted. When we made it to the truck, Grannie sat Manny in the back seat. I sat next to him.

On the way home, Grannie said that we would be stopping at Minnie's. Minnie knew a lot about a great many things. In her youth she had taught school and now, dedicated herself to helping multiple charities, including homeless and hungry people. I looked at Manny. He was feeling better and was playing finger puppets. Then Grannie said, "Children, be good at Minnie's."

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