



The Case of the Haunted Hotel

Ghostly Glenweed Mysteries

B I SKINNER

PROLOGUE

Glenwood Gazette/Morning Edition

Early this morning at the haunted Red Castle Hotel, the famous popstar best known as *Lucy M*, told reporters that someone stole her signature tiara from her head as she slept. So far, there are no witnesses and no leads.

When asked how she felt about the theft, Lucy M said, “How do you think I feel? Somehow, someone got into the room and stole my tiara! From my head! What kind of lax security does this hotel have that anyone can walk in here and take a tiara from a sleeping woman?”

When asked to confirm if she really sleeps with her tiara, she snapped, “Of course I sleep with it! Wouldn’t you if you had one?” The tiara is Lucy M’s signature look, which she claims was made from jewels mined by fairies, rendering the piece priceless. These claims, however, have never been substantiated.

Lucy M insists the tiara is her mojo, and without it, she can't perform. She's canceled her entire spring lineup blaming it all on the hotel and promises to sue.

The hotel, which was already concerned about lagging numbers due to lack of modern interest in the historic building and its ghost tales, is keeping mum.

However, one anonymous executive said, "If these numbers don't turn around soon, the hotel is in big trouble. We're currently negotiating with the Millur national hotel chain about a partnership."

Lucy M's close friend and personal assistant, Anne Smythe told the *Glenwood Gazette*, "We won't rest until we find who's responsible for the theft. The hotel should expect to face a substantial lawsuit for not only compromising Lucy's safety, but loss of income, and mental distress as well."

OceanofPDF.com

I glare at the ghost standing in the picture window of my new home and scowl. It's an elderly woman in a frilly pink flannel nightgown. She stares back at me while I shake my head and mutter, "Old hag must have died in her sleep. Now I know why this place was so cheap."

Then I feel bad for thinking of her as an old hag. She could be a delightful lady, after all. Someone's grandma, perhaps. Still, I purse my lips in annoyance at the real estate agent who's sprinting down the walkway toward me.

"Enjoy your new home, miss!" he says, quickly shoving the keys into my hand while scurrying to his car. He must know it's haunted. Don't they have to disclose that? You shouldn't be able to sell a haunted house to someone without warning them first.

It's the cutest house I've ever seen, and the low price shocked me at the time. Although now I know why. It's two

stories and all brick. The porch already has a rocking chair, several patio chairs, and a small table.

Perfect for enjoying a lazy summer day with a glass of lemonade and a good book. The sellers lined the walkway leading to the porch with grape hyacinths just starting to bloom and colorful columbine in several shades. I fell in love with it the moment I saw it. But now I'm not so sure.

Supposedly, the only problem the home inspector found was a damaged sewer line, which the sellers replaced without hesitation. That should have been another sign this was too good to be true.

I wonder if the inspector was as unbiased as he claimed, or did he know about the ghost? Maybe he's friends with the sellers. I moved here from Florida, so how would I know?

I had to rely on internet reviews to choose him. I don't even know if they license home inspectors. There should be some kind of regulation to protect people like me.

"Jerk!" I whisper angrily, the agent's tires squealing on the pavement while he rushes to get away. And once again, I feel guilty. I shouldn't call people names. It just feels like nothing goes my way anymore. Maybe it never did.

I stroll toward the front door, preparing to start my new life. The movers should be here any moment, and there will be a ton of stuff to unpack. As I open the door, pink-nighty grandma appears in front of me. "Why are you so angry?" she asks. "You're a pretty girl. I'd kill for your shiny hair and

that peaches and creme complexion. What could someone like you have to be angry about?"

My first thought is to ignore her like I usually do when confronted by ghostly-beings. Yes, I see dead people. I also talk to dead people. It really isn't as creepy as it sounds. I was around six years old when I first saw one.

My parents knew I could communicate with spirits, but they decided it was best not to let others know about my so-called gift. Too many people would want to lock me up to keep me away from polite society.

After my parents died and I went into foster care, I had to be extra cautious that no one knew about my talents. As a kid in the system, I couldn't admit to *that*. Spirits know I can see them, so sometimes it's tough to ignore when they're yelling at me in the grocery store's produce aisle.

My dearly departed husband didn't even know. I always thought about telling him. I planned to tell him eventually. Now it's too late. My parents are gone. My husband is gone. I'm the only one left. Life sucks sometimes, you know? At least it does for me.

And that's what brought me here. A sleepy mountain town in Colorado called Glenwood Springs. I took my husband's life insurance money, sold the beautiful house we worked so hard to create, and moved here to start a new life.

"I know you can see me," granny insists.

"I know you know." I sigh.

She smiles. "I'm Clara."

"Holly," I respond. "Holly Daniel."

"You're the new owner; I take it?"

"I am. And you're the resident spirit?"

"I sure am," she states proudly.

"How long have you been in the spirit world?"

She crooks her head, pausing a moment to think. "50 years in June."

"Why didn't you pass over?" I ask. They tell me that the spirits who remain in this world are the ones who decide not to go into the light. Some are afraid of it. Many of them tell me they were too busy or simply weren't interested in crossing over.

They've explained that the light is blindingly bright in the beginning. Most souls are instinctively attracted to the light and naturally gravitate toward it. It's the stubborn ones who insist on staying. At least for a while. The light fades eventually, and once it goes out, that's it. The spirit is a permanent ghost.

"How many residents have you run off?" I ask her.

She counts on her ghostly fingers. "Seven!"

Those poor people probably thought they were losing their minds. Nope. You really were being haunted. Some ghosts are more skilled than others at penetrating the physical world. They can open windows, close doors, and knock vases off shelves.

They can cause enough problems that even though a person can't see them, they know *something* is happening.

Have you ever experienced a sudden deep chill but didn't know why? It was probably a ghost passing through you. It's pretty freaky if you don't realize what's happening.

"Are you the only one who lives here?"

"I am," she sighs. "No one else has died here since me. Otherwise, I'd try to convince them to stay. It gets lonely!" She shrugs her frail shoulders, nodding at me. "Where are you from?"

I'm not interested in making small talk with Clara, but since we're roommates now, I suppose it would be best to humor her.

"Florida."

"No husband?" she asks. "Or wife?" She smacks her forehead, but it doesn't make a sound, which is always kind of weird to experience. "I never know these days. So much has changed since I was alive. It's changed even more since I became a spirit!"

"My husband was killed in combat," I explain.

"Oh, a soldier!"

"Yes."

"What about your parents? Siblings?"

Ugh. Why is this woman so nosy? Can't she just leave me alone? "My parents died when I was ten years old, and I was in foster care after that. I don't have any siblings."

"Ahhhhh," she says knowingly. "That's why you're so angry. The entire world is against you, and nothing good ever happens where you're concerned."

“No!” I snap at her. She raises a knowing eyebrow while I hold up a hand to emphasize my point. “I’ve traveled a long way to get here only to discover ghosts inhabit my new home.”

“Ghost.” She corrects me.

“Ghost. So, if you don’t mind, the movers will be here any moment, and I have a lot of work to do before I can take a break. I don’t have time to play 50 questions.”

“Sure, whatever you want. What do you plan to do here? Sit around and fume all day about how horrible your life is?”

“No.” I breathe deep, keeping my temper in check. “I think it would be best to get a job. Maybe bartending or waitressing. A job where I don’t have to think too hard. I can just show up for my shift and do what they tell me. Then I come home and refuse to think about work until my next shift.”

“Is that what you did in your previous life?” She laughs. “That’s a joke. Previous life. Get it? Since you aren’t a spirit.”

I groan at her grandma joke. “Yes. I get it. It’s hilarious. And no, in my previous life, as you say, I was in cybersecurity.”

“That’s the internet stuff, right?”

“More or less.”

“You young people can’t appreciate how much the world has changed in 50 years.” Clara makes a clucking noise and shakes her head.

“I’m sure we can’t, but if you don’t mind, the movers will be here soon, and I have some things in my car that I need to unload.”

“Fine, fine, I won’t bother you any further,” Clara grumbles and instantly disappears.

Great. Now I’m stuck with a roommate I don’t want. At least she’s dead. Why do I always have such lousy luck? And why didn’t she show up when I first looked at the house? There were plenty of other homes in town that I could have picked. Plenty of un-haunted ones, I bet.

“They’re all haunted!” she announces without reappearing which startles even me.

“You read minds too?” I respond.

“No,” she says, “I just know what you’re thinking! Trust me. Glenwood is full of paranormal activity. You’ll see what I mean once you get to know the place.”

Ugh. Why me?

OceanofPDF.com

2

I pull my long dark hair back into a ponytail to keep it out of the way and get to work. I'm pulling boxes from the back seat of my dilapidated Subaru when a large truck rumbles toward the house. That must be the movers.

He parks the truck in front of the house and hops down from the cab. He's a chubby man with a baseball cap that's seen better days and a cigar in his mouth.

I stare down at the top of his hat and wonder when he last washed it. And my things better not smell like cigar smoke now.

"Is dis dah right place?" he grunts.

"Is that Holly Daniel's stuff?" I point at the truck.

He consults the paper on his clipboard.

"Yep."

"What happened to George? George was driving back in Florida." And George wasn't smoking a cigar either.

“His kid got sick, so we switched in Nebraska.”

“My things are all there, right?” It would be just my luck if they lost everything I own.

He squints at me. “How am I supposed to know, lady? I just drive dah truck.”

“Yes, but you’re the one who’s ultimately responsible for my possessions. What if all my things are accidentally on their way to Iowa?”

“Iowa?” he grunts again, taking his cap off and scratching his bald head. “Why would they be in Iowa? The manifest said they were coming to Colorado.”

“I just meant that as an exam... never mind. Can I look in the back before you unload? Just to make sure.”

“Suit yourself, lady, but if dis ain’t your stuff - and there’s no reason it ain’t - I’m not taking it back to Florida.”

“Just open the back, please.” I insist.

He tosses the clipboard back into the truck cab and shuffles to the back of the truck, where he unlocks the latch and throws open the door.

I’m relieved when I see my dresser and several boxes with my handwriting on them. Phew. They switched drivers, but not trucks. I know it sounds weird and paranoid, but when you have crappy luck, you learn to triple and quadruple-check everything because you don’t trust anyone. If only I’d triple-checked the house I just bought, I wouldn’t be living with a ghost.

“Looks like my stuff. Please be extra careful when you unload it.”

He looks at me like I’m a complete moron. “That’s my job, lady.”

“Wonderful. And could you not smoke around my things or in the house? I hate cigar smell.”

Mr. Cigar Smoker looks like he’s regretting filling in for his friend, but he stubs the cigar out on the side of the truck and stashes it away in his shirt pocket for later use, I assume. At least he didn’t put it out on my furniture.

Within a few minutes, two more men arrive in their own truck. They must be here to help.

A tall, pale, skinny man steps out of the truck, staring up at the house and rubbing the back of his neck. “I can’t believe someone finally bought this place.”

“Why? Sumpin wrong with it?” Mr. Cigar asks. I should probably get his real name if I need to complain later.

“Haven’t you heard?” A short, round man with dark glasses, who was the passenger, responds with surprise. “It’s haunted!”

Mr. Cigar guffaws and slaps his knee. “I ain’t never heard of such a thing!”

Tall skinny guy looks uncomfortable. “You’re obviously not from around here, but the ghosts in this house have run off a bunch of people.”

I try not to smile. I barely know Clara, but I bet she’s proud that people think several ghosts live here. She must

have done a number on the previous owners.

Mr. Cigar still looks skeptical. Short round guy nods his head. "They're real, man. If you ever stayed at the Red Castle Hotel, you'd know."

"Oh, would I?" Mr. Cigar laughs.

"Everyone who stays there has a story about ghostly encounters," he says nodding his head vigorously.

"Everyone?" Mr. Cigar asks skeptically.

"Everyone!" both movers exclaim.

"But if it's so haunted, why would anyone go there in the first place?"

"For the experience!" Tall skinny guy insists, wiggling his fingers in the air like he's a ghost. "Unexplained noises, spirits watching them while they sleep, sudden chills in the hallway!"

He then grabs Mr. Cigar's arm for dramatic emphasis, who almost jumps out of his skin on the spot. "All right, all right. I got it. It's fun for tourists. Whatever. Let's get to work and get out of here. I don't think I want to stay in this town overnight."

The two movers laugh. I wonder how many times they've told those stories.

I'm relieved when the movers stop telling ghost stories and start moving my possessions into my house like they're supposed to. I keep busy unloading my car and hope that Clara doesn't decide to make an appearance and distract everybody.

When Mr. Cigar places a box on the ground in the yard and bends over, revealing way more of him than I want to see when his pants slip down the back, I quickly look away. But not before Clara appears, and I laugh at her disgusted expression.

Disdain is quickly replaced with an impish gleam. Uh oh, here we go. Placing a translucent hand on a measuring tape, that's sitting on top of a box next to him, she appears to concentrate very hard then pushes the tape measure to the ground.

"What the heck?" Mr. Cigar abruptly straightens up, hitches up his pants, and whirls around to stare at me as if I could have knocked the tape measure to the ground from several feet away.

I shrug and bite my lip while Clara waves her hand in front of her face to indicate she doesn't like how he smells. It's the lingering cigar smoke, I assume, which, despite putting it out hours ago, I can still smell it on him too. I'm surprised she can, though. I didn't know that ghosts had a sense of smell.

"You can smell?" I ask.

"Scuze me?" Mr. Cigar says.

"Of course, I can smell," Clara retorts. "How could you not smell that? You know it's bad when even the dead can smell the stinky old cigar amiright?"

Mr. Cigar places the measuring tape back on the box while looking confused. "Must have been the wind," he mutters

while returning to his previous position with the back of his pants slipping down once again.

Then Clara places her hand on the measuring tape, knocking it in the opposite direction this time.

“Hey!” he shouts.

This time I spin away with my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. Meanwhile, Clara is guffawing.

“The yard must be crooked,” he insists. “You had a good inspection, right? I’d be worried about how level this place is if I were you. These things don’t just fall to the ground on their own.”

“I’ll check into it the first chance I get,” I assure him.

This time he places the measuring tape on his belt. Bummer. I was looking forward to Clara really freaking him out.

“Is this what you did to the previous owners?” I ask.

Clara winks and disappears once again.

“Are you talking to me?” he asks.

“Just talking to myself,” I respond.

“Women,” he mutters, returning to his work.

Women don’t go around with their pants falling down, I think to myself.

Several hours later, there's a pile of boxes as tall as my head scattered throughout the living room, with the heaviest furniture, like my bed and dresser carefully placed in their rooms.

I'm relieved the movers are finally done. Mr. Cigar doesn't exactly look like the picture of health, and I wasn't sure how quickly he and his helpers could unload the truck. Clara reappears while I'm setting up the tv in the living room. "I'm impressed you can move objects," I tell her. "It's unusual."

"I've had fifty years of practice," she says smugly.

"Can you move anything you want?"

"No, it's mostly smaller things. Like the tape measure, a book, or a vase, for instance. If I get the right momentum, I can slam a door shut. Now that's fun." She laughs. "You want to really freak someone out slam some doors."

"Kind of harsh, don't you think?" I scold.

“But fun!” she exclaims. “Oh, don’t look so shocked. I don’t scare little kids like that or anything. Just the adults.”

I’m not sure that’s much better, but what do I know? I look around for the screwdriver I’m sure I just had, but I can’t find it anywhere.

“Looking for the screwdriver?” Clara asks.

“Are you sure you’re not a mind reader?”

“I passed on when I was 93. Add another 50 years of silently observing people, and I’m good at guessing what they’re thinking before they say it out loud.”

“Okay, so where’s my screwdriver?”

“You left it on the porch with the toolbox,” she points toward the patio.

“I don’t suppose you can get it for me,” I suggest, opening the front door.

“I’m not that good.” She laughs.

When I open the door, a fluffy gray cat spirit sprints between my legs and races up the stairs. “Hey! Wait!” I call after her. I stare wide-eyed at Clara. “She’s a ghost! A ghost cat!”

“You’ve never seen one?” Clara asks.

“Not until this moment! Does she live here?”

“Of course, she lives here!”

I point at Clara accusingly. “You said you were the only ghost.”

She looks embarrassed. “I’m the only *human* spirit.”

“Just to clarify, are there any other spirits here aside from you and the cat? Animal or human or whatever else might pop up and surprise me in the middle of the night?”

“Just me and the cat!” Clara assures me.

I don’t entirely believe her, but I guess it will have to do for now. “So now I have two roommates I didn’t plan on.”

“Hey, don’t look at it like that. I made you laugh earlier. I know I did.”

“Yeah, that was pretty funny with Mr. Cigar,” I admit.

“You and I are going to have a lot of fun. I just know it!” she declares, beaming at me.

“By the way, it looks like the porch light is burned out,” I mention flicking the switch up and down, to no avail. “I’ll start a shopping list.”

“Last time I checked, the Jacobsens left some light bulbs in the garage.”

“Perfect!” I exclaim, heading that way. I guess I park my car in there too. I turn on the lights, and gasp in shock when I see a blindingly bright pink Volkswagen Bus with a huge lavender daisy painted on the side.

From the looks of it, I’d guess it’s from the 1960s, although it appears to be in remarkable shape. “What the heck?” I exclaim.

“They left the bus!” Clara says, clapping her hands and startling me so badly that I jump.

“If we’re going to get along here, you have to stop sneaking up on me like that!” I scold her.

“Okay, sorry,” she says, holding her hands up in surrender. “I keep forgetting you can see and hear me. I normally move about however I want because no one realizes it.”

“What is this thing?” I wave my hands in the air as if there’s anything else in here that I’d be upset about.

“It belonged to the previous owners. They restored it, so I don’t know why they wouldn’t take it. Unless, of course, they thought it was haunted...” Clara trails off.

“What did you do?” I ask accusingly.

“I may have tagged along a few times while they were driving and freaked them out,” she admits.

“You can go in cars too?”

She wiggles her hand. “Just this one.”

“Explain!” I demand, planting my hands on my waist. I quickly realize just how limited my ghost knowledge is. After hiding it for years, I can see I’m out of touch with ghostly-beings.

“I can’t ride in just any car. But for some reason, I can in this one. I enjoyed sitting in the bus and watching them restore it. One day, when they took it out for a test drive, it shocked me to learn that I could stay in the bus while they drove around town. It was exhilarating!”

“But you can’t leave the property otherwise?”

“Nope!” Clara shakes her head. “And I can’t leave the bus when it isn’t parked here, unfortunately.”

This has been a lot to take in for one day. “But why this particular vehicle?”

“Maybe because they restored it on the property I’m already attached to? I’m not sure. Believe me, no one was as surprised as me -well, I guess the owners were really surprised...” Clara then laughs at the memory until she sees me glaring at her. “...that I could stay in the bus while they drove it.”

“And instead of just keeping quiet, you had to torment them while they drove?”

“I didn’t *torment* them. Not on purpose anyway. But I got so excited when I realized I was still in the car with them as we drove down the road, I bounced up and down in the backseat and shouted, wahoo. Then I accidentally kicked the back of the passenger seat so hard Mrs. Jacobsen felt it, and she screamed, which nearly caused her husband to run off the road.”

I shake my head vigorously. Those poor people. Almost wrecking their car because there’s a ghost riding in the back seat.

“You try being stuck in the same place for fifty years and see how excited you get when you suddenly realize you can go for a ride in the car!”

“But if that was the only thing that ever happened, why would they think the bus was haunted? Wouldn’t they just assume it was a fluke?”

Clara looks at the ground guiltily.

“That’s what I thought. You continued to mess with them after that, didn’t you?”

She stomps her foot like a spoiled child. “It’s so much fun, though! But in case you were wondering, it runs great. You should keep it.” She urges.

“I don’t need it. I already have a car.” I remind her.

“Your car won’t last much longer, though. That drive from Florida pretty much did it in.”

“What are you talking about? What do you know about cars?”

“When you’ve existed for 143 years, you can tell just by listening to a car when it’s in trouble.”

“You’re out of your mind if you think I’m going to believe that.” I insist.

“Suit yourself,” she says. “But you may want to check into a AAA membership because you’ll need to have it towed pretty soon.”

I sigh loudly. Just what I needed. As if I don’t have enough to do already. Now I have to call the real estate agent and tell him to pick up the bus. I don’t care if it runs perfectly. I don’t need another car, and I most definitely don’t need the hassle of trying to get rid of an unwanted vehicle.

I stomp back inside the house, ready to call him and give him an earful, when I remember I didn’t get the light bulbs. I trudge back out to the garage and flip on the lights as I glare at the car again. It’s so pink I almost don’t need to

turn any lights on. I swear it could light up the entire garage by itself.

I must admit, the paint job is flawless. Bright. But flawless. Brand new tires too. I can't help but laugh when I think of the looks on their faces when they thought the car was haunted. But I won't admit to Clara that it's funny. That would only encourage her.

And it was still inconsiderate to abandon it here and leave me to deal with it. I locate the lightbulbs and carry them back into the house. Finally, something useful that the sellers left behind. When I get inside the cat appears at my feet.

"I don't even know your name," I tell her as she looks up at me expectantly. She's a gorgeous cat. Long, fluffy silver hair with streaks of white and lighter gray running throughout. "Clara! What's the cat's name?" I ask out loud, knowing she must be nearby.

"Ask her yourself!" she says from somewhere in the ether.

Naturally, I assume she's joking. "What's your name?"

"It's Mystery," the cat responds.

I'm so shocked I nearly drop all the lightbulbs. "Clara!" I shout. "You better not be messing with me!"

When Clara reappears, she's laughing so hard she nearly falls over.

"The cat talks?"

"Of course, I talk!" Mystery responds indignantly, as if somehow, it's insulting that I should question a talking spirit

cat.

“How?” I shriek. This is all just too much. Even for me.

“Felines always talk to their humans,” Mystery explains and if I’m not mistaken, she rolls her eyes while doing it like I’m too uneducated to be believable. “But because I’m a ghost, and you’re a spirit communicator, you can actually understand me.”

“I have to sit down,” I sigh, collapsing onto a chair at the kitchen table. “How long have you been around?”

“I lost track after several decades.”

“I discovered her when I passed.” Clara adds.

Mystery appears to tire of this conversation, strutting out of the kitchen with her tail in the air. I’m feeling rather overwhelmed at this point. New house, new roommates, both human and feline, and an extra car. It’s a lot to take in all in one day and nothing is going according to my plans.

“All right. Whatever.” This is going nowhere fast, and I have other things to do. “Right now, I want to find a job. I noticed a flyer at the gas station on my way into town that the Red Castle Hotel is looking for a bartender. Isn’t that the one the movers said is haunted?”

Clara looks at me wide-eyed. “Uhhhh yeah.”

“What? What do I care if it’s haunted? I’m kind of used to it, remember?”

“It’s not that. The ghosts there are real. It’s that I don’t know how much longer they’ll be in business.”

“Is this one of those things you claim to just know? Like the car is about to break down?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it on the news. That famous pop star Lucy M was staying in the hotel when someone stole her signature tiara from her head while she was asleep.”

“She sleeps with her tiara on?”

“That’s what the kids are saying.” Clara smirks.

“Do they have any leads?” I ask, as if I know something about leads. But I watch plenty of cop shows on tv, so I happen to know a thing or two. Emphasis on *a* thing probably.

“Nope! They say there’s no record of the electronic code being used to open the door. There isn’t a record of the door opening either after she went to bed at 11 PM. She woke up at 8 AM and realized the tiara was gone. They’re saying only a ghost could have done that.”

“Why would the ghosts steal it? It’s not like they can use a tiara or need the money.”

“I agree, but the authorities still can’t explain how someone could get in and out of the room without opening the door.”

“Uhhhh the window?”

“The windows don’t open in that room, Miss Smarty Pants.”

“Oh. Well, that is kind of weird then. That still doesn’t mean the ghosts stole it. And do people really stay there

just for the paranormal experience?”

“Absolutely!”

“Hold on a sec. What does any of that have to do with whether the hotel is staying in business?” I ask.

“The publicity has been bad for the hotel. Lucy M has billions of fans worldwide, and she’s been throwing daily tantrums all over social media about the theft. She claims that the missing tiara was her special mojo, and she needs it back, or she can’t perform,” Clara explains.

“I think I’ll check it out, anyway. Maybe they’ll be desperate to hire someone, and I’m obviously not afraid of ghosts, am I?”

“If you need a job so bad, why don’t you just get one in cybersecurity or whatever you said it was?”

“To be clear, I don’t *need* a job. I *want* a job. With my husband’s life insurance, the sale of our house, and the money they paid to buy me out of my contract at my old job, I don’t *have* to work. I just want to do something easy. Besides, I’m not sure I can get a job in cybersecurity these days.”

Clara waggles her finger at me. “Did you get fired from your last job?”

“I didn’t get fired.” I waggle back. “They suggested that it would be best if I let them buy me out of my contract and perhaps find work in another field.”

“Why? What did you do?” Clara asks.

“Let’s just say it was a very stressful job, and at times I got rather...” I trail off.

“Angry,” she adds, nodding her head knowingly.

“Can you appreciate just how much pressure came with that job? I dealt with some very sensitive accounts. I’m talking big-name pharmacies and online gambling. Criminals try to hack those accounts 24/7. The pressure is intense.”

“Okay, you win—no need to get all wound up. I could see where bartending might seem a lot less stressful. Do you have any experience? I assume you’d need to know certain drink recipes and all that. I know from watching YouTube that some drinks you shake in a shaker and others you stir with a fancy spoon.”

At this, she mimes, shaking and stirring, and I can’t help but smile. A ghost watching bartenders make drinks on the internet. What will this day bring next? I probably shouldn’t ask.

“I worked as a bartender in college, so I kind of know what I’m doing. Plus, I think tips might be good.”

“Drunk tourists,” she says.

“Exactly.” I nod my head.

“I heard the owner might sell it to one of those chain hotels.”

I shrug. “Whatever. It’s none of my business anyway,” I insist. “I just got here, remember? But I’ll pay them a visit and see if they’ll give me an application. I’ll also call that

blasted real estate agent and tell him to get the bus out of my garage.”

“You might want to wait on that until you know your car is okay.”

“My car is fine. And I want that bus out of here!”

OceanofPDF.com

Early the next morning, I leave a message for the real estate agent to pick up the bus. I add that I didn't appreciate them dumping it without my permission.

When I find myself staring up at the Red Castle Hotel, I'm in awe. I can see where it gets its name. It really looks like a castle. There is a pair of massive stone towers in the middle of everything, and I wonder what it's like to stand at the top of them. I bet you can see the entire town from there.

As I walk through the spacious courtyard, I love seeing spring flowers like daffodils, tulips, and snapdragons lining the walkway. I breathe deep, enjoying the delicately scented pink and white blooms on the trees growing throughout the area.

Wrought-iron tables are scattered about with guests enjoying their morning coffee. The glorious fountain in the middle of the courtyard shoots water high into the air while

surrounded by smaller fountains dancing merrily in the sunlight.

A sign on the building tells me it's a historical landmark and explains some of its history. They made the red bricks from Colorado sandstone in the late 1800s.

I can't imagine how they constructed a building like this back then. And all the way up here in the mountains. It must have been treacherous hauling in the supplies and equipment.

I wonder what will happen if they sell it to the large hotel chain. It will be a shame if they change it just to match all their other hotels.

I don't even have to be inside the hotel to sense the spirits that live here. Although what many people don't realize is that there are ghosts everywhere; they just can't see them. Lots of places are haunted.

As I enter the lobby there's a clerk making notes at the front desk alongside a spirit dressed as a porter. From the way he's dressed, I'd guess he's from the late 1800s. Perhaps he was here when it opened.

He carefully watches over her shoulder, reading whatever she's scribbling. When he looks up, I glance away, hoping he doesn't notice me staring at him. But when I hear him gasp, I know it's too late.

It would be a lot easier if I could pretend with ghosts too. People are easy. They just assume no one talks to ghosts, and if I don't say anything out loud, they're none the wiser.

On the other hand, spirits know right away that I'm a communicator.

The porter ghost rushes through the desk clerk, and I watch her shudder - it must have felt cold - but she returns to her work without looking up. If there are as many ghosts here as I sense, she's probably used to it.

Unexplained noises and occurrences. Unnatural cold spots. What feels like an icy finger tapping a person on the shoulder from time to time. I could see where this place would be popular with tourists. Enthusiasts who are looking for a thrill or the experience of the paranormal.

No doubt they tell wild stories when they get home. Some of them are true. Many of them made up. The ghost flies straight at me. I'm sure he's testing me. I continue to walk toward the desk clerk.

"You're a communicator!" he whoops. "You're rare."

I glance at him but say nothing.

"We get so many charlatans in here claiming they can talk to the spirits, but you're the real thing, aren't you?"

I continue to ignore him. I don't need to start my job application with "talks to ghosts."

"You can ignore me all you want," he insists. "I know you see me."

"Excuse me," I approach the clerk at the desk.

She looks up and smiles. "Welcome to the Red Castle Hotel. Can I start your check-in?"

“I’m not here to check-in. I live here. As of yesterday, anyway. I’m wondering if the bartending position is still open?”

“The job is still open, and you can talk to the hotel manager Gary Sinclair. He’s right over there,” she says, pointing to a stocky, balding man with round glasses that keep sliding down his nose - despite him pushing them up repeatedly as he talks.

“Great! Thank you so much,” I tell her. She seems pleasant enough.

“So, you’re new here?” she asks.

“I just moved in yesterday. The old Jacobsen place.”

She giggles. “Oh, I heard that place is haunted, and that’s why they sold it. Have you seen any ghosts yet?”

“I haven’t, but I’ll be sure to let you know if I do.” I wink at her before heading over to the manager. I’ve been lying almost my entire life about seeing spirits. Now is hardly the time to come clean.

He pauses his conversation as I approach. “Hello, Mr. Sinclair. My name is Holly Daniel. I just moved to town, and I’d like to apply for the bartending position.”

“Really!” he exclaims with so much enthusiasm it makes me a little nervous. Whenever someone is that excited about filling a job, I’ve found it often means there’s a big catch.

“I must deal with another matter, but it should only take a moment. Why don’t you head into the bar over there,” he

points out the area to his left, “and I’ll be right in. Just have a seat. Help yourself to a drink if you’d like.”

“Okay, thank you,” I respond as I head somewhat reluctantly toward the bar. Now I have a bad feeling I’m going to regret this. I seriously consider sneaking out and running. It’s not like he knows who I am, but when I turn back, he’s waving me on toward the bar.

“Go ahead, help yourself. I’ll be right there. I promise!”

OceanofPDF.com

A red brick archway leads to an elegant yet quiet bar. I wonder if it's always this slow. A sparkling chandelier lights the entryway, and the carpet is so plush I want to take off my shoes and sink my toes into it.

The actual bar looks like it's made from walnut. It's a chocolatey brown color with dark brown streaks marbled throughout. It's spacious, with numerous stools arranged at the bar.

Tables are spread throughout, along with French doors that open to the courtyard. A soft breeze wafts over me, carrying the sounds of birds chirping merrily.

This could be nice, I tell myself. I can already imagine serving a Vesper Martini to a friendly tourist who tells me about the day he had hiking in the Colorado mountains. A sign in the lobby said they have concerts every Friday

evening in the courtyard in the summer. I think I could really get into this place.

I suppose an interview - especially one in the morning - isn't the best time for a cocktail, but a glass of seltzer with a slice of lime sounds refreshing. I go behind the bar, locate a glass, throw in some ice, seltzer, and add the lime.

The bar is mostly empty except for a couple at a table drinking Bloody Marys. If it's this slow all the time, this could be a rather dull job. Although I'm sure anything is better than the job I had before.

In my previous position the pressure was so great I legit thought I was losing my mind. It always felt like I was carrying a bag of rocks on my back and that I might collapse at any moment.

And then, one day, I kind of did. The next thing I know, Human Resources offers me a big fat check to go away quietly. And here I am, hoping to tend bar at a hotel in the mountains. I'm sure this will be much better for me. A job like this is just what I need.

"Are the rumors true?" the ghostly porter asks me as he floats in the doorway.

Fine. I'll bite. "What rumors?" I ask, barely above a whisper, hoping the couple across the bar doesn't notice me talking to myself.

"You're applying for the bartending position?"

"Yes. I am. Now go away."

“I’m not going anywhere, lovely lady. Do you know how long it’s been since I had an actual living entity to converse with?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. Now go away and don’t screw this up for me.”

“I also heard you bought the Jacobsen place.”

“I did.”

“Tell Clara I said hello!”

“How do you know about Clara if you can’t leave here?”

“Ghosts gossip too, you know,” he informs me with a self-satisfied look.

Then he rushes over and plops himself on top of the bar. “I hope you get the job. I just know we’ll be best friends. I’m Samuel, by the way. What’s your name?”

I glare at him. “Go away.”

“That’s an odd name.”

“Ha ha. You’re a comedian too. Now go away.”

Samuel scowls at me while pushing a glass from the bar. I notice it’s easier for him than it is for Clara. I wonder if it’s because he’s been a ghost for a lot longer than she has. The glass crashes to the ground and breaks, and the couple sitting across the room turn to see what the ruckus is.

“Now, look what you’ve done!” I cry. “I’ll be fired from this job before it even starts!”

I hurry around the bar to clean up the broken glass before Mr. Sinclair comes back, but it’s too late. He’s in the

doorway, staring at me open-mouthed. There goes the new job. I'm off to a fantastic start here.

He hurries over and plants himself in front of me.

Samuel sticks his tongue out at me like a belligerent child before disappearing in a wink.

"Look, Mr. Sinclair, I'm so sorry. It was an accident. I'll clean it up. I'll pay for the glass. I'm terribly sorry. I don't know how I could be so clumsy."

The words spill out of my mouth one after the other, and that familiar feeling of panic wells up inside me. I was so sure things would be different, and everything would be easier here.

"You can see them!" he exclaims.

"See what?"

"You see the ghosts. You're a *real* communicator." He hisses at me while glancing around in case someone might overhear.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He stares at me. "You were talking to one of them. I can tell."

"I'll just clean this up and be on my way. I'm sorry to have taken up your time."

"I can pay you!" he blurts.

"To clean up the glass?"

"No!" he exclaims, grabbing my arm; he's so excited. "I can pay you to communicate with the spirits in this hotel."

This guy is off his rocker, but I pause before telling him that.

“We need to catch whoever stole Lucy M’s tiara,” he whispers, constantly peering over at the couple to ensure they can’t hear him. “It’s a huge mystery, and it’s costing us business. Some people think it’s the ghosts.”

My curiosity gets the better of me. “Why?” I ask.

“Because of the way it happened. No one can explain how someone, or *something*, got into and out of Lucy M’s room undetected.”

He looks so desperate. Part of me wants to help him, but I don’t know how. Besides, my ability to communicate with spirits is a long-kept secret, and I don’t open up to just anyone. It seems almost unnatural at this point.

“If we don’t solve this mystery soon, the owner will sell to Millur, the big corporate hotel chain.”

“Would that be the worst thing in the world?” I ask. “Considering it would still be a hotel. At least they aren’t talking about tearing it down to make storage units.”

“They’ve already said they’ll change everything. They’ll gut the entire place and completely remodel it. It will no longer be the historic Red Castle Hotel. It will look like exactly like every other Millur hotel out there. You’ve looked around, right? You must see how unique this place is. All the history and the atmosphere. That would be horrible!” He folds his hands and lifts them up to me like he’s praying for me to help him.

I feel for the guy, but considering I have no connection to this town, except the home I just purchased, I can't quite bring myself to get worked up about it. Not worked up enough to reveal my secrets, anyway. "I'm sure there are others who could help you," I tell him.

"But I've tried that!"

"Tried what?" I ask.

"I hired two other people who claimed to be spirit communicators, but they couldn't tell me anything. I don't think they were authentic. I'm just so desperate!"

Now I'm angry. I despise scammers. And when it comes to communicating with spirits, there are plenty of them. Buy an EMF reader online for \$40 and charge people a pile of money so you can lie about their dead loved ones.

It infuriates me. There are very few legitimate spirit communicators anywhere, so for this guy to have supposedly hired two of them is the first clue they're fake.

"I'm sorry, I just don't think I can help you," I mumble. And then, because I can't think of anything better to do, I run from the bar, through the lobby, out the front door, and into the late morning sunlight.

I feel bad. He's desperate, and I'm mad that he's already been scammed by fake communicators, but I didn't come here to talk to ghosts. I came here to get away from my past.

I get in my car, the tears threatening to fall. Why is this happening to me? I don't want to talk to ghosts and solve crimes. I just want things to be easy.

It gets even worse when I turn the key and I'm met with the worst sound one could imagine coming from a car engine. "Are you kidding me?" I shout, banging my hand on the steering wheel. I shut the engine off and try it again, hoping it was just a fluke. Nope. This time it sounds worse. I turn the engine off again.

But then I try a third time because I'm just that kind of person. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment. On the third go-round, I get nothing. Not even that horrific sound. Wonderful. This day just can't get any better.

I remember Clara's ominous warning that my car was on the verge of collapse. How could she have been right about that? It has to be a coincidence, right?

I search on my phone for the nearest mechanic and decide to walk over when I discover it's only three blocks away. That gives me a chance to check out the town a little on foot, anyway.

After coming from Florida, it's been a delightful surprise to see mountain peaks so close I swear I could just reach out and touch them. Glenwood Springs is nestled among the mountains in a valley and, from what I've seen so far, has all sorts of cute shops that I can't wait to check out. When I'm in a better mood, that is.

I may not have to find work right away, but I wasn't counting on buying a new car this soon, either. I head west on 6th Street and notice a used bookstore I will check out soon. But first things first. I have to find out what's going on with my car.

I also walk past a brewery that serves craft beer they brew on the premises. When everyone in Florida found out I was moving to Colorado, the first thing they all told me was that I must try the beer.

Which beer, I asked them. All of it, they insisted. They claimed there was a brewery on every street corner. I don't know about every street corner, but I've noticed there are several in this small town alone.

I'm wistful when I think about how Ben, my husband, would have loved a place like that. But now it's just me in a new town with a broken car. And someone I just met begging me to ask a bunch of ghosts if they stole a famous

singer's tiara. Why does things like this always happen to me?

As I approach the auto shop, I see a spirit sitting outside in a lawn chair. He's wearing a uniform, but I can't tell how long he's been gone just from that. I ignore him, but his face lights up when he spots me.

Yet another reminder of how I absolutely don't need to make a career out of talking to ghosts. It's too dangerous. I've spent my life hiding my gift because there are people who would be afraid of what I do and want to harm me. And then there are the people who would be overly excited by what I can do and never give me a moment's peace.

But I feel bad for the hotel manager and the people who work there. It looks like an amazing piece of history, and it would be a shame to sell it to a big corporation. It still isn't enough to convince me to do what the manager wants me to though.

"Hello, miss! How can I help you today?" a friendly mechanic behind the counter asks me.

The spirit stands eagerly at my side. No doubt waiting for me to get my issue addressed so we can chat. He'll be waiting a long time because I'm not talking to him.

"I parked my car at the Red Castle Hotel. It made two horrible noises and then no noise, and now it won't start."

"What kind of noise?" the mechanic asks.

I hesitate. Does he really want me to imitate the noise?

He looks at me hopefully.

I clear my throat. I try to recreate the awful noise the best I can. I must have done a good job because the mechanic looks uncomfortable, and the ghost next to me actually puts his hands over his ears.

“Oh, knock it off; it’s not that bad!” I snap at him without thinking first.

“Um, what?” the mechanic looks confused. First, I make this screeching noise, and then I appear to argue with an imaginary friend.

“I was just talking to myself. I’m weird like that,” I explain.

It’s sad that having arguments out loud with myself is less problematic than talking to a ghost.

“But that’s the noise your car made?” he asks.

I nod. “And the second time, it was even worse.” I take a deep breath to make that sound, but he quickly holds up his hand, and the ghost covers his ears again.

“It’s okay. I got it. But your car shouldn’t be making noises like that.”

“I figured as much. The third time I tried it, there was nothing.”

“I have a few minutes to spare. Why don’t we drive the tow truck there? I’ll look at it, and if necessary, we’ll tow it back here.”

“Let’s go!” I tell him, eager to get my car running again.

“I’m Tom, by the way.”

“I’m Holly.”

“All right, Holly, let’s get the tow truck and look at your car.”

It takes about a minute to get to the hotel, and after I pop the hood for him, he pokes his head inside. I don’t like the noises he’s making to himself in there. It sounds dire.

He fusses for a while and straightens up to look at me. I have my fingers crossed behind my back, hoping that will make a difference in what he’s about to say. “Why don’t you try starting it again?”

I eagerly jump into the driver’s seat, praying that it will have magically cured itself in the last half hour. I cross my fingers, but when I turn the key, still nothing.

“I’m afraid it isn’t good. How many miles do you have on this?” he asks.

“About 175,000.” I cringe as those words come out of my mouth. Of course, it isn’t good. That’s like a billion miles. And even if he can repair it, will it be worth it?

“I can’t tell for certain until I get it into the shop and up on the lift, but so far, I’m guessing the transmission is shot.”

I sigh.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s not what you wanted to hear, and I hate delivering news like that, but you may be looking at a new car. Are you staying at the hotel?”

“No, I was here applying for a job. I bought the Jacobsen place and moved in yesterday.”

“Really?” he asks, sounding surprised. “I hear that place is haunted.”

“This is what everyone tells me.” I smile at him, but it’s forced.

He waits for me to offer more, but when I don’t, he continues. “We can hook your car up now and tow it back to the shop. I’ll have our parts runner give you a ride home, too.”

“Okay, let’s do that. I obviously can’t leave the car abandoned here.”

Tom hooks my car up to the tow truck, and we head back to the shop. I have this sense of dread in my stomach that this will either be the end of my car or the beginning of a freakishly large repair bill. Either way, I have a horrible feeling. This hasn’t been the best start to my new life.

And even though I’m trying to forget about my conversation with the manager at the hotel, it keeps creeping back into my thoughts. I just really wanted to make drinks and listen to people tell me about their day. I don’t want to be a professional ghost whisperer.

Although wouldn’t that be the ultimate irony? I come here to start anew but end up using the one thing I’ve always hidden from. Tom tells a teenage boy who works in the shop to give me a ride home. When we pull up in front of the house, Clara is relaxing in a rocking chair on the porch.

“Wow, that’s freaky you bought the Jacobsen’s house. I hear it’s haunted, you know.”

“There’s a ghost sitting on the porch right now,” I tell him as I wave at Clara.

He laughs. First, he insists it's haunted; then, he thinks I'm joking.

"Thanks for the ride," I tell him.

"No problem, miss. Tom will call you after he looks over your car."

I drag my feet as I approach the porch. I know just what Clara will say.

"Car trouble?" she asks.

"It's just a coincidence!" I insist.

She chuckles. "Yeah, sure. Did you leave it with Tom?"

I nod my head.

"Good. He's the most trustworthy. He'll tell you exactly what's happening with it. Although I can already tell you that it's a goner."

"Great. I really didn't want to buy a new car right off the bat."

"There's a car ready and waiting for you in the garage," she reminds me.

"That's not my car."

"It is now," she laughs.

"I don't see myself driving a bright pink VW Bus."

"But it's free!"

I roll my eyes, and she asks, "Did you get the bartending job?"

"No." I snap.

"Why not? Was it already filled?"

I almost lie out of habit when I remember she knows my secret. “The manager wants to hire me to talk to the ghosts at the hotel.”

Clara stands up so fast she nearly knocks the rocker over backward. “He knows?”

I swipe my hand through the air. “It was a careless mistake. A spirit purposely knocked a glass off the bar to get my attention, and I yelled at him.”

Clara smiles. “Ohhhh I bet that was Samuel. He’s a tricky little bugger.”

I nod my head. “He asked about you.”

“And Sinclair wants to pay you to talk to the ghosts? Why on earth would he do that?”

“He thinks it could help solve the mystery of the missing tiara. Some people think the ghosts know who did it, or maybe it was the ghosts who stole the tiara. Since no one else can talk to the ghosts, though, he’s convinced that a spirit communicator could solve the mystery.”

Clara thinks for a bit. “Interesting theory. But if he wants to pay you to talk to the ghosts, why wouldn’t you? You’re willing to tend bar for a paycheck. Just do what you’re naturally good at instead.”

“It isn’t safe for me to admit that I’m a spirit communicator.” I insist.

“Oh, poppycock!” she exclaims. “And it’s not like you’d be taking out a billboard announcing it. You’ll just be providing a unique service to a company that needs you.”

"I'm just not interested, okay?" I snap at her.

"Suit yourself grumpy," she tells me before disappearing into thin air again.

I unlock the door and fling it open. Just what I needed in a roommate. A temperamental ghost with an attitude. She doesn't understand. She's not the one with the so-called gift. She's just a plain old ghost. What problems would she have? Aside from being dead, anyway.

When my phone rings and I see it's the mechanic, my heart skips a beat out of nervousness. Might as well bite the bullet.

"Hey, Tom," I answer with a nervous laugh.

"Hi, Holly. I'll be frank with you. I don't have good news."

I take a deep breath. "Okay, go ahead."

"Unfortunately, it's just as I feared. Your transmission is shot. There are numerous belts and hoses that are cracked and worn. The rack and pinion needs replacing soon, and several fluids should be flushed.

"And if I wanted to address all of that, what would it cost?"

"I wrote up an estimate for you if you really want to make all the repairs, but if I were you, I think your money would be better spent on a newer car."

You know it's bad when the mechanic, who stands to make a ton of money on repairs, tells you to give it up and get another car.

"Okay, could I have a day to think about it?"

"No problem. Take your time."

“Thanks,” I mumble as I hang up the phone.

When the phone rings again, I assume it’s Tom, and he forgot something, but the number isn’t one I recognize.

“Hello? This is Holly.”

“Hi, Holly! It’s Michael calling about the VW Bus in your garage.”

“Oh. Yeah. The sellers left it here, and I’d like to know when they plan to pick it up.” As the words come out of my mouth, I realize there’s a simple solution sitting right under my nose, or my roof if you will.

“They intended to leave that for you if you wanted, but if you insist, I can send someone over there to get it.”

“They just wanted to *give* me the car?” If that’s the case, I obviously know why, and it wasn’t out of the kindness of their hearts. It’s because they think it’s haunted, and they wanted to get rid of it the easy way.

“Yes. That’s what they told me. If you want it, it’s yours. If you check the kitchen drawer closest to the back door, you’ll find the title and it’s already signed over to you.”

I open the drawer, and sure enough. There’s the car title. How convenient for them.

“But I don’t want you to feel you don’t have a choice here. I can pick it up first thing in the morning if you want.” He assures me.

“Ummm, why don’t you hold off on that for now and give me some time with it,” I tell him. This may be the first thing to go right since I’ve been here. Although I still don’t know

that I need a pink VW with a lavender daisy. But if it's free,
do I really care what it looks like?

OceanofPDF.com

The next morning, I'm awake before the sun. It was quiet all night. No more visits from Clara or any other spirit, but my dreams were full of me chasing after ghosts and begging them to talk to me.

I eventually decide it won't do me any good to toss and turn, so I get up, throw on a pair of leggings, a hoodie, and my running shoes, and head out for an easy run toward town.

I must remember to pay attention to the landmarks to find my way home. Maybe it isn't the best idea to go jogging in a strange town at daybreak, but I need to clear my head.

I run toward the mammoth hot springs pools on the east side of town. I read in a brochure at the gas station that the pools are over several hundred feet long, but I refuse to believe it until I see it. I pause on the pedestrian walkway, stunned at the sight.

They aren't open yet, but staff members are already there tidying up before a day of swimming. There's even a man on what looks almost like a Zamboni, but instead of clearing ice, he's cleaning off the cement pool deck.

The brochure also said that visitors have come from all over the world, since the mid-1800s, to soak in its naturally heated waters that contain over one dozen minerals which bubble up from deep within the earth. Maybe I should have gone for a swim last night after the disaster at the hotel.

After several minutes of staring at the water, I realize I can't do that all day, although watching the colorful fountain and listening to the gently rippling water is tempting. But that doesn't count as exercise, so I pivot and head over the bridge that spans the Colorado River.

I want to check out more of the shops and restaurants I noticed yesterday. After I exit the bridge and continue along Grand Ave, which appears to be one of the main streets through town, I smell the most mouth-watering scent imaginable.

It's coming from a bakery, but I tell myself if I'm out for a run, the last thing I need is a donut. I pass the shop slowly while peering in. I wave at the woman flipping the sign on the door to Open, and she waves at me to come in. I notice that she's so short she almost stands on her toes to reach the sign.

I shake my head and tell myself I shouldn't, but then I get all of two doors beyond it. Oh, who am I kidding? I laugh as I

turn on my heel to go back. The sign reads *Sol Conceptions*. That's an unusual name for a bakery. The woman is behind the counter when I go in, and she's giggling.

"Change your mind already?"

"I just couldn't pass up the smell. How many customers do you lure into your web with that scent?"

"A lot!" she laughs. "Are you new or just visiting? I haven't seen you in here before."

"I'm brand new. I just bought the Jacobsen place." I cringe as I say it. I decided to quit telling people because I'm tired of them asking if it's haunted. Except I forgot already.

She smiles. She has kind eyes. And she has an almost calming, motherly way about her. Yet her turquoise cat eyeglasses lend a hip air to her style.

"And the first thing everyone asks you is if it's haunted."

"Yes!" I throw my hands in the air. "Everyone has to comment on it."

"It's a small town. Get used to it."

The bakery walls are colored in a cheerful yellow paint with hand painted images of flowers, butterflies, and sunbeams throughout. I stare at the display case where she has colorful cakes, cookies, cupcakes, scones, bagels, and many other tempting goodies for sale.

"How am I supposed to decide what to pick?" I moan. "It all looks so good."

"You'll just have to try something different every time you come in."

“Oh, I see what you’re up to. First, you lure customers in with the smell, and then you get them addicted, so they have to keep coming back.”

“You’ve only been here a short time, and you’ve already discovered my secret. I’m Juliet, by the way, and you are?”

“Holly,” I tell her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Holly.” It’s then I detect the faintest of southern accents.

“You’re not from here either.”

“The accent still slips out sometimes. I’m from East Texas. Right across the street from Louisiana.”

“I’m from Florida. Jupiter, to be exact.”

“And what brings you to the mountains of Colorado? Do you have family here?”

I hesitate. I rarely want to tell people about my past. Sometimes they don’t know what to say. Other times they say oh, that’s too bad and then they launch into their own story to show me they know what it’s like to be me.

You really don’t; I want to tell them. But for some reason, Juliet seems like the kind of person who would be easy to talk to. Like she’d do more listening than talking.

“I don’t have any family. My parents died when I was quite young, and my husband was an Army Ranger who was killed in combat two years ago.”

Juliet’s big brown eyes are full of warmth and understanding. I also like that she has some meat on her

bones. I would never trust a skinny baker. “I’m sorry for your loss, but I’m glad you’ve come here.”

And that’s all she said. And it was perfect. “Thank you. As long as I can keep coming back here to fill up on your pastries, I think it will be okay.”

“Well, of course, it will! Now quick, decide on something, and I’ll get you a cup of coffee. Your first treat is on me.”

I pick out a bagel with cream cheese and a coffee with two sugars. After that a crowd of customers stream into her shop, and I don’t have a chance to talk to her further. I move to a table outside instead and watch the town come to life for the day.

Shop keepers turn their signs to Open as they place displays and moveable shelves outside. They have exhibits and clever signs showing the day’s specials, mannequins with clothes and accessories, plants and flowers, tea and spices, to name a few.

There’s still an early spring chill in the air, but the birds are loud and busy getting about their day as well, and it’s a sure sign that spring is only a moment away.

I sink my teeth into the best bagel I’ve ever tasted. I’m not sure if it’s the mountain air or the Colorado sunshine, but this is incredible. Of course, the first good restaurant I find has to be a bakery. I came here to start a new life, but I hadn’t planned on gaining 50 pounds in the process.

I reason with myself that if I always walk over here, it will burn off some of the calories. While I sip my coffee, I catch

snippets of the conversation next to me.

“They called us all in for a meeting last night and warned us if things don’t turn around soon, there will be layoffs.” A woman with glasses and frizzy hair says.

“That’s horrible,” her friend with a hat responds. “It has to be the ghosts, right? Who else could enter someone’s room undetected? But then what? It’s not like they can put a ghost in jail. It’s a no-win situation.”

Frizzy hair shakes her head sadly. “I’m hearing rumors that the owner wants to sell to Millur.”

“Oh great! Just what the world needs. Another cookie cutter chain hotel, making the fat cats even richer than they already are. They’ll ruin it.”

Why did I sit here? I feel bad listening to the ladies talk. I wonder what they would think if they knew I could talk to ghosts. I could ask the spirits in the hotel if any of them know what happened. One may have even witnessed the crime firsthand and know who stole the tiara.

But that’s not why you moved here; I remind myself. You moved here to start over and get away from all the stress and pressure in Florida. I shouldn’t feel guilty. None of this is my fault, and I already have enough of my own problems.

The last thing I want to do is get involved in this town’s business. And I definitely don’t need everyone knowing that I’m a spirit communicator.

If they know what I can do, they’ll hold it against me. Even though Glenwood seems almost comfortable with the

paranormal it's still too big of a risk. I refuse to be known as the crazy ghost lady.

After finishing my breakfast, I return the plate and cup to the counter.

"How was your first bagel and coffee in Glenwood?" Juliet asks.

"It was fabulous. Truly." I tell her.

"So, I'll be seeing you often?" she asks.

"As long as I can run off the calories!"

"Stop by anytime," she responds cheerfully. I really like her, and I feel like we could be friends.

But instead of running home, I adjust my pace to a leisurely walk so I can take note of everything and remember the places I want to return to later.

I stroll over the bridge as the sun rises higher in the sky. It's that time of morning when the sunbeams highlight everything. Not too bright, but no longer dark around the edges.

The pool is open now. Lifeguards are at their stations but still wearing long parkas until the sun can warm them. So far, there are only a few people in the pool, and most of them are swimming laps. The pool is so long the lap lanes go across the pool instead of stretching the entire length.

Music plays softly from speakers at the pool as the faint smell of sulfur drifts my way. Clara said it has something to do with the geothermal activity below ground, and the heated water that bubbles up before being pumped into the

pools. She went on and on about a lot of science stuff that I admit I only half-listened to.

I smelled it when I first drove into town, but she said I wouldn't notice it after a while. I'm mesmerized by the fountain on the west end of the pool as it dances and splashes. Even though I'm tempted to visit the pool, right now, I must finish unpacking boxes and set up the house. I can't keep procrastinating.

I only wish I had a job to go along with it. You were offered a job, I remind myself. But you turned it down. Not *that* kind of job, I then argue in my head. You know you're in a difficult spot when you're arguing with yourself in your own head.

But even though I have a ton of chores to do, I choose to procrastinate a little longer and visit the bookstore I noticed yesterday while walking to the auto shop. Hey, no calories there. Just more books. Which I probably don't need either, but considering I can't find my book boxes yet, I rationalize this means I should visit the bookstore.

OceanofPDF.com

The bookstore is a tiny building tucked into the corner of Maple and 6th St. There are several flower boxes attached to the windowsills with cheerful daffodils and tulips just beginning to bloom. I feel better just looking at them.

There are several small, round bistro tables out front where I picture customers enjoying a book and a cup of coffee on a lazy Sunday morning. When I open the door, a tiny bell jingles overhead.

I enjoy the unique scent of books. A mixture of paper and glue and stories of far-off lands and magical people. I smell coffee too. There's an espresso machine tucked into the corner alongside cushy chairs and scattered bean bags in front of a fireplace which remains unlit today.

I can already imagine relaxing there on a cold winter day with a cup of cocoa and a book in hand. The inside of the store is bigger than I imagined it. Colorful directional signs

and arrows point me to all sorts of different topics, and I can't decide where to begin.

There's a young woman behind the counter with what looks like an antique cash register. She's as colorful as the flowers out front with short, spiky hair - a faux hawk. It's light blue on the bottom and dark blue on top, and it's fascinating.

She has a mixture of tattoos along both of her arms, and while I'm trying not to stare, I can see that most of them have something to do with pictures of books and famous quotes.

There are characters from the classics, like a festive white rabbit, who I assume is from Alice in Wonderland, and a picture of a pig who must be from Charlotte's Web.

I'm embarrassed when she catches me staring at her tattoos, but I imagine she's used to it. Her ears have several earrings each, and she has a tiny gold hoop in her nose. Sometimes I secretly wish I was cool enough to do something like that, but I don't think I am.

"Welcome to the Looking Glass!" the woman declares. "Is there anything special I can help you with?" she asks.

"Hello! I just moved here, and I can't find my book boxes yet, so I decided that was a good excuse to stop in."

"I'm so glad you did!" she tells me. "Where do you live?"

Once again, I want to lie, but it's exhausting keeping up with all of it.

"I just bought the Jacobsen's house."

“Hot diggity! I wondered when that place would finally sell. Have you met Clara?”

I pause for a moment in shock, wondering how to handle the question. Everyone has told me they think it’s haunted. This woman doesn’t even ask. She just knows. I’m rooted to the spot. I can’t decide if I should flee or ask her what she’s talking about. But then she decides for me.

“You *are* a spirit communicator, right?”

Thoughts race through my head. How does she know? Who told her? Am I in danger? Do I have to move already?

She grabs my arm she’s so excited, and I have the overwhelming urge to bolt out the door. And yet just as I’m about to tell her I don’t know what she’s talking about, she says, “It’s okay, honey, you’re safe here. I’m a witch.”

She just openly admitted to a stranger that she’s a witch. Then I shock myself with what finally comes out of my mouth.

“I have met Clara,” I nod my head.

“Isn’t she a hoot?” she asks.

“Is it just me, or are people around here pretty chill about the paranormal activity?”

She smiles. “Not everyone here has paranormal gifts, but they’re used to living with it anyway, so they’re more accepting than your average town, I think. Why, don’t they talk about it where you’re from?”

I take a deep breath. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Absolutely.”

"I don't tell anyone about what I can do. My former husband didn't even know."

"You don't say! Is that why he's your former husband?"

"No, actually, he's dead."

"Well, that sucks," she says simply.

"Yes, it does."

"You were out for a run, I take it?" she nods at my attire.

"I was, but then I stopped at the Sol Conceptions Bakery."

"Ohhhh yeah, that will get you every time."

"I've already decided that could be dangerous."

"At least you walked there, right?"

"I did."

"There you go. If you walk, none of the calories count. It's a rule. Hey, are you sure I can't help you find something?"

"I just realized I should probably read more about my new town. You must have books on the history, right?"

"Of course, we do! Follow me, sister!"

As she leads me through a maze of books, she looks back at me over her shoulder. "I'm Wendy."

"I'm Holly."

"Here we go, Holly." She says as we arrive at the spot that has a sign reading Glenwood Springs History. "We have quite a few books on the history of Glenwood." She points to the two shelves where books of various shapes and sizes sit.

Then the doorbell jingles again. "I'll leave you here to look on your own, but give me a shout if you need anything, okay?"

“Great. Thank you for your help!”

“Coming!” she shouts toward the door while hurrying off to help the next person.

“Hey there, Aaron! You must be here for your order.” I overhear Wendy say.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“This is a great book; I can’t believe we found it.”

“Theresa will be so excited. Vintage Nancy Drew.”

“With a dust jacket!” Wendy adds. “What are your plans for her birthday?”

Aaron sighs. “We have dinner reservations at the Red Castle Hotel. We’re worried about it changing if the owner sells to Millur so we decided we should go while it’s still our beloved place. Did you know we got married there?”

“You did?”

“Yep. It was a gorgeous day in June, and the courtyard was covered in spring flowers and twinkling lights. So beautiful. And you know what else?”

“What?” Wendy asks.

“Theresa is convinced she saw a glowing outline of a little girl in our room that night. She was wearing a nightgown and holding a candle. But when Theresa tried to talk to her, she disappeared.”

I sneak a peek through the bookshelf while Wendy and Aaron continue reminiscing. I watch Wendy shake her head sorrowfully.

“It’s a shame. I can’t imagine what this town will be like if the hotel goes corporate.”

“My brother is the bookkeeper over there, you know, and he’s told me it’s not looking good. Business has really suffered after Lucy M’s tiara was stolen.” Aaron sighs.

“I know!” Wendy says. “I get a lot of business from tourists staying at the hotel. They’re on vacation and remember how much they like to relax with a good book, so they come in here. Even *my* business is hurting now because the hotel’s business is so slow. I don’t know what will happen to me if Millur buys it.”

He nods. “Hopefully, they catch whoever did it soon, and everything can get back to normal. Otherwise, this town could be in a lot of trouble.”

I watch Wendy hand the purchase to Aaron after he pays. “Tell Theresa I said happy birthday, and if you hear about anything new, let me know.”

“Will do.” Aaron nods his head, tucks the package under his arm, and heads out the door.

I quietly come out from my hiding spot clutching the book I picked.

“You find a good one?” Wendy asks.

“I think so,” I tell her, holding up the book.

“Oh yay! You’ll like that one!” she says.

“The stuff that’s going on at the hotel. Do you really think it will be that bad if the owner sells to the corporation? The hotel will still be open, right?” I ask.

“That hotel has been here almost as long as Glenwood has been a town. You’d be surprised by all the famous people worldwide who have stayed there. It’s a historically significant landmark. Tourists come here just to stay at the Red Castle.”

“The guys who moved me in told me people stay at the hotel hoping to experience ghostly encounters,” I tell her.

“Absolutely!” she nods her head. “It’s a big draw. But after the tiara mess, and if they sell to Millur, it will be like any other hotel. It will lose its charm and intrigue. And I fear it will lose a lot of customers in the process. If they start laying off staff because of it, it could cause problems for the entire town.”

“I heard you tell that guy *your* business is down too.”

“These are scary times right now,” she says.

“This will sound like a weird question, but do you have any advice on how best to make an important decision?”

“It’s not weird at all, and you’ve come to the right place. I’m a spell-casting witch, after all.”

I must have looked nervous because she laughs. “Don’t worry. I don’t mean that I’ll turn you into a toad, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

I laugh uncomfortably. “I wasn’t thinking that at all!” I was *so* thinking that. Considering I see dead people, I shouldn’t be judgmental about someone who’s a witch, but I’ve never been around a person who was so open about their

paranormal talent, and I'm not sure what she'll suggest next.

"I have a simple spell to help aid with tough decisions."

"Oh. Okay. That sounds like it could be helpful."

Wendy ducks down behind the desk while I hear her rummaging. Several seconds later, she pops up with a mauve-colored candle and a small silk bag.

"This should do the trick!" she declares. "And we're in luck because it's a new moon. Tonight, when you're at home relaxing, I want you to light this candle. It's used to attract wisdom. Then I want you to prepare a tea using these herbs."

She shows me what's inside the little bag. It smells good, whatever it is. "These herbs will help clear your mind and attract the insight you're looking for. Then get a good night's rest, and if you're fortunate, you'll have a much clearer idea of what you should do in the morning."

"Okay! I'll give it a shot!" I declare. After I pay for the book and Wendy refuses to let me pay her for the herbs and the candle, I head home. I've met some of the nicest people here, and I hope they solve the case of the missing tiara soon. For all their sakes.

I spend the rest of the day unpacking boxes and setting up my new home. I keep replaying the conversations I've overheard today in my head. I can't stop seeing Mr. Sinclair begging me to help him discover who stole the tiara.

It all weighs on me heavily, and I don't like it. That night I do as Wendy instructed. I prepare the tea, light the candle, and then I sit in a chair in the living room in the dark and wait.

The candle flickers as shadows dance across the walls. I'm not sure what I'm expecting next, although Wendy told me she hoped the answer was clear when I woke up. After finishing the tea, I blow out the candle, put the cup in the sink, and head upstairs to bed.

Clara has been unusually quiet. Even though I saw her watching me at times throughout the day. I think she forgets I can see her. I suppose she's mad at me for snapping at her yesterday. I tend to have that effect on people.

Can I help it if they insist on pushing my buttons? I told her I wasn't interested in talking to the spirits at the hotel, and I meant it. And if this dilemma keeps me tossing and turning all night, I'll be mad. Maddier than usual, that is. "I don't think this tea is working at all," I mumble as I drift off to sleep.

I don't even know where the keys to the pink bus are. I go through the entire house, opening every drawer and cupboard, but no luck. How wonderful of them to dump a car at my house with no keys.

I call the real estate agent and leave yet another message. He must think I'm the most unstable person. Clara appears behind me while I'm on the phone. I'm getting a little more used to her showing up from out of nowhere, but I still wish she would announce herself first. Too bad I can't tie a bell around her.

"The keys are in the bus," she explains.

I throw my hands in the air. "You couldn't tell me that before?"

"You didn't seem interested before."

Why is this woman so exasperating? "Fine," I grumble, wandering out to the garage.

I tug and pull on the garage door, but it won't budge. Clara appears again. "The button on the wall opens the garage door."

Okay, I admit it, sometimes having her around is helpful.

"See, I can be useful if you just ask."

"Mmm hmmm." Is all she's getting out of me right now.

I peer inside the driver's window, and just like she said, the keys are in the ignition.

I hop into the car, adjust the seat, put my seat belt on, cross my fingers, and turn the key. The bus fires to life. Better than the car sitting at the mechanic's shop right now, at least.

I know next to zilch about cars, but this one certainly sounds healthy. It has that rumble Volkswagen sound to it, which is a relief. We'll see what Tom says about it. I refuse to keep a car that will fall apart next month.

"The car will be fine. I told you, they rebuilt the entire thing." Clara states as she appears in the passenger seat. If she's right, and they overhauled the whole bus, I feel bad they just left it behind.

It looks like it was a costly and time-consuming remodel, only to be abandoned because they thought it was haunted. And technically, it is haunted. Just not in the way they think. Some might even laugh at the idea of an elderly ghost in a pink nightgown.

"I'm asking the mechanic to check it out, anyway. I don't need another money pit on my hands."

“Oh, goodie, I like car rides.”

“You’re coming to the shop with me?”

“Of course, I am. I want to say hello to Fred.”

“Fine. But do not use this as an excuse to freak out the people who work at the shop.”

“But what fun is that?” She pouts. “Why bother tagging along if I can’t harass people?”

“I don’t want you distracting them. I also don’t want them charging me extra to check out a haunted car.”

“All right, if you insist. I’ll behave myself.” She huffs, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance.

Somehow, I don’t believe her, but I need to get to the hotel, and I don’t want to waste more time. Yes, when I woke up this morning, the solution was obvious. I don’t know if it was the tea or the candle or a solid night’s rest, but I know what I must do now.

Several people recognize the bright pink bus and honk and wave as we drive into town. I half-heartedly wave the first few times, but eventually I stop because I feel like I’m in a parade.

I’m relieved that overall, the car seems to run well. It makes me realize just how bad the other car was. I’d gotten used to the weird noises coming from the engine, or I ignored the warning signs—either way, the bus handles well for a 55-year-old vehicle.

I park in the only open spot at the garage as Tom approaches me, wiping his hands on a red shop towel.

“Well, what do we have here?” he laughs, tucking the rag in his back pocket. “The Jacobsens didn’t take it with them?”

“Behave!” I hiss at Clara, wagging my finger in her face. “Nope,” I tell him, hopping out of the driver’s seat. “Rumor has it they thought it was haunted, so they left it with me.”

“You don’t say,” he responds, peeking into the cab as if he thinks a ghost could jump out at any second. What he can’t see is Clara sitting in the passenger seat, sticking her tongue out at him. I shake my head at her from behind his back. I swear if she messes this up for me.

“Would you be willing to take a quick look at it? If you tell me it’s in good shape, I’ll keep this car and donate my other car to charity.”

“I personally helped them on this beauty from time to time when they needed an extra hand, so it should be a great car for you, but I’ll give it a quick checkup just to make sure.”

“I really appreciate it, Tom. I’ll walk over to the hotel while you’re doing that, but I shouldn’t be gone long.”

He looks surprised. “What are you doing at the hotel?”

“I’m going to see a man about a job,” I say decisively.

“Good for you. And good luck!”

“Thank you!” I respond, as I watch Fred and Clara chatting it up in the bus. After that I head quickly and purposefully toward the hotel. This bartending gig is just what I need.

And if I have to talk to a few ghosts in the process, then so be it. Who knows, maybe it will be fun to put my gifts to

good use and make some extra money doing it.

At the front desk, I ask for the manager. It's a different clerk than yesterday. The moment Mr. Sinclair sees me, he claps his hands excitedly. "Please tell me you've changed your mind."

"I have conditions," I insist.

"Name it."

"You have to hire me to work as a bartender."

He looks confused. "But we've been over this. I need *you* to be my spirit communicator."

"I understand that, and I'll do it, but to be the most effective and convincing, I need an excuse to hang around here for several hours at a time. And, if and when I find out who stole the tiara, you agree to keep me on as a permanent bartender."

"But what if you turn out to be a lousy bartender?" he asks.

"I won't. I want this job."

"Okay, what do I have to lose, right?"

"Right." I nod my head as we shake on it.

I plan to have a few conversations with some ghosts. It should be easy to determine who stole the tiara. They're ghosts, after all. They see and hear everything. I'll tell the authorities who to arrest, the mystery is solved, and boom - I've got myself an easy job, and I can get on with my life.

"Can you start tonight?" he asks.

"I'll see you in a few hours!"

“Splendid!” he cries, clapping his hands once again. I wonder if he does that a lot.

OceanofPDF.com

“What do you think?” I ask Clara as I hold my arms out to show off what I’m wearing for my first night on the job.

“You look like a bartender,” she tells me.

“Nice Cons,” Mystery adds.

“How do you know what kind of shoes these are? You’re a cat!”

“I watch tv!” she says before stomping off.

“Are all cats so easily offended?” I ask Clara, who nods her head.

“Do I look like I’ll blend in? I don’t want to stick out like a sore thumb.”

“You’re new in a town of a few thousand people. The only way you don’t stick out is if you’re invisible.”

“Oh, yeah, good point. If no one realizes I can talk to ghosts, I guess I’m okay with looking like the new girl on the

block.”

Clara shakes her head. “Word travels fast here. I wouldn’t count on keeping your secret for long.”

“But if I don’t tell anybody, there’s no one to find out, right?”

“You haven’t told *anybody*?” she responds with a raised eyebrow.

“Okay, obviously, Mr. Sinclair, the hotel manager, knows. Because he caught me. Oh, and Wendy, the bookstore owner. But I didn’t tell her. She guessed.”

“Because she’s a witch,” Clara adds.

I nod my head. “Yep. But no one else knows.”

“That’s already two too many. People will know.” She tries to place a hand on my arm, and it gives me goosebumps because it’s so cold. “Don’t look so anxious. This town has a long tradition of paranormal presence. It isn’t the town you grew up in. I promise.”

“Well, I can assure you I won’t be telling anyone else. Hopefully, I can keep it a secret long enough to figure out who stole the tiara and then live a quiet, uneventful life, as I planned all along.”

“Do you really think it will be that easy?”

“Solving the crime or living a quiet life?” I ask almost in jest. Of course, she means solving the crime.

“Both,” she whispers. I suspect there’s a lot more to that statement, but I refuse to discuss it further.

“Don’t you think the ghosts know who stole the tiara? They must, right? Considering they’re ghosts. They just need the right person to talk to.” I insist.

“Whatever you say, dear. But try not to get your hopes up. The mystery could take longer than one night to solve.”

I roll my eyes at her. What does she know? She’s a ghost trapped in this house and an old VW bus.

“Don’t wait up for me!” I tell her. Then I laugh at my own joke. I wonder if the spirits at the hotel will appreciate my sense of humor. I certainly hope so.

As I drive to the hotel, everyone I pass waves at me again. This time I ignore them completely. This car is too conspicuous, and I refuse to feel like I’m in a parade every time I drive somewhere.

I wonder if I could re-paint it. Just a basic blue or something. It’s bad enough being new in a small town, but this makes it even more noticeable.

I carefully park the glowing bus in the employee parking lot and head to the back entrance. There are several staff members sitting at a picnic table outside, socializing on the mild spring evening while eating their dinner.

They obviously don’t know there’s a ghost standing nearby, watching them with a smile on her face. She’s wearing a business suit. I wonder if she was at the hotel for work or a conference when she died.

I wave a casual hello to the people at the picnic table as I pass. Some of them wave back or turn to stare at me, the

new girl.

As I pull open the back door, the ghost approaches me.

"It's true!" she exclaims.

"What's true?" I whisper.

"There's a ghost whisperer in town."

Rats. She must be exaggerating. "It's spirit communicator; thank you very much, and how did you know?" I hiss.

"Everybody knows."

That is so not what I needed, but I brush it off for now. "I imagine you know where I need to go next? It's my first night."

"Your first stop is the manager's office. You'll have to finish your paperwork and get a timecard."

"Okay, thanks," I tell her.

"I'm so excited!" she practically squeals. "So, where are you from? How do you like Glenwood so far? This is going to be great!"

"Uhhh yeah, look, I need to get going but I'll see you later."

"Mind if I stop by the bar later?" she asks. "We should get to know each other."

"Sure, sure, no problem," I tell her. I need a ghost to tell me who stole the tiara not an overly chatty gal pal to follow me around all day.

Mr. Sinclair is still annoyingly excited that I'm here. He asks how many ghosts I've been able to talk to so far, and I

explain I've only just walked in the door. It's not like they all lined up to greet me. Okay so one did.

"Oh, okay, sure, I understand. If you need anything else, just let me know. Whatever you need, I'm here for you."

"By the way, did you tell anyone else I'm a spirit communicator?"

He shakes his head. "No, why?" Before I can explain, he goes on. "After I cost the company a lot of money by hiring those fakes, I didn't exactly tell them that this time I've found a real one. Know what I mean?"

"Do me a favor and don't tell anyone. At least not yet. It's hard enough being new in town."

"Say no more, I understand. My lips are sealed."

"If that's all I need to get started, I should get to work!"

"Welcome aboard!" Mr. Sinclair says, shaking my hand so enthusiastically my entire arm vibrates.

I wander into the bar, tying an apron around my waist. I spent the afternoon on their website, familiarizing myself with their specialty cocktails. They also have numerous Colorado brewed craft beers on tap.

I wonder what my friends in Florida would think if they could see me now. The bar is eerily quiet. The only person in there is a man who's sitting alone in the corner nursing what looks like it could be a G&T.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask him.

"Nah, I'm good. Just waiting on a dinner reservation."

"Okay, I'll be right over here if you need anything."

I'm crouched down behind the countertop, searching for cocktail napkins, when I hear a voice.

"You must be the new bartender."

I look up to see a tall and imposing-looking man in a sheriff's uniform peering down at me.

"That I am." I'm immediately wary of any stranger. Especially one who could arrest me. I also get the sense he's not here for a drink or a friendly introduction.

"I'm Sheriff Mack."

"Hi there. I'm Holly Daniel. Can I get you something?"

"A glass of iced tea would be fine. I'm on duty, after all."

"Are you saying this is official business?" I snark.

He seems surprised by my sharp response. "*Should* it be official business?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," I tell him while carefully pouring a glass of iced tea. I slide a cocktail napkin toward him with the chilled glass of tea and a colorful straw.

I notice that even sitting down, he seems tall. I bet he uses that to his full advantage when questioning suspects. "You're the one who pointed out you're on duty."

He suppresses a smile. Is he laughing at me? "I said that because normally, I'd be the first to ask you to pour me a glass of the latest IPA, but unfortunately, I can't right now, so iced tea will have to do."

"Fair enough." I nod my head, although I'm still not buying the idea that he came here solely for a casual chat.

"You're not just a new bartender; you're new in town."

“I bought the Jacobsen’s house, but somehow, I think you already knew that.” When I hear myself talking like this, it almost makes me cringe, but I can’t help it. I don’t want to trust this guy. Growing up in the foster system taught me that whenever the police show up, it means there’s trouble.

“It’s a small town, and word travels quickly when a new person arrives. Especially when rumors say the new person has a rare talent for *communication*.”

Crap. How does he know? Who told him? I knew I couldn’t trust anyone. I knew this would come back to bite me.

“I’m not sure what you’ve heard, Sheriff, but I’m just a regular person who decided she needed a change of pace and thought Colorado would be perfect. Who could resist a place like this? It’s beautiful here.”

“You and I both know you’re not just a regular person, but we can get back to that later. You working as a bartender in a hotel also intrigues me.”

This guy is so annoying. What’s he getting at?

“Just trying to make a living, Sheriff. Do you question *all* newcomers like this? There’s nothing wrong with bartending after all.”

“You misunderstand Ms. Daniel. I’m not criticizing bartending. But before moving to Colorado, you were a well-paid cybersecurity consultant. Now you’re a bartender in a hotel that just experienced a highly publicized burglary. Can you see how that must look?”

“No.” I scowl. “Are you saying I’m a suspect?”

“Put yourself in my shoes, Ms. Daniel. Wouldn’t this whole setup look strange to you? I have to protect my town from those who may wish to do us harm.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. And not that it’s any of your business, and I don’t know where you’ve heard these rumors, but when the company where I used to work offered to buy me out of my contract, I accepted. The field I was working in, while lucrative, was also incredibly stressful. I decided I didn’t want to do that anymore, so I packed up and moved west.”

“Can you tell me where you were when the tiara went missing?”

“So, you *are* treating me like I’m a suspect? Should I call my lawyer?”

“Only if you think you need to.”

“If you must know, I was in Oklahoma.”

“If you have relevant information, that would be helpful to solving this case, you’re obligated to share that with me.”

“What kind of information would I have?”

“You may have abilities or insights that others don’t have.”

“Like I said, Sheriff. I’m just a bartender who only learned about the whole tiara fiasco after coming to town.”

“Okay. Well, if you learn of anything that you think I might find useful, call me.” The sheriff slides his card toward me on the counter, and I glance at it, but I don’t take it. “Thanks for the tea and conversation,” he says, leaving money for

his drink next to his card. "Until next time," he nods while turning to leave.

I refuse to touch the money or his card until he walks out the door. I don't want him to think I have a reason to contact him. Now or ever. As soon as I'm sure he's gone, I put the money in the cash register and throw the card in the trash.

I don't know how he knows about me. Who would have told him? It better not be Sinclair. Did Wendy tell him? I thought she was sympathetic to my story, plus she doesn't seem the type to betray a confidence.

Although she obviously wants to make sure the hotel remains successful, and I don't really know her. Maybe she did tell the sheriff about me. Whoever told, I'm steamed about it. I shouldn't have admitted it to anyone, period.

"I thought he'd never leave!" groans the well-dressed spirit who appears in front of me so suddenly I swear I jump almost a foot off the ground.

"You and me both!" I tell him as he sits at the bar.

"It's none of his business why you're here or what you're doing. Who cares if you want to work as a bartender?"

"Thank you! At least someone around here is sensible."

"And yet he obviously knows you can see us, but you refused to fess up."

"I don't see why it's necessary!" I snap.

He holds his hands up. "No argument here! You have to protect yourself. That's none of his business either."

He reaches out with a ghostly fist, which is always weird, but I don't want to be rude, so I fist bump him back, and I'm rewarded with an icy sensation throughout my hand.

I want to rub my hands together to warm up, but I don't think this is the best time to insult him. Considering he seems to be squarely on my side.

"I take it you aren't here just to serve drinks? Sinclair wants you to communicate with the hotel spirits about the stolen tiara, doesn't he?"

I hesitate. I didn't confide in the sheriff, and I'm not inclined to confide in a ghost I met 30 seconds ago, either.

Noticing the look on my face, he smiles. "I don't blame you. I wouldn't want to share your secrets with me either. But I'll give you a tip, anyway. Just in case you might need it. The hotel spirits don't know who stole it. Or how."

"You don't think it was a ghost?" I ask.

"What does a ghost need with a tiara?" he scoffs.

I ponder it. "Who else could get into a room completely undetected other than a ghost?"

"If you had a person who knew how to bypass the security system, to make it look like no one entered the code *or* opened the door, you could."

"And do you know a person like that?"

"His name is Curtis Kell; he works here as a bellhop."

"Go on."

"He's a computer nerd who hacked into the system at school to change his friend's grade. They suspended him

while investigating it, but his rich daddy hired a high-priced attorney, and the school couldn't prove that he did it, so they reinstated him. But I heard him bragging to one of his friends about how he got away with it."

I re-arrange some brightly colored straws on the bar top as I ponder what he told me for a moment. "He sounds like the type of person who could rig an electronic door to make it look like it wasn't accessed. Hacking a school server wouldn't be easy. It's not something a typical teenager with a laptop and a Wi-Fi connection in their parents' basement could pull off. So, assuming he did it..."

"Oh, he did it." He nods his head vigorously.

"...then I think we're on to something. How will I know which one he is?"

"He's the one with messy purple hair that hangs in his eyes."

"That should be easy enough to spot. I can talk to him tonight if he's working. Are you *sure* you overheard him admitting to messing with the school server?"

"I *know* what I heard, and I think if you happen to know someone who's investigating the theft, you could pass that along."

"Okay, thanks for the information. And by the way, if you should hear anything else about the case, you could let me know that as well."

"Just out of curiosity, right?"

"Of course!" I exclaim.

“Sure thing, lady!” he says, disappearing into thin air.

It was only after he left, I realized I never asked his name. Or how long he’s been a ghost. Or even how he died. So far, I’m not doing the best job of spirit communication.

And why did I pretend like I’m just here to be a bartender? It’s not like the ghosts care. I have an uneasy feeling Clara was right and that this won’t be as easy as I imagined after all.

OceanofPDF.com

Rather than spending the evening meeting as many ghosts as possible, I devote it to finding a way to talk to Curtis. I know Sinclair thinks the ghosts must know something, but right now, I'm focused on the bellhop.

I'm so engrossed with trying to locate Curtis and invent a good excuse to talk to him, I've already messed up several drink orders. If I want to convince Sinclair to make me a permanent bartender, I should pay more attention to the customers. But just when I see him walk past by the doorway, and I'm about to call out, a ghost stops to talk.

"Hi, there! I've been excited to talk to you all night!"

"Huh?" I respond, dismayed when Curtis keeps going, and now I can't see where he went.

"We met earlier when you first arrived. I'm Fiona."

"Oh, uh, yeah, nice to meet you again. I need to grab someone before he leaves for the evening, if you don't

mind.”

She looks so disappointed I feel a twinge of guilt, but I must talk to Curtis. I’m sure he’s the number one suspect. That annoying sheriff wants to pester me, and make all sorts of insinuations, when I’m certain that Curtis is the one he should be stalking. And if I’d known that when he stopped by here earlier, I would have told him that myself.

Considering the angry ghost, whose name I forgot to get, told me to talk to him, I’m sure it’s best to start there. Finally, when I discover a heavy box that I can’t move, I put my plan into action.

“Hey there! Excuse me!” I call out to Curtis when I see him pass by again.

“New bartender?” he asks.

“Yes, and I’m wondering if I can get your help.”

“Sure thing; what do you need?”

“We got a shipment of new pint glasses, but the box is too heavy. Can you move it for me?” I point to it on the bar.

“Of course! Where do you need it?”

“If you could carry it into the back, that would be great.”

“No problem!” he says easily lifting the large box.

I gasp just to show him I’m impressed he can pick it up so easily. “Is it always this quiet around here?” I ask as we head into the storage area. I’m hoping that pointing out the obvious lack of business will encourage him to talk about the burglary.

He shakes his head. "It wasn't always like this, but after Lucy M's tiara was stolen, and she's been screaming about it all over social media, we've hit a rough patch. It's been quiet ever since."

"Obviously, I wasn't here when it happened, but I heard that the thief got in and out of the room undetected. How is that even possible? Do you think it was one of the - you know -" I lean forward and whisper, "ghosts?"

He smirks. "If you believe in that sort of thing, I guess you could claim it was a ghost."

I bite my lip to keep from laughing at the ghost who's making rude gestures right in front of him.

"You don't think the hotel is haunted?" I ask in my best 'I'm completely clueless about any of this' voice.

"Nah. That's all rumors and superstition. You won't believe the number of tourists we get here who swear they saw a ghost in the hallway or heard a strange noise in the middle of the night."

I start to laugh out loud when the ghost blows in Curtis' ear, causing him to swipe at his head. "Stupid mosquitoes," he grumbles. When he looks at me suspiciously, I turn my laugh into a cough.

When the ghost realizes he has an appreciative audience, he really puts on a show. I glare at him for trying to distract me from my investigation.

"But if it wasn't ghosts, how was the tiara stolen?" If Curtis doesn't know my background, he'll keep thinking I'm

clueless about how technology works and hopefully mess up and confess to something.

Sure enough he puffs out his chest. "It would have to be a sophisticated hacker, for sure."

"Hacker? I don't get it."

"It's like this. Someone who knew the appropriate technique could override the system and enter a special code that would open the door without anything registering."

"*Really?*" I ask, looking at him with sappy doe eyes, just for good measure.

"Of course!" He's obviously enjoying my one-woman fan club, so I keep pressing.

"I bet you'd have to be really smart to know how to do that."

"Eh, it definitely requires an extra level of sophistication." He tilts one shoulder like he's trying to be nonchalant about bragging. If this keeps up, I'll have him confessing my first night on the job and won't have to talk to any more ghosts at all. Mr. Sinclair will be so impressed. I don't know why anybody thought this would be difficult.

"But what about the security cameras? Those didn't show anything either. From what everyone is telling me, anyway." I hastily add.

"Anyone who could bypass the keypad entry on the door could bypass the cameras, too. It just takes the proper knowledge."

“I hear that’s something you could do, though.”

He falters for just a moment, but it’s enough to tell me I’ve hit a nerve.

“You *hear* that?” he asks with a slight waver in his voice. “I don’t know where you would have heard that.”

“Oh, you know how people talk.” I shrug.

“Sure, I’m a computer science major, but I wouldn’t know the first thing about breaking into someone’s hotel room!” he exclaims, his cheeks flushing. Why is he so nervous suddenly?

“Awww c’mon!” I gush. “Everyone I asked said that you’re the resident computer genius. They all tell me you’re the one to go to with their tech questions or if they need something *fixed*.” I raise an eyebrow, hoping he’ll catch my drift.

“What do you mean, *something fixed*?” he responds his voice breaking.

Bingo. Did I hit a nerve or what? He went from acting boastful to sweating in about three seconds flat.

“Were you working that night?” I ask just to see if I can get him to bite.

“What night?” he snaps.

“The night the tiara was stolen?” I coo while resting my hand on his arm. I’m getting good at this.

“Why do you ask?” he steps back and glances toward the door like he’s looking for an escape.

“I’m just curious. There must have been a lot of excitement. You have a famous pop star staying here, and then someone sneaks into her room and steals her priceless tiara? This wasn’t just a crime of opportunity, right? It must have been planned by a technological genius; don’t you think?” The more I press him, the more he sweats.

“I wouldn’t know about any of that. I was on spring break in Mexico.”

“Oh, I see. I was only wondering. It’s all the town is talking about, and I figured someone like you must have the inside scoop and all.”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “I know nothing. If that’s all you need, I have to get back to my post.”

“Yeah, no problem, and thanks for the help.”

“Sure, anytime,” he mumbles, dashing from the room before I can ask him anything else. Why is he so skittish if he wasn’t in the country during the burglary?

I flop down on the couch and kick off my shoes. The night stretched out longer than I expected, and I'm exhausted. But just as I'm drifting off to sleep on the couch, Clara shows up.

"How did your first night at work go? Did you get the chance to talk to any of the resident spirits? Get any answers? C'mon, give me the scoop. I'm dying to hear all about it!" Then Clara laughs. "Get it? Dying?" She continues laughing at her own joke while I shake my head. "Sheez, tough crowd," she complains.

Meanwhile, Mystery tiptoes up to us to join me on the couch.

"I'm *dying* to hear about your night, too," Mystery informs me, laughing like Clara.

I stare at her. I still can't believe I'm talking to a cat.

“What?” she says as she licks her paws, using them to clean her face. Then she pauses. “You talk to dead people, yet you think a talking cat is weird?”

I’m not quite sure how to respond to that, so I don’t.

“It was a curious night. The sheriff showed up and basically told me I was a suspect.”

“What do you mean, basically? Did he actually say that?” Clara asks.

“He didn’t literally tell me I’m a suspect or tell me not to leave town or anything. But he said it looks questionable that I arrive in town right after a priceless tiara gets stolen. *And* I can see ghosts, *and* I happen to get a job at the hotel where the theft occurred a mere 24 hours after moving here. And when I say it out loud like that, even / think it’s suspicious.”

Clara’s eyes widen as she leans forward, and Mystery continues grooming herself. “He knows you’re a spirit communicator? How?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. But I’m mad someone must have told him.”

“How did that discussion go? I can’t imagine.”

“I denied it.”

“So, he knows you’re a communicator. You know that he knows. He knows that you know he knows, and yet you still denied it?”

“Of course, I did. It made me mad when he said that if I had special resources and ways of getting information that

he didn't, I should share it with him. Who does he think he is? I don't have any obligation to him. I don't have to share a darn thing!"

"But if you can assist him with this case, why wouldn't you? You already admitted you want to work as a bartender and not a communicator. If the two of you could work together to solve this case, then you could get on with just being a bartender."

"I'm sure I can solve this just fine on my own. I don't need to become the sheriff's ally. My personal life is none of his business."

"Okay, no need to get snippy with me. I'm not the one you're mad at!" Clara explains with her hands in the air. "And I doubt you'll get many answers from suspects, if that's how you treat them."

At this, Mystery pauses again and stares at me. "Meeeeow, girlfriend!" she says, swiping her paw through the air.

"You just *said* the word meow." I point out.

"So?" she smirks.

"You're a *cat*. Why didn't you actually meow at me?"

"I thought *saying* it was funnier," she explains, returning to grooming her long fluffy tail.

Once again, I don't quite know how to respond. And must these two be so nosy? Wasn't I supposed to come home, kick back, and relax? Wasn't that the point of all of this?

Instead, I end up defending myself over how I treat the annoying sheriff.

“Did you get anywhere on the case? Did you talk to any ghosts like you’re supposed to, or did you just argue with the police?” Clara asks.

“Now that you mention it. A ghost I met told me about Curtis, the bellhop. He said he’s a computer genius who hacked his school’s system to change a friend’s grade. I think he could have rigged the electronic door system, so it appears as if no one entered the room that night.”

“That’s a possibility. What did the other ghosts have to say about this Curtis fellow?” Clara asks.

“I didn’t actually talk to any other ghosts,” I admit.

“But that’s what they hired you to do,” she points out.

“Obviously, I understand that,” I explain, getting testy again. “But I think the idea that Curtis hacked the keypad, and the security camera is solid. Oh, and I actually talked to two ghosts! I said hello to one on the way in. So there.”

I point my finger at Clara and Mystery for emphasis. They both roll their eyes in response.

“Did you confront Curtis?” Clara asks.

“I didn’t exactly confront him; I just hinted that I heard he was capable of amazing things with computers.”

“And?”

“And he got very squirrely and nervous after that.”

“Okay, so maybe he should be a suspect.” Clara points her finger back at me.

“I think he’s very suspicious,” I tell her, nodding my head. “And can I also point out that the ghost who told me about Curtis, agreed that the sheriff should mind his own business.”

Clara looks skeptical. “Who is this ghost? What’s his name?”

“I forgot to ask,” I admit.

Clara purses her lips at me. Why does she have to be so judgmental about this? What does she know about crime investigation?

“What about Ronald Thurman?” Mystery asks while Clara nods her head in agreement.

“I have no idea who that is. Is he a ghost?”

“He’s a retired jewel thief who lives in town,” Clara says.

“A retired jewel thief!” I laugh. “I never knew there was such a thing. I hope he has a good 401(k) plan?”

“No, silly. He was one of the FBI’s most highly sought-after thieves. Then he cut a deal with them, quit stealing, and became a consultant. Now he advises them on how to catch thieves like him.”

“You think he could advise me on how to catch the thief? I don’t get it.”

Mystery sighs in exasperation. “No. I mean, tigers don’t change their stripes - nor do house cats, if you were wondering - and I think you should consider him a suspect as well.”

I lean over and look Mystery in the eye. “Do you really?”

“Mockery will get you nowhere. Meeow.”

“Fine. Where do I locate this allegedly retired thief?”

“Don’t look at me!” Clara says.

I look at Mystery again.

“Don’t look at me either.”

“Thanks for the help, you two,” I sigh. “I’ll get right on that.”

I’m too tired to do anymore sleuthing tonight but I’ll get at it again in the morning. I need to research Curtis further.

OceanofPDF.com

The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that Curtis is the one who stole the tiara. If he hacked his school servers to change his friend's grade, then I'm sure he has the knowhow to bypass the hotel's security system.

However, when I get the brilliant idea to stalk him on social media, I'm dismayed to find pictures of Mexico on his accounts. "Drat!" I tell Mystery, who is sitting on the desk next to my computer, staring at the screen with me. "What now?" I ask sorrowfully as she slowly blinks her big green eyes at me.

"Go for a walk. Climb some trees. Catch some mice. That usually helps me," she says.

"That's a good idea. Aside from the trees and mice part, I mean."

Mystery is right; I need a run to clear my head. But this time I refuse to let myself go by the bakery - as much as I

enjoyed it the other day - I don't need to pack on extra weight the first week I'm in town. I'll wait until week two for that.

I plan to stick to the part of town that's on the opposite side of the bakery this time. But as I pass the bookstore, I realize I should stop and thank Wendy for her help the other day.

It's also a good excuse to ask her if she told Sheriff Mack about my gift. I wonder what his first name is. Or does everyone just call him Sheriff all the time? When I walk in the door, I'm surprised to see Juliet and Wendy sitting at the counter, drinking coffee.

"Hey, newbie!" Juliet waves at me.

"Hey, you! Finished that history book already?" Wendy asks.

Drat. There goes my chance to ask Wendy if she told the sheriff about me.

"Hello, ladies! I was just out for another run and thought I'd stop in to say hello."

"Look!" Wendy exclaims as she holds a bright yellow box out to me. "Juliet brought cherry turnovers."

"Oh great," I groan. "I purposely went this direction so I could avoid the bakery!"

"Awww," Juliet pouts. "You don't like me?"

"I like your bakery too much, I'm afraid."

"C'mon, lady, have a seat and tell us about your first night bartending at the hotel."

When I look shocked, Juliet laughs. "Small town, remember?"

"Wow, you ladies seem to know everything!"

"You'll get used to it after a while," Wendy tells me.

I sit on the chair that Wendy pulls up for me. The store is empty except for Juliet and a young woman who works for Wendy. I wish Juliet wasn't here, though. I need to know if Wendy snitched on me.

"How did the hotel ghosts react when you showed up for work last night?" Wendy asks.

I knew it! I can't trust anybody. I glance over at Juliet, and then I stare at Wendy icily. "It was you who told the sheriff!" I snap. "Even after I confided in you that I've kept that a lifelong secret. How could you betray me like that?" I'm so angry I could spit.

The look of surprise on Wendy and Juliet's faces after my outburst is one I've seen many times in my life. I often react first and think later, but I'm so mad she betrayed me.

"Whoa, girl, calm down. I didn't say a word to anyone. I would never do that to you!"

"But I, but..." I sputter while looking back and forth between Juliet and Wendy.

Then Wendy smiles when she realizes what the problem is. "Juliet is a witch too. A sun witch."

I turn to Juliet, who's nodding her head eagerly and probably hoping that I don't have any more outbursts. "I could tell that you were a communicator the moment you

walked into the bakery. We didn't really have a chance to talk at length because the bakery got so busy, though. I promise you Wendy didn't say a thing to me."

My cheeks flush pink. How embarrassing. I barely know these ladies, and I've already yelled at them. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "I had no idea." Then I pause and smile. "That explains the name of the bakery."

"Here," Wendy says, thrusting the box of pastries in my direction. "I think you could use one of these."

"You're probably right," I tell her. I'm the one who snapped at her, and yet she's the one making a peace offering.

I glance at Juliet. "Is that why your baked goods are so incredible? A little magic here and there?"

"I'll never tell!" she laughs.

"Now, what is this about the sheriff knowing that you're a spirit communicator? That must have been quite the conversation!" Wendy says.

I take a deep breath. It still seems weird to openly discuss this with others. "Sheriff Mack came into the bar last night. Does everyone just call him Sheriff Mack, by the way?"

Juliet and Wendy nod their heads. "He's kind of uptight," Wendy explains.

"No kidding. Anyway, he came into the bar last night when I was working. He seemed cross with me and pretty much accused me of looking suspicious because of my timing with moving to town and the job at the hotel and all. Plus, with my ability to talk to ghosts, he said that also

looked suspicious. Then he asked where I was the night the tiara was stolen.”

Juliet’s mouth forms an O. “He knows you talk to ghosts? How? And how did you respond?”

“I denied everything. But I don’t think he believed me. And I don’t know how he found out I see dead people.”

“He doesn’t seriously think you stole the tiara, does he?”

I lift one shoulder. “He flat out told me that my timing was unusual, even when I told him I was driving through Oklahoma that night.”

“Honey, that’s messed up,” Wendy chimes in.

“What reason does he have to be so suspicious of you getting a job at the hotel? Lots of people work there. Lots of people work as bartenders all over this town. Why is that suspicious? Aside from the fact you see dead people, I mean.” Juliet asks.

I feel kind of bad. I’m still not telling them the whole truth. “Well...” I start.

“What?” Wendy leans so far forward that she nearly falls off her seat.

I pull a cherry from the turnover and pop it into my mouth. Dang, these are just as good as the bagels. “I didn’t exactly work as a bartender in Florida.”

“Waitress?” Wendy asks.

“No.”

“Barista?” Juliet offers.

“No, not that either. I was a consultant in cybersecurity.”

“And suddenly you’re a spirit communicating bartender at a hotel full of ghosts where a rare tiara was recently stolen.”

I nod my head.

“I could see where that would make ol Surly Steve suspicious.” Wendy says.

“What?” I laugh.

Juliet shakes her head. “That’s our secret nickname for him.”

“He *is* a little surly.” I point out.

“He doesn’t trust newcomers. He’s not that bad once you get to know him. But I think he could have approached your conversation better,” Juliet points out.

“Now, wait a minute. Getting back to you becoming a bartender. I have to ask. Why the switch?” Wendy asks.

“My job was extremely high-pressure, and I guess I alienated one too many people with my attitude. They said I was unreasonable and difficult to work with because I can be a little, well uh, er, angry at times.” I’m embarrassed having to admit that now, considering I just showed these ladies how quick-tempered I can be.

“You don’t say.” Juliet nods her head knowingly while Wendy bites her lip, trying not to laugh.

My hands are in the air. “I get it. I need to relax more. Especially before someone here gives me a nickname. I just thought that moving here and working in anything other than cybersecurity was exactly what I needed. But I hadn’t planned on getting pulled into an investigation like this.”

“Sinclair wants you to talk to the ghosts, doesn’t he?” Wendy snaps her fingers. “He’s already hired two fakes. But how did he know you were the real deal?”

“He caught me yelling at a ghost who purposely broke a glass to get my attention.”

“He caught you yelling at a ghost and said, hey, you want to tend bar?” Juliet asks. “I’m confused.”

I play with the string on my hoody to stall for time. I’ve already admitted far more to these two than I ever admit to anyone. “He wanted to hire me to question the ghosts to see if they know who stole the tiara. But I insisted I didn’t want to just talk to the ghosts. I want a real job. So, I said if he hired me to tend bar at the hotel, I promised to investigate the theft by talking to the ghosts there to see if they knew anything.”

“If you think the sheriff is already suspicious of you, he’ll really be fired up if he finds out you’re investigating the tiara theft, too. I’d tread lightly around him. As much as he distrusts strangers, he’ll be extra annoyed if he catches you poking around the investigation.” Juliet warns me.

“But now that we have that out of the way, did you learn anything last night? Did the ghosts tell you if they know who did it?” Wendy asks.

“No,” I shake my head sadly. “I only talked to one ghost. He said none of them know what happened but that I should talk to Curtis, the bellhop, because he overheard him

bragging to his friends once about how he hacked into the servers at his college to change his friend's grade."

"And you think he could have bypassed the hotel security system!" Wendy adds.

"I do. Or maybe I did. I don't know. It sounds like something right up his alley, but then he told me he was in Mexico for spring break when the theft happened."

"Maybe he's lying?" Juliet suggests.

"I thought so too, but when I stalked him online and checked his social media, I saw he posted pictures of Mexico."

"Ohhhh, let me see!" Wendy says, rubbing her hands together like it's a big scheme to be solved. I show her what I found on the internet. "That picture looks awfully familiar." She points to a picture of a group of people enjoying themselves at a tiki bar.

"Do you follow him on social media?" I ask.

"Nope," she says. "Never even heard of the guy."

"I'm not sure why it would look familiar, then."

"Me either, but I'm sure I've seen that photo before." She insists.

"Did you learn anything else?" Juliet asks.

"No. Not from anyone at the hotel." I start, still reluctant to admit things about my home life.

"Clara knows something?" Juliet asks.

This really is a small town!

“Yes,” I say as I contemplate telling them that the cat had a suggestion as well but decide against it for now. “She said that I may want to talk to a guy named Ronald Thurman who is some kind of retired thief? She thinks he might have come out of retirement to steal the tiara.” I hold up my hands in confusion while Wendy and Juliet nod excitedly. They must know the guy.

“Yes! That’s a great idea!”

“But where do I find him?” I ask.

“He stops at a coffee shop right up the street for coffee and a scone every morning at 9:30,” Wendy explains.

“What are we waiting for?” Juliet announces as she and Wendy jump up like they’re going somewhere.

“We’re seriously going to confront this guy?” I ask.

“Not confront,” Juliet says. “We’ll just conveniently show up in the same place where he is and have a casual conversation with him.”

“Considering you don’t know him, and we do, you definitely want us to come along.” Wendy points out.

“All right. Let’s go!”

Wendy tells the high school student who works for her to mind the store while we’re out, and off we go to the coffee shop on Maple St.

As promised, when we walk in, Mr. Thurman is sitting in the corner sipping espresso and reading a book. From the cover, it looks like a romance novel. For some reason I

pictured a retired jewel thief reading a true crime novel instead.

“Hey Ronald,” Juliet says as she sits down at the table next to him.

“Good morning, Juliet! I’m glad I saw you. I want to order a custom cake for my niece’s birthday.”

“Wonderful!” Juliet responds. “Stop by the bakery any time, and we’ll set you up.”

“Greetings, Wendy!”

“Hi Ronald.”

His pale blue eyes then turn to me. He concentrates on my face so hard it’s unnerving. “You have a new friend,” he says. I have a feeling that he already knows who I am, and it freaks me out.

“This is Holly,” Juliet tells him.

“Hi.” I lift my hand in a half-wave.

“I understand you bought the Jacobsen place.”

Ha! I knew it.

“I did.” I nod my head.

“I also heard you’re driving their bus.”

“Believe it or not, they left it for me with the house.”

“Isn’t that fortunate?” he murmurs. He has a very calm and measured way of speaking.

“So, what brings you, ladies, out on this fine spring morning? And why do I sense you were looking for me in particular?”

“We came to ask you about the stolen tiara.” Wendy gets right to the point.

He chuckles softly. “Ah, yes, the question on everybody’s mind. When a priceless piece of jewelry goes missing, it must be the retired jewel thief. You do remember that I’m retired, right?”

“We weren’t thinking of you as a suspect so much as we were wondering if someone were to steal a priceless tiara, what would they do with it? Obviously, they can’t just go to a pawnshop and unload it because everyone knows about it and will be on the lookout for it. What good is stealing it if you can’t make money on it?” Juliet asks him.

Ronald slowly places a colorful bookmark into the book and rests it on the table next to his espresso cup as if he’s settling in to tell us a tale.

“I’ve already discussed this with the police when they came to question me. Naturally, they assumed the worst of me as well, but since you’re here, I’ll tell you the same thing. As you rightly surmised, they wouldn’t just visit the corner pawn shop to sell it. There are a couple of things they might do, though. One could sell it on the black market.

“Given the notoriety surrounding the piece, most likely, it would sell to a collector who has a thing for gathering secret pieces. He’s only able to tell a select group of friends about it, for instance.

“Similar to those scumbags who hunt rare animals, just to say they did. Reserving their distasteful private collection

for guests who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, enjoy looking at the stuffed carcass of an endangered species.”

When I smile at that Ronald turns to me. “Just because I once made a living stealing jewels doesn’t mean I’ll do anything for money. I have standards, you know.” I blush at how he seems to notice every little thing. Perhaps that comes from years of being a thief.

“What else could they do with it?” Wendy asks.

“They could take it apart and sell the jewels separately. It wouldn’t be worth as much as the whole tiara, but they’d still make out quite nicely. And that way, it’s significantly harder to trace it back to the thief.”

“Any ideas how someone could have entered the room without it registering in the computer or on the security cameras?” I ask him.

“The most obvious solution would be someone who has the skills to bypass the camera in the hallway and the keypad system on the door.”

“Like somebody who could hack into their school server to change a grade?”

Ronald nods. “I would think someone like that could override a door lock.”

“And that someone didn’t just hack the school system. He conveniently works at the hotel,” Wendy quietly mutters to me.

“If a person had stolen jewels to fence, do you think they’d try to contact you?” Juliet asks.

“Anything is possible, but who in town doesn’t know that I work with the FBI? As strange as it may seem, I don’t think I’m their first choice.”

“When was the last time you were at the Red Castle Hotel?” I ask.

“When I heard you were a bartender at the hotel, I didn’t know that you’d be investigating the stolen tiara as well,” he says smoothly.

“I’m just curious,” I insist.

He crooks an eyebrow at me. He obviously knows I’m lying. “My dear, I haven’t been to the Red Castle Hotel in years. So no, I wasn’t there the night the tiara was stolen. It was my weekly poker game at the Elks Lodge in Rifle. You can check with the folks there if you’re really interested.”

“I believe you,” I tell him. But I’m so contacting the Elks Lodge.

“As fascinating as this has been, ladies, I really must be going.” He puts his hat on, takes his espresso cup to the counter, makes pleasantries with the barista, and then heads out the door.

“What do you think?” Wendy turns to us after we watch him stroll up the sidewalk.

“Who else but Curtis is a sophisticated hacker with easy access to the cameras and the numeric keypad?”

“But who also claims that he was in Mexico on spring break when it happened.” Juliet reminds me.

“And has pictures posted on his social media,” Wendy says.

“I know. I know.” I shake my head. “Aside from that, he still seems the most obvious. I just don’t know how.”

“I wish I could stay longer and talk, but I have to get back to the bakery.” Juliet sighs.

“And I need to make sure Emma hasn’t sold the entire store out from under me!” Wendy says.

“I’ll let you know if I find out anything new tonight,” I tell them as the three of us go our separate ways.

OceanofPDF.com

That night at the bar, I watch several ghosts pop in and out of the area and peek around corners at me. Like they're trying to decide if the rumors are true - that there's a legitimate spirit communicator in their midst.

However, I'm more curious about a young woman in the corner who has been on the phone for nearly an hour. She doesn't look like she's from Glenwood. She's more fashionably big city than sleepy small town looking.

She wears one of those hairstyles that's supposed to look like she just rolled out of bed that way, but in reality, she spent over an hour styling it to look casual. And it's colored blonde with a hint of baby pink throughout.

She's also wearing a super cute dark gray dress with spaghetti straps and a sweater under it. Then she added sheer black tights with black and white high-top Converse. I

think Mystery would approve. But no one else dresses like that around here.

She seems upset. Whoever she's talking to must be yelling at her. I consider approaching her to see if I can help, but I'm not sure she'd notice me. She's so engrossed in the conversation.

Eventually, she hangs up and makes her way to the bar. "Whiskey sour, please," she tells me with a glum face as she slides onto a stool.

"Everything okay?" I ask, preparing her drink.

"No," she sighs. "I'm desperate to locate that tiara, but I'm not getting anywhere."

Did she just say what I thought she said? Someone else is looking for the tiara? Now I'm confused. Is she with the police?

"You're looking for the tiara? Lucy M's tiara?"

She nods her head sorrowfully. "I'm Anne, Lucy's assistant. She blames me for the theft. If I don't find it, she'll fire me."

"How is it your fault? I thought someone took it off her head in the middle of the night. You're just an assistant and not a bodyguard, right?"

She slumps like she has the weight of the world on her shoulders. "She said if I wasn't such a sound sleeper, I would have heard something and could have called for help."

“You stayed in the same room as Lucy?” I ask. I don’t understand what being a sound sleeper has to do with any of this.

“No, I was in the room next door.”

This is the weirdest conversation ever. When Anne sees me staring at her in confusion, she clarifies.

“*Everything* is my fault. No matter what.” She rests her forehead on the bar in defeat.

“Ah, I see. I used to work for people like that. It sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Lucy isn’t always like this!” she insists. “She’s really cool a lot of the time, and I owe her everything!”

“Why?”

“When she hired me, I was living out of my car. I dropped out of school and went to Los Angeles to become a movie star.” At this, she seems to scoff at her own lofty dreams. “My parents were furious and stopped speaking to me, I broke up with my boyfriend, and I was trying to pick up waitressing shifts at a small diner nearby, just to make some money to keep gas in the car, buy food, and go to auditions. Los Angeles is crazy-expensive, you know.”

“How did Lucy find you?”

“She ate lunch in the diner one day, and I waited on her. I tried so hard not to be all fan girl on her, but I couldn’t help it. And she was super sweet. Posed for pictures and everything. Later she saw me in my car in the parking lot

sobbing my eyes out because I was so depressed about my horrible life. She took pity on me and offered me a job.

“Next thing I knew, I was touring with her. Lucy M! Imagine that! I went from a homeless, broke waitress to a famous pop star’s assistant traveling the world. And now I’ve screwed it all up because her tiara is missing, and she refuses to tour again until it’s found.”

“Is she in the hotel right now?” I look around as if I expect to see a famous pop star just saunter into the bar.

“Oh no, she refuses to set foot in this place ever again. I’m here alone, hoping somehow, I can recover the tiara so we can get back to touring,” she says.

“She seems pretty angry about the whole thing.” I point out.

“You want to know something funny? Because of all the publicity around the stolen tiara, she’s selling more music than ever! She’s making bank on this mess. Meanwhile, I’m getting blamed for it all.”

“I hope you find it soon!” I tell her. I could confide in her that I’m doing the same thing - perhaps we could work together and solve this faster - but I think it’s better to keep that to myself at this point.

It’s wild to think that Lucy is making more money because of the theft. This makes me wonder if Lucy had something to do with it. What if she hired Curtis to help her pull off the heist? Convinced him to hack the security system and steal

the tiara for her because she knew all the publicity would help her?

After Anne finishes her drink, I watch her shuffle out of the bar. I feel for her. It's the pits when your boss is constantly on your case about things you have little control over.

Maybe after we locate the thief and the tiara, she can secure a better job. I'm so engrossed in pondering how Curtis could have worked with Lucy to steal her own tiara that I barely notice when a man sits at the bar. He clears his throat to get my attention.

"Oh, hi, there! Sorry about that! What can I get for you?" I ask him.

"What do you have on tap tonight?"

"We just got a new hazy IPA in this afternoon."

"That sounds good. I'll take one of those."

"You're a regular, I take it?"

"I live here."

"In Glenwood, you mean?"

"Well, yes, but I live in the hotel."

"You can do that?" I ask in surprise.

"Sure!"

"I've never heard of such a thing! Isn't that expensive?"

He laughs. "It's not cheap, that's for sure. But someone cleans my room every day, and if I want, I can just pick up the phone and have meals brought up to my room. Or like tonight, the bar is only an elevator ride away."

“That does sound like a pretty cushy lifestyle,” I tell him, sliding the glass of beer toward him. It occurs to me that if he lives here full time, maybe he knows something about the missing tiara. Perhaps he heard or saw something. “You must have been around when the famous tiara went missing.”

He shakes his head. “I was, but I know nothing about it, if that’s what you’re wondering. I didn’t even know who this Lucy M person was, or that she was staying here until it was in the news.”

Way to throw cold water on my theory.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” he asks.

“I just started! I’m Holly.”

“Nice to meet you Holly, I’m Leroy.”

“Lucy M’s assistant, Anne, was just in here. She said Lucy blames her for the theft, and if she can’t locate the tiara, she’ll probably lose her job.” I still can’t believe this guy knows nothing about it. He must have overheard *something*, right?

“I don’t really know much about what kids listen to these days. All I know is there were cops everywhere for almost a week. Now this Lucy person is distraught, and all the publicity has been awful for the hotel. I wish I could tell you more, but that’s all I know.”

“I heard they’re thinking about selling it to the Millur chain.”

“I’ve heard that too. It will be a shame if they do because you know those fancy corporate guys will come in here and change everything to make it match all their other hotels. A small town like this doesn’t need a cookie-cutter hotel replacing a historical landmark.”

“I agree!” I tell him, placing two cocktail napkins in front of the couple who sat down while I was talking to Leroy.

“What can I get for you folks?”

After I complete their drink orders, I turn back to Leroy to ask him some more questions, but he’s gone along with his glass of beer, which I suppose he took back up to his room.

I hope I didn’t offend him with my questions. I was just hoping he’d know something he could share. This is so frustrating. I keep reminding myself that I’m supposed to be talking to the hotel ghosts, but there’s a steady stream of customers all evening.

Maybe they’re here to check out the place where Lucy’s famous tiara was stolen. Or perhaps they’ve heard the sale rumors too and want to get here before it happens. Who knows? I just know the live customers keep me from talking to ghosts most of the night.

Fiona stops by once again but I’m too busy working to talk so I simply wave at her from across the room. She looks disappointed but she’ll just have to come back later.

I’m restocking the napkin holder when my ghost friend from the other night appears. “Hey, how’s the investigation

going?” he asks. “Did you check into the bellhop like I suggested?”

Before responding I look around to make sure there are no living beings nearby who can hear me. I lean forward and whisper. “I don’t even know your name!”

He smiles and I notice he has a big dimple in his left cheek. I bet he was quite the charmer when he was alive. “Ambrose Galloway at your service.”

“Hello, Ambrose. I’m Holly by the way.”

“Holly, like Christmas. I love it. But back to my original question. Did you look into the bellhop?”

I nod my head. “I think you’re right about him. But I don’t think he acted alone.”

“I was hoping you’d say that because I have more to tell you on that front.”

“What? What do you know?” I press him.

“You first.”

“Fine. I met Anne the other night.”

“Lucy M’s assistant?”

“Yes.”

“I thought I saw her hanging around here.”

“She commented on how Lucy is making more money than ever on the scandal. I think that Curtis and Lucy are in cahoots.”

Ambrose looks at me skeptically. “That sounds odd,” he says.

“Not at all! Hear me out.” I’m annoyed that he isn’t as interested in my theory as I thought. “Lucy convinced Curtis to hack the keypad to her room and the camera. Curtis pretends to steal the tiara from Lucy in the middle of the night. The next day, Lucy reports it stolen. She gets what she wants - more publicity - and Curtis eventually fences the tiara for the money.”

He ponders it for a bit. I still don’t think he’s buying it. “I guess it’s possible.”

“It’s not just possible!” I snap. “I think it’s highly likely.”

“All right, calm down, Christmas. You know I’m on your side. You are an angry little thing, but I get that. I even like it.”

“Go ahead. Tell me what you know.”

“Oh, you’ll like this, trust me. I overheard Curtis telling some of the other staff that he’ll be coming into a lot of money soon. But he was very secretive about it and wouldn’t tell them how.”

“Ha!” I shout so loud that people sitting across the bar turn to look at me. “I knew it!” I stab my finger at Ambrose for emphasis. I know I must look really weird to them, shouting and poking my finger into thin air. But I’m excited. It has to be Curtis. I just have to figure out how he could be in two places at once.

“As much as I hate to suggest this, do you think I should take this information to the Sheriff? What if he knows something we don’t?”

“Absolutely not!” Ambrose exclaims so forcefully I take a step back. “You know you can’t trust him! We have to keep this between us.”

“I get that, but--”

“---but nothing! If you admit that you’re snooping around the investigation, you’ll get in trouble. And then he’ll just tell you how wrong you are, anyway. It’s best if you keep this between us.”

“I guess you’re right. At least, I hope so.”

OceanofPDF.com

The following morning, when I'm in the kitchen making breakfast, I hear Mystery shout, "Hide! It's the popo!"

"What?" I exclaim as she streaks through the kitchen, running out the back door. Then I'm surprised to hear pounding on the front door. What the heck is going on? I go to the door, but I'm not happy when I see Sheriff Mack on the porch.

"Good morning," I tell him with forced cheerfulness as I let him inside.

"Ms. Daniel," he says curtly. "Can we talk?"

"Of course. Come in. Would you like some coffee?"

"No thanks, it will only take a moment."

This should be fun.

"Word has it you're investigating the stolen tiara case."

"I've had casual conversations about it. Like pretty much everyone else in town."

“You and I both know they’re more than casual conversations. I hear that you’ve been talking to the, er, *employees* at the hotel.”

I pinch my lips together at him. I’m annoyed at the obvious implication.

“Like I said, everyone is talking about it. You can’t go anywhere in this town right now without overhearing conversations.”

“You also had a lengthy conversation with Ronald Thurman about how a person could sell the tiara if they just happened to find it in their possession.”

I nearly blurt out *who told you?* Did Thurman rat us out? Or did someone in the coffee shop overhear us?

He continues. “What I can’t decide is, does this make you just nosy or perhaps suspicious?” He folds his arms across his chest and takes a broader stance with his feet to show me he isn’t planning to budge until he gets answers.

“If you’re interfering in an investigation because you fancy yourself as some modern-day Nancy Drew, I’ll warn you I can charge you with interference. And if you had something to do with the actual heist, I can take you in for questioning. So, tell me, Ms. Daniel, which is it?”

Any thoughts I may have had about potentially sharing what I know with him just went right out the window. And it’s not that I’m worried about getting in trouble. I just don’t like the guy.

Ambrose is right. I should keep what I know to myself. If Sheriff Mack wants answers, he can get them on his own, just like I had to. Granted, there's the small detail that he can't talk to ghosts like I can, but that's his problem.

I look on in horror when Clara suddenly appears looking up at the sheriff in admiration. She's standing so close she's practically hugging him. I watch him shiver involuntarily as she slides her hand down his arm, and I can't decide if I should laugh or scold her. Either response might earn me a trip to the sheriff's station.

"I already told you, I was driving through Oklahoma when the tiara was stolen. I was nowhere near Glenwood."

"So, you're interfering in an investigation."

"There's no law against my discussing the news with friends."

"You're friends with a retired jewel thief who happens to be an FBI consultant?" I watch him pause before what he obviously thinks is him moving in for the kill. "After being in town for a few days?"

"Who I'm friends with is none of your business."

"If you've learned anything important from all the new *friends* you've made, you need to tell me," he growls.

"I'm sure you know far more about this case than I do, Sheriff."

"You need to tell him about Curtis!" Clara urges.

I glare back at her. She's getting such a talking to after he leaves.

“I won’t warn you again, Ms. Daniel. If you know of anything that could be important to this case, you must tell me.”

“Oh, you’ll be the first person I call Sheriff,” I respond sarcastically.

He glares at me as he leaves. He obviously doesn’t believe me.

After I shut the door behind him, Clara whirls on me. “You need to tell him what you know! You’re letting that angry old ghost influence you.”

“That angry old ghost understands me better than anybody else here.”

“Oh, poppycock! Sinclair hired you to investigate the case because of your spirit communication gifts. They didn’t hire you to keep secrets from the police. From what you’ve told me, you’ve barely talked to the other ghosts in the hotel.

“What if one of them knows more than this Galloway character? What if one of them holds the key to solving this? I thought that’s what you wanted. Solve the case and get on with your new life.”

“And I’m working on that!” I insist.

“Doesn’t seem like it to me.”

“All I have right now are theories. As soon as I get something concrete, I’ll share it with the Sheriff.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. You’re always mad and distrustful. I know you don’t have plans to involve the police

in this. You think you'll catch this Curtis on your own and then wash your hands of the whole thing."

"Whatever! Don't you have someone else to haunt?" I yell at her.

"Fine!" she exclaims, disappearing with a loud pop.

"Fine!" I shout back at the air.

Mystery then stomps past me, glaring over her shoulder as she runs up the stairs.

"You're all really annoying!" I yell.

OceanofPDF.com

That afternoon Wendy texts Juliet and me.

I have something important to show both of you. How fast can you get here?

I'm on my way!

Be right there!

I get into the bus and race to the bookstore.

"What is it?" I ask breathlessly the moment I burst through the door, startling several customers in the process, the bell jangling overhead so hard I'm afraid I'll break it.

Juliet arrived only seconds before me, but Wendy made her wait.

She holds up a book of pictures. I lean in closer to look at it and I realize it's one of those coffee table books. With pictures of people partying on a beach. In Mexico.

I snatch it from her hands, staring openmouthed at the familiar pictures. When I finally look up at her, she's

grinning at me. "I told you I saw those pictures somewhere!"

"I have to go!" I announce, shoving the book back into her hands.

"Wait!" Juliet exclaims. "Where are you going?"

"To confront Curtis. Where else?"

Wendy shakes her head. "We need to call Sheriff Mack first. He'll know what to do."

"I'm not calling anybody," I tell her. "Curtis has been boasting to everyone at the hotel that he's coming into some money soon. I must confront him before he gets away with it."

Juliet grabs my arm. "Are you out of your mind? You can't just run off like that and confront a jewel thief."

"The heck I can't!" I insist, pulling my arm from her grasp.

"I didn't call you here so you can deal with this alone," Wendy insists. She looks cross.

I stare back at the two of them while the familiar anger wells up inside of me. "You two are as bad as Clara and Mystery and Sheriff Mack. You can call the authorities if you want. I'm going to solve a crime!"

I leave the two of them standing there speechless. They'll understand after I catch Curtis and save the hotel.

I have to confront Curtis before he takes off, and it's too late. I run into the hotel, searching everywhere for him. He's scheduled to work today, so he must be here somewhere. I halt in the hallway after passing Fiona.

“Hey!” I hiss. “Hey, you!” She looks surprised that I’m talking to her. Even though she’s stopped by the bar several times since I’ve started, but I just haven’t had time for idle chit-chat.

“I keep hoping we could hang out,” she says. “Several of us have wanted to talk to you since you first arrived. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a true spirit communicator here. Samuel said he met you the first time you were here, but you blew him off.”

“Yeah, yeah, I swear we’ll hang out soon.” I dismiss her greeting. “Can you tell me where Curtis the bellhop is? He’s scheduled to work this afternoon.”

“He quit.”

“He what? What do you mean, he quit?”

“He walked in here today, said he didn’t need this stupid job anymore, and quit. Didn’t even give notice. Sinclair was furious because on top of everything else, now he’s short a bellhop.”

“Did he say where he’s headed next?” I plead. I just knew it. He stole the tiara, and now he’s rich, so he’ll leave town if I don’t stop him first.

“He said he was going to Hot Springs Pizza, and the beer is on him if anybody wants to join him.”

The nerve! After stealing a priceless tiara, you think he’d take off for parts unknown. But instead, he has to flaunt his newfound wealth first. But that’s good for me because I can now confront him before it’s too late.

“Thanks!” I tell her as I run for the exit once again.

“I hope we can talk again soon!” she shouts after me.

I have to get to the pizza place before Curtis leaves. Admittedly, I don’t know what I’ll say to him when I get there, but I can’t let him get away. Part of me wonders if I should clue the sheriff’s department in like Wendy and Juliet insisted, but I don’t have time.

Besides, what would I say to him? Admit that I held everything back this morning? And none of this changes the fact that I still don’t trust him. He’d probably just dismiss anything I had to tell him, anyway. I better do this on my own for now.

Once I get Curtis to confess, then I’ll call the police. I bolt through the front door of the Hot Springs Pizza restaurant so abruptly that the hostess jumps back several inches, like she’s expecting some lunatic to mow her down. I’ve done that a lot today for some reason.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

I scan the restaurant, and there he is. He’s with a group of his friends, laughing it up and having a great time.

“Fun time is over, buddy,” I murmur, marching his direction.

“Wait, miss, where are you going?” the hostess calls after me.

I ignore her while moving in on Curtis.

“Curtis Kell,” I announce as I get to their table.

He looks surprised. "Hey, Holly, right? Join us! We're celebrating my liberation from the hotel."

"The only reason you're *liberated*, as you say, is you stole Lucy M's tiara!"

I admit; it's not as slick as I had pictured it. I was thinking more like a tv show where the heroine is calm as a cucumber when she confronts the perp. That's what they're called, right? Perp?

I was going to trick him into confessing, not just blurt out the first thing that came to mind, but whatever. That doesn't change the fact that he's guilty, and I just know it.

He looks surprised at my accusation. More like surprised I figured it out, I bet.

"I stole *what*?" he asks, looking around at his friends as they all laugh. But then his eyes get huge as he stares at something over my shoulder. Ha! He knows he's in trouble now. "Uh oh!" he says, still looking behind me.

I spin around to see Sheriff Mack heading in this direction. What the heck is he doing here? I bet Wendy and Juliet called him and tattled on me. Before I can say anything more, Curtis leaps from his seat and sprints across the restaurant out the back door.

"Hey!" I call after him. This wasn't supposed to happen. I'd chase him, but he's remarkably fast.

"Don't move!" Sheriff Mack angrily jabs a finger in my direction.

“Why me? I didn’t do anything!” I exclaim as he and several others run after Curtis. I don’t care what he says. I’m obviously not staying here just because the sheriff tells me to. But as I turn to leave, one of the deputies grabs my arm.

“The Sheriff told you to stay put.”

“Why? I didn’t do anything. Curtis is the one you want.”

“Just stay here,” he demands.

Curtis’ friends all look uncomfortable.

“We don’t have to stay, do we?” one of them asks the deputy.

“Yes!” I tell them. For all I know, they could be accomplices.

“Go.” the deputy tells them as they all jump up and hurry out the door.

“Hey! You haven’t paid yet!” the hostess calls after them.

What a mess this is. But I take satisfaction because I’m right. The authorities will catch Curtis, he’ll confess, and this will all be over. The fact he ran from me proves he stole the tiara.

“I still don’t understand why I have to stay if they don’t,” I whine until the deputy pushes me into a chair. Every eye in the restaurant is on us. How embarrassing. If people weren’t talking about the new girl before this, they are now.

After what seems like forever, Sheriff Mack returns, and he’s furious.

“Please tell me you caught him!” I beg.

“What were you doing here?” he demands.

“Curtis stole the tiara!”

“That’s not what I asked. Why did I, and this entire restaurant, just watch you confront Curtis Kell?”

“He hijacked the security system at the hotel and stole the tiara!”

“And how do you know this?” he asks.

This is nerve-racking. “I just do,” I whisper. Now what?

“When I was at your house this morning, you swore you knew nothing about the case. Yet here you are confronting a hotel employee about it. What gives?”

Oh dear. Do I tell him what I know? And if I do that, I admit I’ve been lying to him and keeping evidence from him. The restaurant is so quiet I could hear a pin drop.

“That’s it. You’re coming with me,” he says, holding out his hand. Does he expect me to take it? As if! When he grabs my arm pulling me to my feet, I realize he’s serious.

“Where are you taking me? You can’t just do this!”

“I can and I will. And if you don’t stop resisting, I’ll handcuff you.”

After that I go quietly. This is all bad enough and I don’t need to be handcuffed in front of the world.

Sheriff Mack shoves me into the back of a patrol car while he then takes the driver’s seat.

“Am I under arrest? Are you taking me in? I want my lawyer.” I cringe when my voice comes out all screechy.

“You’re being detained. Now quite bellowing like that and start talking.”

When he just sits there and doesn't start the car, I'm a tiny bit relieved. Maybe we're not going to the police station after all.

"Curtis Kell is a genius computer hacker who once broke into the school system to change his friend's grade." I blurt out.

"We are aware of that," he says so calmly it almost scares me.

When I look surprised, he glares back at me.

"But the fact you're surprised by that means you should have offered that evidence to me when I first asked. Your first night at the bar."

I gulp.

"And he was telling friends at the hotel that he was getting a bunch of money and then he quit today!" I stammer.

"We're aware of that as well."

"Oh."

"For someone who insisted she didn't know a thing about this earlier, you obviously know quite a bit. And since you seem to know so much about this, do you also realize he has an alibi for the night the tiara was stolen?"

"He lied," I whisper.

"And how do you know this?"

"The pictures he posted on social media of his vacation in Mexico are fake."

"Excuse me?" his head whips around at me.

Uh oh. I guess I do know something he didn't.

I take a deep breath and think, please, please, please, don't arrest me.

"The pictures of Mexico on his social media accounts are from an obscure book on Mexican tourism. He probably thought no one would ever put them together."

"And how did you put it together?"

Oh dear. This is getting so much worse.

"I saw them in a book." I trail off, hoping against hope he doesn't ask me where the book is. Wendy and Juliet insisted we go directly to the authorities, and I refused, and I'm worried it will look like they were in on it.

"You have this book at home?"

"Not exactly."

"I need the exactly part."

"It's at the Looking Glass Bookstore."

Sheriff Mack shakes his head. "You stumbled across this on your own?"

Why did I let him put me in the patrol car? Now I have no way of warning Wendy in advance to just lie and tell him she knows nothing about it. Although I'm assuming that she'd never lie, anyway.

"Wendy was the one who discovered it. But I swear to you she demanded that we contact you immediately, and I refused!" Now it all pours out because I don't want to get my friend in trouble. "I ran to the hotel to confront Curtis

even though she and Juliet insisted we turn over the evidence to you right away.”

“You’ve involved Wendy and Juliet in your scheme?”

This keeps getting worse. “They didn’t want to be! I swear!”

“I’ll ask you this one last time and you better be honest. Is there anything else you know about this case that you should tell me?”

“I promise you, that’s it. That’s all I know.”

He falls silent. Like he’s trying to decide what to do with me.

“Can I ask you a question?” I whisper.

“I’m not up for negotiating here,” he says.

“I completely understand that.”

“So, what’s your question?”

I can’t believe I’m going to ask him this, but at this point I have nothing to lose. “I know why I was here confronting Curtis but why were you here?” I thought Wendy had called him and told him but his surprise over the pictures tells me she didn’t.

“Mr. Kell was already a suspect in the case, but he had an alibi, so we continued to watch him from afar. And he’s underage, so when someone reported him for drinking at the restaurant today, we thought it would be a perfect time to pick him up and interrogate him. But then you beat us to it.”

“Did you catch him?” I ask.

There's a long, uncomfortable pause before he says anything else. I can't believe it. He got away, and it's all my fault.

"We have him in custody."

Phew! I fall back against the seat and breathe a sigh of relief. I may have screwed up royally, but at least this is over.

The tiara thief is in custody and obviously the police will get a confession from him. I'm so ready to be done with this.

"Are you arresting me or..?"

"You can go," Sheriff Mack says reluctantly. "But I don't want to hear another word about any involvement on your part in this case."

Now that they caught the thief, he doesn't have to worry about that anymore. "I promise you, I am done with this, Sheriff!"

"See that you stick to that promise," he tells me as he lets me out of the back seat of the car. Several people walking by stare at us. I'll never live any of this down.

OceanofPDF.com

As I watch Sheriff Mack drive away, I ponder my next move. I know I should go to the bookstore and give Wendy and Juliet a heads up about the Sheriff wanting to see the book. But I'm so excited they've finally arrested Curtis that I want to let Mr. Sinclair know first.

And yes, I get that they've only just arrested him, but I'm sure he'll confess soon, if he hasn't already. Sinclair should be the first to know because he'll be so relieved. And then he'll make me a permanent bartender.

The day started out a bit dicey, but it's only looking up from here. I'm sure that Wendy and Juliet will understand when I explain everything. And the hotel is just a couple streets over, so it's easy to pop in there first.

"The police arrested Curtis for stealing the tiara!" I exclaim upon seeing Sinclair in his office.

“What?” he says, clearly in shock. That’s odd. I assumed he wouldn’t be surprised either. “Are you serious?”

“Of course, I’m serious. Didn’t you know he’s a computer hacker?”

“I know he’s a computer science major, but you’re saying he’s a criminal? Are you sure? I’ve known him for years and he just didn’t seem the type.”

“I guess you never really know someone?” I shrug. “Don’t tell anybody, but I think he and Lucy M were in on it together for the publicity.” He stares back at me like I’m crazed. Why doesn’t anybody think that’s valid?

“I thought you’d be happy with this news!” I throw my arms in the air in frustration. “The owner won’t have to sell the hotel.”

“Yes, that is superb news.” He nods his head. “In fact, I’ll call him right now to tell him. I still can’t believe that it was Curtis. Wait, how do you know this?”

I didn’t think he’d ask that. “Oh. Uh. Well. I just talked to Sheriff Mack.”

“And he told you this?”

“Um. Yes.” Perhaps I shouldn’t have come straight here after all. And then I remember him telling me I’m to stay out of this from now on. And my promise that I would. I begin to sweat a little. But now that the case is about to be solved, I don’t think this counts.

“Okay, well, I’ll call the owner and give him the good news!”

"I'll let you make your phone calls and I'll see you tonight for my regular shift as the *bartender*."

"I'm glad you plan to stay on," he responds, punching a phone number into the keypad. "I'll see you tonight!"

"Don! Sinclair here. Great news!" I hear him say as I skip out of his office. Everything will be fine now. I just know it.

Now to update Wendy and Juliet. I hope they understand why it took so long for me to get back to them. When I arrive back at the bookstore, though, the CLOSED sign is out. That's odd. I knock on the door, anyway.

"Hey Wendy! Are you in there?" I call out and peer through the window. Everything is dark, and it looks empty. I hope she didn't get sick or something. I guess I'll text them.

Good news ladies! They arrested Curtis for stealing the tiara! Thanks for your help with the book. Heads up: Sheriff Mack will probably want to see the book you showed me. But don't worry, I told him it was all my idea.

Once they realize everything is okay, I'm sure they'll understand. Next, I rush home to update Clara on everything that has happened.

"Hey Clara!" I call out. "You'll never believe it!"

I feel rather foolish standing in the kitchen shouting to a ghost who is so far ignoring me. Like she has anywhere else to be! "Clara?"

Mystery walks through the kitchen then. "Mystery, where is Clara?" I ask. Mystery says nothing and regards me with

the usual air of a cat who thinks she's superior to everyone else.

What the heck is going on? I still haven't heard back from Wendy or Juliet and now Clara is nowhere to be found. Fine. I don't care. Who needs them? I'm just happy the bad guy was caught. To heck with everybody else.

OceanofPDF.com

I expect to find a celebration at the hotel tonight, but it seems more like a wake.

"What's up?" I ask Mindy, the front desk clerk. "Why is everyone so quiet?"

"You haven't heard?" she says, looking surprised.

"Heard that Curtis got arrested for stealing Lucy M's tiara? I mean, I know you guys were all his friends, but c'mon, we caught the bad guy, and saved the hotel."

She looks at me with disgust and jabs her finger at the tv that plays news in the lobby.

"This is Madison Romero reporting from WXYN in front of the sheriff's department. I'm here with local Curtis Kell, who was arrested but then cleared of stealing the famous popstar Lucy M's tiara..."

"What do you mean, cleared?" I shout at the tv.

“Mr. Kell, can you share with us why they arrested you earlier today?”

“Of course, Madison. The police *mistakenly* believed that I stole Lucy M’s tiara while she was staying at the Red Castle Hotel.”

“And what made them think that?” she asks.

“I’m studying to get a computer science degree and unfortunately, the authorities thought that meant I could hack the security system and cameras in order to access Lucy M’s room.”

“You’re saying that isn’t true?” the reporter asks.

“Right. It’s completely false.”

“Is it true that the police suspected you right away?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“But you had an alibi?”

“Yes, I told them I had an alibi, but this is where it gets rather embarrassing,” he says.

“Liar!” I shout at the tv again while several people around me tell me to hush.

“I admit I told them I was in Mexico for spring break at the time and I even posted fake pictures on my social media accounts, but that’s not a crime I’d like to point out.”

“It is when you lie to keep from being arrested.” I keep talking out loud to the tv, but no one pays attention.

“So, you weren’t in Mexico?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Then where were you?” she asks.

"I was in the hospital."

"What?" I shriek.

"Why were you in the hospital? And why did you lie?"

"It's embarrassing, Madison, but I was having hernia surgery, and I didn't want anyone to know."

"You liar!" I continue to shout. No one will believe this, right?

"You were also overheard bragging about coming into a large sum of money soon, and then you quit your job. Can you blame anyone for thinking it looks like you have the tiara and you're about to leave town?"

"I completely understand how that looks, but the truth is I turn 19 next week, which means I'm getting the trust fund my grandmother set up for me. I don't have to work anymore, and I can concentrate on schoolwork full time.

"The police have all the documentation now, so they let me go. I apologize for any confusion my previous statements may have caused, but I assure you I have proof of everything I just told you."

I can't believe this is happening.

"Holly!" I hear Mr. Sinclair bellow from his office. Uh oh. "I take it you've heard the latest?" he grumbles.

"I just saw it on TV in the lobby," I tell him sorrowfully. "I was so sure Curtis was the one. Everything just fit."

"The Red Castle owner says this embarrassment was the last straw. The Millur Group made him a final offer, and he accepted. Next month, they'll close on the deal, and the

spirit extermination begins as soon as they can get a medium here.”

“Extermination?” I whisper.

“Yes, the new owner doesn’t want to deal with troublesome ghosts. And considering we still don’t actually know who stole the tiara, it could be the ghosts, after all. Either way, the new owner doesn’t want them on the property.”

“They can’t get rid of the ghosts. They’re the best part of this place. It’s why people come here, right?”

“It’s out of my hands now. They can do whatever they want. I’ll probably lose my job too. I’m sorry, but I don’t know what they’ll do with the rest of the staff.”

I trudge out of his office. This isn’t just about me being a bartender anymore. It’s about all the ghosts that will simply cease to exist. It’s about all the history in this place. It will all be gone. And what about the staff who might lose their jobs?

What a disaster. I’ve been here less than a week, and everything is horrible. I wish I’d never come here. Why did I have to buy that stupid house and think that this would all be so great?

That evening while I'm at work I poke my head into the manager's office. "Hey, Mr. Sinclair, would it be all right for me to look at some of the security camera footage from the hotel?"

He looks so utterly defeated I feel horrible. "You know that the video from outside Lucy M's room shows nothing the night the tiara was stolen. Besides, I already gave all of that to the police, so I'm not sure that it matters now."

"Not video from the night *of* the theft, but what about video the night before? Specifically, from the cameras in the lobby. Did you give that to the police?"

He shakes his head. "No. They didn't ask for it."

"May I see it?" I press.

"I guess. It's all pointless, anyway. I talked to my sister in Nebraska, and they'll let me move in with them while I look for a new job."

“Nebraska?” I ask. “What is there to do in Nebraska?”

“I’m hoping nothing to do with ghosts or diva pop stars!”

“But what if we can save the hotel? Would you stay then?”

“Of course, I’d stay. But there’s no saving the hotel at this point, so don’t get your hopes up. I’d start looking for a new job if I were you, by the way.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Can I still get the video?”

“Sure, I’ll have my secretary put it together for you. If she hasn’t quit already.”

This is so depressing. Everyone is wandering around the hotel with glum faces, and the mood is dark. It’s eerily quiet, and there are very few reservations.

Everyone is waiting to see what happens with the sale of the hotel and the ghosts are all hiding for fear of being caught and exterminated.

I’m not even sure why I’m asking to see video footage. I guess I think perhaps I’ll be able to spot something everyone else has overlooked or didn’t think of.

It’s kind of a Hail Mary, but I think it’s worth trying. Sinclair gives me a flash drive of the camera footage at the night’s end and when I get home, I’m too wound up to sleep, so I decide to comb through the video instead.

After an hour of staring at people coming and going, I’m bored out of my mind. I’m not sure what I was thinking. Why isn’t it like tv where the video instantly reveals a clear shot of the bad guy, and they all leap up and run out the door to

give chase? Then just as I'm about to fall asleep, I see him out of the corner of my eye.

"What the heck?" I mutter as I rewind a few minutes of video to watch it again, but slower. There he is, plain as day. Well, plain as day in a baseball cap, but I know it's him. He moves exactly like him, is the same size as him, and even though the camera angle partially obscures his face, there's no mistaking it.

Ronald Thurman, who insisted he hadn't been to the hotel in years, was in the lobby the day before the tiara was stolen.

"Yes!" I shout and jump up from my chair so abruptly that Mystery, who was napping on the bed, leaps up, bolting from the room.

"You woke up poor Mystery, and she doesn't appreciate it!" Clara scolds me.

"Sorry, Mystery!" I call out.

"What are you shouting about?" Clara asks.

"So, you're talking to me again?"

She glares at me. "For now. I wondered what all the commotion was about."

"Ronald Thurman told us he hadn't been to the hotel in years."

"And?"

"There he is! In the hotel lobby." I thrust my finger at the screen as Clara moves closer to peer at it.

"Son of a gun, that *is* him! But when was that?"

“Get this,” I say, trying to sound less smug than I feel, but I don’t think it’s working. “He was in the hotel lobby the day before the tiara was stolen!”

“Do you think he was there casing the place so he could steal it?” Clara asks.

“Why else would he lie about being there?” I’m so excited I’m practically jumping up and down.

“What next?”

“I confront him, of course!”

Clara looks worried. “I feel like we’ve been here before. Shouldn’t you report this to Sheriff Mack first and let him handle it?”

“Oh, for...” I sputter. “Why is everyone so keen on reporting everything to the sheriff’s office the second I get a clue?”

“Do I really have to remind you why?”

“I won’t keep it from him forever. Just for the time being. Is it my fault that the police didn’t request this footage already? And besides, he could have let me know they released Curtis when they found out he was in the hospital recovering from surgery while the tiara was stolen.

“Instead, he let me embarrass myself and run around thinking that the case was solved when he knew it wasn’t. I’ll let him know after I talk to Thurman.”

Clara shakes her head angrily. “You have a knack for tying yourself up in knots with all your justifications. The sheriff

doesn't owe you anything. And, if you don't call Sheriff Mack right away, I swear I'll..."

"You'll what?" I sneer as I plant my hands on my hips in defiance. "Call him yourself? Tattle on me? I don't think so!"

"You're mean!" she shouts at me as I flounce out of the room.

"Call someone who cares! Oh wait, you can't!" I snark back. And yes, that exchange makes me cringe, but there's so much at stake here, and I still don't trust the Sheriff.

I wish people would quit nagging me. Once I talk to Thurman if he confesses, then great, he's off to jail. Or even if he trips up and reveals something he shouldn't, then I'll call Sheriff Mack.

They just don't understand. What I've found could blow the entire case wide open, and after I made a mess of the whole Curtis thing, I want to make up for it. The hotel's future is at stake. My job is at stake. I will make this right.

And thanks to Wendy and Juliet, I know he'll be in the coffee shop at 9:30 in the morning and I'll be waiting for him.

“Ah, good morning Ms. Daniel. How nice to see you again. Sorry about the situation with Mr. Kell.”

I sit across from Ronald Thurman, pondering what to say next. Maybe I should have worked this out beforehand.

“You must have seen the hotel’s surveillance video,” he tells me calmly.

How the heck does he know?

“You said you hadn’t been there in years.”

“Yes.” He sighs. “I couldn’t help myself. When I heard Lucy M would be at the hotel, I wanted to see the tiara for myself. You can take the man out of the cat burglar business, but you can’t take the cat burglar business out of the man you know.”

“So, you did take it!”

He chuckles softly. “Oh, my dear. I know you’re desperate to locate the actual thief, and I’m sorry to disappoint you,

but it isn't me. Those days are long behind me.

"I just wanted to get a glimpse of it if I could. For old time's sake. Did you even bother to check out my alibi? I can assure you Sheriff Mack did, and the Elks Lodge and my poker buddies confirmed it."

I'm embarrassed when he reminds me, I already asked him where he was when the tiara was stolen, but I was so convinced it was Curtis I forgot to double back on what he told me.

"I must say I'm impressed, though. The police don't even know that I was there. How did you think to check out the video?"

"Just a hunch."

"Because you thought there may have been something everyone else missed?"

"Yeah." I hang my head in disappointment.

"Your stubbornness and missteps aside; you have a knack for this, you know."

"A knack for what?" I snap at him. This isn't going like I planned.

"A knack for investigating," he explains, and then laughs at my obvious shock. "As you can imagine, I've met many cops in my time, and I've developed a sixth sense about them."

"I'm not joining the sheriff's office, if that's what you're thinking!" This guy has some nerve.

“Not that, you silly girl. You’d make a good private investigator. Once you get that chip off your shoulder, anyway. You can’t do it all alone.”

OceanofPDF.com

I'm at the bar that evening, still pondering what Mr. Thurman said about how I'd make a good private investigator. That guy is mad as a hatter, if you ask me.

"Hey there," I greet Anne as she slides onto a seat at the bar.

"Hey," she responds glumly.

"Discover anything new since we last talked?"

"Nope." She sounds so defeated. I feel horrible.

"I'm sorry that the bellhop wasn't the thief after all."

"Me too," she sighs. "I thought we had something there."

"Do you still have your job, at least?"

"Today I do, but who knows what will happen tomorrow? Lucy threatens to fire me at least once an hour."

"Do you think it would be better to work for someone else? She sounds kind of mean."

“Who would hire me? I’m the person responsible for losing the famous Lucy M’s tiara. For ending all her tour dates!”

“Oh, c’mon, you’re not responsible. I don’t care what your boss says. Whoever stole it is responsible. What did she expect you to do? Maintain a 24/7 watch over her head?”

“She probably does.”

When Leroy strolls into the bar, she cringes. “I can’t believe that guy is still hanging around,” she mutters.

“Leroy? You know him?”

“Know him?” she snorts. “He’s our number one stalker.”

“Wait a minute. He’s your what?”

“He’s obsessed with Lucy. Writes to her allll the time.”

Anne rolls her eyes.

“You mean since the tiara was stolen?”

“No! I mean, for the last two years.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “That’s not possible.”

“You should see the stacks of emails he’s sent her. And when we realized his hotel room was next to hers, I even contacted the police about it.”

Anne laughs when she sees how shocked I am. “What, are you, friends, with him or something?”

“He told me he never heard of her.”

“That’s a huge lie. I can show you the emails if you want.”

“That’s okay, I believe you.”

“What did the police say when you contacted them?” I ask.

“They said if he hadn’t made any threats or physically approached her, there’s nothing they can do about it. He’s pretty creepy, if you ask me.”

“You said her room was next to his?”

“Yep!”

“That’s a huge coincidence, don’t you think? Especially considering he told me he’d never heard of her. Why would he lie about that? What if *he* stole the tiara?”

“I don’t know.” Anne sounds doubtful. “Do you think that’s even possible? Would he have known how to sneak into someone’s room undetected? That would have to be extraordinarily difficult, and he doesn’t seem the type.”

“I know, I know, even so, he lied to me when he had no reason to.” I point out.

She sighs. “I don’t know what more to tell you. I don’t even know if it matters anymore.”



“Hey, Mr. Sinclair?”

“What is it now, Holly?”

“I have a question about Leroy Rees.”

“He’s a permanent resident here and spends a lot of money in this hotel, so whatever he wants, he gets. Although what do I care? I’m about to lose my job, anyway.”

“Lucy’s assistant told me you put Lucy M in the room next to his, despite the fact he’s practically been stalking her for

years. That wasn't a coincidence, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. He specifically requested it."

"And you put her there because he spends a lot of money in the hotel." I press.

"Yes. But I didn't know about the stalking."

"Anne told me they have stacks and stacks of emails from him. She said she even reported it to the police. *And* when I asked him earlier, he told me he never heard of her."

"I know nothing about that. It's not like their rooms were adjoining, so what's the harm? Besides, it's too late now."

"What if he stole the tiara?"

"He'd have to be the kind of person who could magically break into a locked room completely undetected, and I don't see that happening. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do..."

"Okay, sorry to have bothered you."

Sinclair may think it's too late, but I don't. Leroy and I are having a conversation tonight, even if *I* have to stalk *him*.

When Leroy doesn't show up at the bar as I hoped he would, I finally lose patience and go to his room to confront him. And yes, I realize I could get in tons of trouble for this, but if I'm right and somehow, he had a way to access Lucy M's room with no one knowing about it, he could be the thief.

Or what if it was always Leroy instead of Curtis working with Lucy? Why doesn't anyone else think of these things?

When Leroy answers the door, he looks surprised to see me standing there.

“Hello! I have your lager,” I tell him. “Oh! You’re not the usual person who delivers room service. You’re the new bartender, aren’t you?”

“Joe is busy at the moment, and I didn’t want you to miss your evening brew,” I tell him.

“Great, thank you!”

“Hey Leroy, why did you tell me you never heard of Lucy M when it turns out you’ve been stalking her for years?” I don’t have time for clever conversational tactics here. Every moment that the mystery remains unsolved is a minute closer to the end of this hotel.

Leroy’s face turns red, and he stammers. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, you do. Do I need to get Anne, Lucy M’s assistant, to confirm that you’ve tried to contact her so many times that they had to report you to the authorities?”

“No, no, don’t do that.”

He looks around the hallway in a panic, like he’s worried that someone might overhear us.

“Why don’t you come inside instead of discussing this in the hallway?”

I pause for a moment. If this guy will steal a tiara, he may kill to keep his secret. But I’m so desperate to solve this I’ll take the chance. I just hope I don’t regret it. But just in case, I look around his room for a weapon. I think I could scream

loud enough and smack him on the head with the lamp if I needed to.

“Okay, yes, I admit it. I became so obsessed with Lucy M over the years that they called the police on me. I realized then how foolish I’d been.”

“You asked Sinclair to make sure her room was next to yours!”

“I know. I’m so embarrassed about that now.”

“Where were you the night the tiara was stolen?”

“Hold on a second, young lady. Are you seriously accusing me of stealing Lucy M’s tiara?”

“You were obsessed with her, and you conveniently requested she get the room next to yours. That all sounds way too convenient.”

“Not that it’s really any of your business, but I was in Aspen.”

Yeah, right, likely story. That’s like the tenth lie he told me.

“Doing what?” I ask.

“If I tell you, will you leave me alone and promise never to speak to me again?”

“Sure,” I tell him. “Why not?”

“I was speed dating.”

“What?”

“It’s called speed dating. Specifically, Silver Speed Dating. It’s for people over 60 years old looking for a companion. After humiliating myself over Lucy M, I realized perhaps it

was time for me to find a regular woman. And one who's closer to my age."

"Can you prove it?" I still don't believe this guy. Although who would make up a story like that? Maybe he's telling the truth after all.

"I don't need to prove a darn thing to you, missy, and if you don't leave right now, I'm calling Mr. Sinclair and having you fired." He pulls open the door and points to the hallway.

"Okay, okay, I'm going. But I'll be checking your alibi!"

I guess the door slamming in my face says it all.

OceanofPDF.com

I'm not the least bit happy when I see Sheriff Mack stride into the bookstore later that evening.

"Ms. Daniel."

"Sheriff Mack."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"I haven't the slightest." I'm still bitter about the whole Curtis thing. The Sheriff should have called me right away. Considering I'm the one who tipped him off about the fake photos.

Sure, the tip led him in the wrong direction, even so, I tried to work with him, and he didn't have the courtesy of updating me on the case.

"We have a complaint from Leroy Rees that you were harassing him earlier this evening."

"Seriously? The guy's a loon!"

“That’s irrelevant; you crossed the line by going to his room and confronting him over Lucy M.”

“The first time I met him, he not only claimed he’d never heard of her, but he also said he knew nothing about the theft. But his room was right next to hers! At his request!”

“Mr. Rees was one of the first people we interviewed in connection with the burglary, and we cleared him immediately after confirming his Aspen alibi. And that would be why he knew nothing about the case, because he wasn’t here to witness any of it.”

“Well, I know that *now*!” I retort.

Sheriff Mack leans over the bar and stares at me. And if I thought he was angry the other day at the pizza restaurant, that was nothing compared to how angry he is now.

“Ms. Daniel. I’m out of patience with you, and if I wasn’t so busy with about a dozen other things tonight, I swear I’d arrest you this second.”

“Arrest me?”

“I got a call from the FBI today.”

“And?”

“And it looks like you have a thing for harassing innocent people.”

“What are you talking about? I just explained why I felt the need to question Leroy.”

“I’m not talking about Leroy right now; I’m talking about Ronald Thurman!”

“What?” Then I recall my second conversation with Glenwood’s retired jewel thief. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. The FBI saw you talking to Mr. Thurman in the coffee shop this morning, and they contacted me to see if I knew anything about it. I knew right away it must be you. They’re holding me responsible for your shenanigans. They don’t appreciate a civilian questioning one of their consultants.”

“Well, *someone* needs to work this case.”

“Ms. Daniel, my office *is* working on this case, as you say. Not you. I repeat, if I weren’t so busy, I’d arrest you right now, but I have other more pressing matters to attend to. But I swear if you put so much as a toe out of line again. I don’t care how busy I am. I’ll arrest you, and this time you’ll go down to the station and sit in a jail cell until you can learn to mind your own business!”

With that, Sheriff Mack stands up straight, glares at me one last time, and marches out of the bar. I’m mortified when I see Mr. Sinclair standing in the doorway, looking very unhappy. This is feeling a lot like Florida.



“Holly! My girl!” Ambrose exclaims, as he appears at the bar several seconds later for one of our nightly chats. He always seems to show up right after I get in trouble for something. Which I appreciate because it gives me someone to rant to.

“What is the deal with that sheriff? Why is he always on your case?”

“I don’t know. I think he’s in an extra bad mood tonight. I seem to be causing him trouble right now. Trouble I imagine he never bargained for.”

“Cheer up; I have some good news for you.”

“Lay it on me. I need it.”

“Ian Newby from Denver will be here tomorrow.”

“Who is Ian Newby?”

“He’s the guy who installed the keypad systems on the doors.”

“Oh. Okay. And why is this good news?”

“Don’t you think someone who installs the locks on doors would know how to add a backdoor to the system so he could get into any room in the entire hotel? Undetected!” he emphasizes when I don’t seem to get it as fast as he is hoping.

“I don’t know. You must admit your last tip wasn’t the greatest.”

“This makes perfect sense, though. And remember how you insisted that Lucy M could be in on this? What if it’s Lucy M and Ian?”

“That’s an interesting thought. And why will he be here tomorrow?” I ask.

“He comes once a month to perform routine maintenance.”

“And you think I should conveniently show up tomorrow and talk to him?”

“Exactly! Why wouldn’t you?”

“You saw how mad Sheriff Mack was tonight, though. What if he finds out?” I remind him.

“Don’t tell me you’re starting to take that guy seriously?” he mocks.

“It’s not that; it’s just that...”

Ambrose makes chicken wings with his arms and clucks at me.

“Knock it off!” I tell him.

“Then don’t be such a chicken and come talk to Ian tomorrow. I have a good feeling about this one!”

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

I check the schedule, and Ian should be at the hotel at 10 AM. I don’t think it’s good to confront him at the hotel if I can avoid it, given what happened with Leroy. It’s best if I can lure him away from here, where we can talk in private.

I arrive at the hotel shortly after ten o'clock and immediately search for Ian. He's sitting on the ground in front of room 325 with the entire keypad spread out in pieces before him.

My mood instantly lifts when I realize how easy it would be for him to alter the lock system. I know that's a strange thing to get excited about, but I'm desperate.

"Excuse me, Ian Newby?" I approach him.

"Yes?" he responds.

"I'm interested in installing security locks at my, uh, a bookstore, and I'm told you're the guy to ask."

"Sure, where's the bookstore?"

"It's just up the way on 6th St. It's called the Looking Glass."

"You bet. I know where that is. I can stop by to give you an estimate when I finish here. Does noon work?"

"That's perfect!" I tell him.

"Great! I'll see you then."



I'm relieved that I won't have to question Ian at the hotel. The only glitch is I have yet to tell Wendy that he'll come to her bookstore when he finishes to give her an estimate on installing security locks there.

And yes, I realize I may have implied that I'm involved somehow in any decisions that Wendy makes regarding the bookstore. Oops.

"Hey ladies, I haven't heard much from you lately." I greet them as I enter the bookstore.

"Hey, Holly," says Wendy.

"Hi," Juliet responds.

I notice neither one is particularly enthusiastic. Just wait until they hear about Ian. I'm desperate to do better here for them and for me.

"Ambrose gave me another lead last night," I tell them.

"Because the first one worked out so well?" Juliet points out.

"I said the same thing, but I think this one could be really solid."

Wendy looks skeptical. "Go ahead."

"A guy named Ian Newby installed the keypad locks on the hotel doors."

“Okay,” Juliet says.

“I’m thinking, what if he built some kind of backdoor access into the system just so he could get into any door in the hotel without being detected?”

“He went to all that trouble just in case there was a shiny tiara he could steal someday? Seems a bit of a stretch,” Juliet says.

“And I understand what you’re saying, but I’m running out of suspects. And what if Ian and Lucy M are in cahoots?”

“But you thought *Curtis* and Lucy M were in cahoots,” Wendy points out.

“I know, but we need to try this,” I beg. “It’s the last one, I promise.”

“What do you mean *we* need to try this?” Wendy asks, suddenly suspicious of the explanation I’m giving them.

“I don’t think that confronting him at the hotel is the best idea, so I’ve asked him to come over here to give us an estimate on installing security locks.”

“Us?” Wendy shouts. “Here?”

“Yes, calm down,” I tell her when customers turn to see who’s shouting. “Sheriff Mack is on the warpath, and if he catches me confronting another suspect, I’m in serious trouble. Like he’s going to arrest me type of trouble.”

“So, you invite him here? Without my permission?” Wendy says.

I don’t know why everyone is so mad at me these days. I’m just trying to solve this case as they asked me to. Is it

my fault if I don't get this perfect every time?

"No," Wendy says, shaking her head angrily.

"What do you mean, no?" I demand. "I've already invited him!"

"Then uninvite him!"

"Holly, we haven't had a chance to tell you this yet, but I had a lucrative wedding cake order cancel on me because of all the drama that's been going on, and then a famous romance author canceled a book signing event here at the store. Also, due to all the drama."

Wendy nods her head and I feel like they're ganging up on me.

"Seriously? I had no idea."

"After the stunt you pulled with Curtis, the sheriff sent deputies to the bookstore and the bakery to question both Wendy and me. In front of numerous customers," Juliet tells me.

Now I feel sick.

She continues. "We're trying to be patient. We know you had a hard time before you got here, but our involvement in this case and everything happening at the hotel is costing us customers that we can't afford to lose."

"Okay, I'm sorry. You're right. I shouldn't have presumed that this okay. I'll run back to the hotel now and cancel on Ian, okay?"

"I appreciate it," Wendy says. "You need to let the authorities handle this. No more junior detective."

But just as I put my hand on the doorknob, Ian shows up at the bookstore right on time. Why couldn't he be really late or be one of those unreliable types who doesn't show up at all? Why did he have to do what I asked him to do?

"Please, just play along one last time," I whisper to Wendy.

"Fine," she snaps. "But I swear to you this is the last time."

As Ian surveys the bookstore and checks out the current locks, he makes notes along the way.

"So, you're the new bartender, huh?" he asks.

"Yep. I moved here from Florida."

"Florida is nice. I have friends who live in Miami. What made you decide to move here?"

"Oh, you know, change of pace."

"I get it. Glenwood is a great town. I love coming up here. Have you been to the pool yet?"

"No, I haven't had the chance. I'm surprised they open this early in this season."

Ian laughs.

"What's so funny?"

"They're open year-round."

"Really? How can they do that?" I ask. I'm so interested in the pools that I almost forgot why I asked him to come here.

"The biggest pool is about 90 degrees, and the smaller one is 104."

"All the time?"

"All the time."

“It’s open in the winter?”

“You can swim when it’s snowing!”

When I catch Wendy glaring at me, I realize I’m spending too much time chatting and not enough time interrogating.

“How long have you been dealing with the security system at the hotel?”

“About three years.”

“So, you were there when the tiara was stolen?”

He laughs. “Everyone asks about that.”

“It’s crazy stuff! Somebody breaks into the famous Lucy M’s room, yet there’s no evidence they did. How can that happen?”

“If you’re wondering how secure these locks are,” he nods at Wendy, “they’re secure. It would be extremely difficult to break into them.”

“And yet someone did,” Wendy points out.

“Unfortunately, yes, someone did. I wish I could tell you *how* they did it, but I just don’t know. They called for me the next day, and I examined the system, but I still don’t know how it happened. There’s no evidence of tampering, and I can’t explain it. I assure you; however, that’s the only time in the history of this company that it’s happened.”

“Where were you the night that the tiara was stolen?” I ask. Might as well, considering that’s why I called him here.

“Are you asking for my alibi?”

I raise a shoulder. “Just curious.”

“I was at a Boyz II Men concert at Fiddler’s Green in Denver.”

I laugh until I realize he’s serious. “Were you really?”

“Look, I’ll show you what I showed the police when they asked.” He pulls his wallet out of his pants and then takes out a ticket stub. Sure enough. Boyz II Men.

“But anybody could have a ticket stub,” Juliet points out. She and Wendy had been so quiet I almost forgot they were here, too.

“The police department in Denver verified that the GPS on my work van showed me at the concert,” he explains.

“Don’t you have your own car?” I ask.

“It was in the shop for two weeks waiting for a specialty part.”

I’d love to ask Sheriff Mack if this guy is telling the truth. He would know if the Denver police had verified his whereabouts the night the tiara went missing. But I don’t want to get arrested.

And I’d tell Juliet or Wendy to ask him, but they don’t seem like they’re in the mood to do me any favors right now. So much of this would be easier if I didn’t alienate people.

When Ian finishes his assessment, he hands Wendy a written estimate. “Let me know if you ladies have questions about installing the security locks here. And if you’re done interrogating me, I’ll head back to Denver now.”

“We’re all good. Thank you!” I tell him before ushering him out the door. I hope he wasn’t offended by all my questions. I feel like, except for Curtis, we’re still at day one, where I have lots of questions but no obvious answers.

An uncomfortable silence hangs heavily in the air after Ian leaves.

“So much for a fresh start with an easy job, huh?” I half-joke. When they don’t even crack a smile, I continue. “I *had* to bring Ian here. If Sheriff Mack catches me in the middle of this again, I’m in so much trouble.”

“Honey, we need to talk,” Juliet says.

“We’ve noticed you like to blame other people. A lot,” Wendy points out.

“It’s not my fault Sheriff Mack is so hard to work with.”

“Are you absolutely certain that you’ve done nothing to contribute to any of the problems between you and the sheriff?” Juliet asks.

“Or anyone else in Glenwood?” Wendy adds.

“Be brutally honest with yourself.” Juliet implores me.

There’s a teeny tiny voice inside me that wonders if it’s even a remote possibility that I could be responsible. What if they’re right? What if it is me? My best friend in Florida, Christina, alluded to the same thing right after I got fired there.

“He’s so pushy, though. I swear this always happens to me.” I complain. Those old arguments are ringing hollow, but I can’t seem to stop them.

“What if you stopped always seeing yourself as a victim? Or what if you were able to work *with* Sheriff Mack rather than against him? Maybe the case would be solved by now,” Juliet suggests.

“I’ve been through a lot, you know. More than you can imagine.”

“We know you have, sweetie,” Wendy says. “But *everyone* has been through something.” She holds up her hand as I start to protest. “And no, not everyone has lost as much as you have. We know the losses you’ve faced, but what are you doing to move forward with your life?”

“I moved here, didn’t I?”

“You leaving Florida to come here isn’t moving forward. It’s running away.” Juliet points out.

“Excuse me?” I give them both a steely eye glare.

“It’s time someone was honest with you because I don’t think the ways all of us tiptoe around you help you. A true friend would call you out on some of your unseemly behaviors,” Wendy says.

“By all means, go right ahead!” I shout.

“I will bet \$1 million that you’re already thinking about leaving town. Thinking that moving somewhere else is what will finally fix everything for you.”

My mouth drops open.

“Ah ha!” she declares. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“You know, Holly, you’ve barely acknowledged what the rest of us are going through. And no, we weren’t raised in

the foster system. We haven't experienced the death of a spouse. But look at us! Look at this town! We're facing some difficult times if the hotel goes out of business.

"The bookstore that Wendy has worked so hard to build. My bakery. What becomes of us if we go out of business too? What happens if this entire town goes broke? Have you thought about how that will affect all of us?"

"Of course, I've thought of that!" I snap. "I've been trying to solve this mystery. But it isn't working."

"We just think that if you worked a little harder to get along with others, rather than insisting you're the victim and that no one understands you, it could help a lot."

I'm disappointed when I realize it feels the same here as everywhere else. People just disappoint me or use me. And now everybody is mad that I haven't solved this case single-handedly.

Maybe I should sell the house and just live out of the bus. I could travel around like an Instagram influencer and film my adventures. Clara could come with me.

If she were still speaking to me, that is. I wouldn't have to put down any roots, and the moment I decided the town wasn't for me, I could pack up and leave.

I head back to the hotel, still trying to understand how everything got so screwed up. I know that the others blame me, but it can't be all my fault, can it?

The moment I enter the hotel I sense a dark energy that I've never experienced. One of the ghosts I've said hello to in passing, but never got his name, races past me.

"Hey, uh, you, what's..."

"Can't talk! Gotta hide!" he shouts, hurrying away.

What the heck is going on?

"The medium is here!" another ghost whispers behind a large potted plant.

I can't believe it. It's happening. A full-scale ghost extermination. I feel sick. I wonder if Ambrose knows.

"Pssst!" Fiona whispers to me. "C'mere!" she motions for me to join her in Sinclair's office.

I hurry over. "How bad is it?" I ask.

"It's really bad," she responds. "They already got about a dozen of us."

"How! What? I don't... I don't even know what to say."

"She's holding a seance in the ballroom. Some ghosts just can't resist it!"

"I need to warn Ambrose!" I insist.

"Holly, it's too late." She looks at me with genuine fear in her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"They got him. He was one of the first to get eradicated."

"What about Samuel?"

She shakes her head sadly.

This is my fault. I could have been here if I hadn't wasted time with my scheme to lure Ian away from the hotel. I could have warned them.

"Ambrose wanted me to deliver a message to you if he didn't make it."

"What is it?"

"He said 'it's not what you think.'"

"It's not what I think? What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, but he searched frantically for you all afternoon. He learned something new and insisted he could only tell you."

"And that's all he said?"

"That's it. And Holly, I understand the timing isn't great here, but I have something to tell you too."

“Okay.” She’s not going to lecture me on my attitude too, is she? Because that would be really weird.

“I knew all along that Curtis wasn’t in Mexico for spring break. I knew he was having surgery instead.”

“And how did you know that?”

“He had to submit paperwork to Human Resources for his health insurance. I saw the file.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I yell at her.

“I tried to talk to you several times, but you were always too busy.”

So, it really is my fault. If I had talked to her when she first approached me, she could have told me about Curtis back then. Sinclair hired me to talk to ghosts, and yet I pretty much only talked to one. Who I now realize seemed to have his own agenda. Which I secretly liked because he was always angry like me.

That’s it. I know now what I need to do. I quit.

OceanofPDF.com

My phone rings just as I'm pulling into the garage at home. I'm not answering if it's Sinclair. It's not. It's one of my old work friends from Florida.

"Hey there, Christina."

"Holly! Guess what?"

"What!" I exclaim, surprised at how nice it is to hear her voice. I know I complain about life in Florida, but hearing her voice comforts me. Life may have been crazed there, but I had friends and did fun things. My only responsibilities were to my job. I didn't have an entire town counting on me to solve some dumb mystery.

"I'll be in Colorado this weekend! We all will. The annual tech conference."

"Is it near me?" I'm excited at the thought of seeing her again.

“I think so! It’s in downtown Denver at the Denver Convention Center.”

I’m crushed. That’s nowhere near Glenwood. It’s hours away. I picture myself pulling up in the bright pink bus and wonder what everyone will think.

“That’s close to you, right? I mean, it is Colorado after all.”

I’ve noticed that people who don’t live here have no clue where anything is. They seem to think that “Denver” encompasses about 75% of the state.

I sigh loudly and almost snap at her that downtown Denver isn’t anywhere near Glenwood. But then I stop myself. It’s not her fault she doesn’t know Colorado. I didn’t realize it myself when I first got here.

“The convention center is a long drive from where I live. Several hours’ worth of driving.”

“It’s still closer than Florida, right?”

She has a point there. Maybe I should go to Denver. Obviously, I could use a break from this town. Already? I remind myself. But maybe time with old friends will be good for me. The little voice in my head reminds me that things weren’t that great in Florida either, but I ignore it.

And when I hear the whistle of the California Zephyr pulling into the nearby train station, I realize I should just take the train.

That way, instead of getting lost and fighting traffic, I can ride the train and relax. I’ll start the political thriller that’s

been collecting dust on my nightstand because I never have time to read these days.

I suspect that quite a few people in this town will be happy to get a break from me, anyway. The next morning, I'm climbing onto the train to Denver. It may take a lot longer than a plane ride, but at least I don't have to stand in line to have everything x-rayed, only to get felt up by a federal agent when I accidentally set off an alarm.

I'm so claustrophobic on a plane, anyway. Packed in like cattle with the passenger in front of me refusing to put his chair up so I spend the flight with my food tray in my lap.

On the train I can move around, and when I went to the dining car for lunch, there's a flower in a little vase on the table. They even have a menu with everything from vegan chili to a cheeseburger with fries and coleslaw. I'm not sure why I never thought of this before.

The drive into Glenwood was scenic, but I couldn't sit back and enjoy it like I wanted to. There's even an observation car with seats facing the floor to ceiling windows devoted to taking in the scenery.

The conductor told me that sometimes that car is so popular they have to limit time spent in there so everyone can experience it. But it's quiet today with only a handful of us looking on.

The train follows the Colorado River and rafters wave at us as we pass by. But then they stand up and – I can't believe I'm seeing this; it must be my imagination – they're mooning

us. I turn to the conductor horrified, but he laughs and says, "They call that the blue moon." Apparently, it's a thing. Who knew?

I also notice a handful of ghosts along the way. Thankfully they're not mooning us. They look like they must have died either while working on the railroad tracks or as miners.

They're surprised when I wave at them. *I'm* surprised when I wave at them. It's almost like acknowledging that I can see them is becoming a habit.

The train ride was incredible, but I'm happy to finally be in Denver. And while the station in Glenwood is tiny, the station in Denver is huge.

There are restaurants, shopping, and a hotel. I arranged to meet Christina at a pizza restaurant in the station. And there she is, waving at me excitedly from a table in the corner.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" I tell her.

"It's so good to see you!" she squeals and hugs me. "So, tell me all about it. How is life in the mountains? Is it as low key as you'd hoped?"

I snort-laugh so hard she's taken aback. "I don't even know where to start." I can't tell her they hired me to communicate with ghosts to solve a mystery because she doesn't know I'm a spirit communicator, and I feel like it's a little late in the game to mention it now.

Even though a lot of people in Glenwood already know. But if I tell her I share my new home with a ghost and a

talking cat, she'll really think I've lost it.

The waitress places a steaming hot pizza in front of us, and it smells fabulous. Slices of fresh tomatoes, torn pieces of basil, with chunks of mozzarella all melting into the sauce, make me swoon. The crust is lightly browned to perfection, and when I bite into it, it crunches in just the right way.

"Oh, my gosh Holls. This is the best pizza ever. And the beer here is unbelievable. The waitress was telling me before you got here that Colorado has craft breweries all over the place. Do you have them in Glenwood?"

"Oh yeah, there's so many in Glenwood it will take me awhile before I can try all of them. We even offer a rotating series of local beers in the bar at the hotel where I work, and I get to try them..." I drift off when I realize I don't work there anymore. And the thought suddenly makes me sad.

I'm worried that it's my fault. I'm in a unique position to investigate the crimes given my connection to the spirits and I fear I didn't take advantage of that. What if I had been better about working with the sheriff?

I could have explained to him why the manager hired me in the first place instead of being so cagey about it. He basically told me he knew what I was, anyway.

Part of me was still worried about my secret getting out and part of me was just convinced that I was being taken advantage of. I wasn't, though. They just really needed me. Even though I was new there, the town needed my talents.

“If I ate and drank like this all the time, I’d be as big as a house. Wait, did you say you work in a bar?” Christina asks.

“I do! Well, I did.” I admit wistfully.

“Uh oh, did you get fired again?”

“No, I didn’t get fired again. Hey, what do you mean again?”

She holds her hand up. “Don’t get all mad now. I know how you are. But let’s face it, you were pretty much fired from the job in Florida. Sure, they gave you a severance package, but everybody knows that was just to keep you from going off the deep end.”

When I look at her, horrified, she continues. “But I’m sure this mountain air lifestyle with your craft beer and fabulous pizza is helping, right? Much less crazed.”

My first thought is to tell her she can’t imagine how stressful things still are for me and how I can’t help it that these situations seek me out, when I realize how maybe it could have been different.

What if I behaved differently rather than always expecting others to behave differently? Would it change things?

“Oh, you’re never going to believe this! The subaru died almost the moment I got to Glenwood Springs...”

“Please,” she rolls her eyes, “I totally believe that. That thing had a billion miles on it...”

“But that’s not the part you won’t believe. I’m driving a neon pink fully restored Volkswagen bus.”

“No. Way.”

“Yes way.” I laugh so hard I nearly choke on my beer. “And everyone waves when I drive it like I’m in a parade or something.”

“Why on earth did you pick a car like that?” she asks.

“Oh, I didn’t pick it, the people who sold me the house left it for me!”

“You’re kidding! Why would they do that?”

“Because they thought...um, they uh, they didn’t have room for it where they were going.”

“And they gave the car to you instead of selling it?” she asks in surprise. “That seems weird.”

“And there’s the cutest little bakery there with the best pastries. And it’s walking distance from my house. I swear the next time you see me I’ll be huge. I think I should start swimming laps at the pool every day.”

“It sounds like you’re having a great time!” she exclaims.

“Oh, yeah, I was, I mean I am...” Sharing stories with Christina made me forget for a moment how I’d left things with everyone. It also made me realize that Glenwood has definitely had its moments so far. Dare I say it’s even growing on me?

“We’re getting dessert, right?” Christina asks.

“I thought you’d never ask!” I respond. “That fudgy chocolate lava cake looks to die for.”

“If we split it, it’s only half the calories.” She points out.

“Done!” I wave the waitress over and order the chocolate. When she brings it out to us, we both groan at the sight of

it. It's nothing but pure ooey, gooey, chocolaty goodness.

As I dig into chocolate heaven, for a moment I'm convinced that I'm hallucinating when out of the corner of my eye I see Anne and Ian walking through the train station. Together.

Hang on a second. That's not possible. I must have imagined it. But then I move around to get a better look. I see the couple who looks like them disappear into a crowd of travelers in the terminal. I almost fall out of my chair I'm trying so hard to see them again.

"What are you doing?" Christina asks.

"I thought I saw someone I know from Glenwood."

"Wow, you already know people that well?"

"It's a small town," I explain.

Now my mind is churning. What are those two doing together, and why are they in Denver? My pulse races. There was a time when I thought Ian and Lucy could be working together. What if it's Ian and Anne?

If that's the case, then Anne had me completely fooled. I bought into her entire act. Was she in Glenwood pretending to be looking for the tiara to make herself look less suspicious?

"Hello!" Christina snaps her fingers in my face.

"What? I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

"I was telling you a story about work, but you were totally checked out. I swear you were a million miles away."

"No, more like 150 miles away."

“Well, this has been great, but I have to get back to the conference now. But call me tonight. You should come drinking with us!” she insists.

“I will!” I nod my head, but I barely hear her because I’m desperately plotting my next move.

OceanofPDF.com

I look up the address of the lock company Ian works for and I'm happy to see it's only about 20 minutes away so I can easily take a ride share. If Ian is there, I'll just say I was in town and realized his shop was nearby. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that he's out on a job.

Or still out with Anne. Wouldn't that be interesting if they showed up at his work together only to see me standing there? I'm not sure what I'm looking for or even what I'll say, but I'll think of it when I get there. My driver pulls up to the shop and I beg him to wait for me. "That will cost you extra, lady," he snarls.

"I'm more than happy to pay for it. And give you a great review."

"Okay, I'll wait 15 minutes, but I can't sit around forever."

"15 minutes should be more than enough!"

I run into the shop. "Hello there. How can I help you?" asks the girl behind the desk.

"Hi, is Ian in?"

"He's not in at the moment. But let me check." She looks at the screen on her desk. "His tracker says he's headed to Littleton for the afternoon. Is there anything I could help you with? Or we could try calling him if it's urgent."

"No, I'm fine. I'm an old friend of his and in town for the day and thought I'd say hello."

"Can I get your name?"

Whoops. Hadn't thought of that. "Carol."

"Just Carol?"

"Yeah, he should know. So, is that tracker pretty accurate?"

"It's completely accurate. If our employee stops at the gas station to use the bathroom and buy donuts, we know exactly where he was and how long he was there. We use it for both safety and accountability."

"So, there's no way to hack the GPS?"

Now she's looking at me strangely, like I'm asking suspicious questions, besides refusing to give her a last name.

"I'm thinking of something like that for my employees, you see, so it's good to know that exists."

She relaxes. Phew. "Yes, you should check into it. It's quite effective."

“Good to know. Okay, thanks for your help. I’ll be on my way now.”

“Thanks for stopping by Carol!”

I hesitate for one second and nearly ask who Carol is. This might go a lot easier if I was better at these types of things.

As I head back to the car, I hear someone calling out, “Miss! Miss! Excuse me, miss!” I whirl around, thinking that Ian must be back, and spotted me. Quick, think of something!

But it’s not him. It’s a ghost. I almost ignore him because I don’t want my driver to leave, but then realize he might have something important to tell me.

“Hello,” I respond.

“Wow! A real-life spirit communicator! This is exciting!”

“You live here?” I nod my head at the building.

“Yes, ma’am! Since 1982.”

“What can you tell me about Ian?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Do you know him well?”

“Uhhh, I’m a ghost, and he can’t see or hear me.”

“Lady! I won’t sit here all day while you talk to yourself,” the driver whines.

I almost laugh. I forgot it looks like I’m talking to an imaginary friend.

I want to question this ghost further, yet I don’t want to be stranded. When I see the sign for yet another brewery

across the street, I decide I can duck in there and wait for another driver.

"I'm so sorry," I tell him. "You can go, and I'll just order another driver when I'm done."

"Suit yourself. Have a good rest of the day," he tells me as I shut the door and he drives off.

"Why are you asking about Ian?" the spirit asks.

"Is he trustworthy?"

"I suppose?" he responds.

"Do the other employees talk about him? Has he ever been disciplined or suspended? Has he ever acted in a way that you thought was suspicious?"

"You sure ask funny questions, Carol."

"I'm not really Carol. I'm Holly."

"Then why did you tell her," he points back at the building, "that your name is Carol?"

"It's a long story. But back to Ian."

"I don't have much to tell you. He always comes to work on time and does what they tell him. He seems to lead a boring life, if you ask me."

"Have you ever met a woman named Anne? Has he ever come to work with her or met her here?"

He shakes his head. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"She looks like this." I hold up my phone to show him a picture.

"Seriously, I've never seen him with anyone other than people who work here. I'm sorry I don't have more for you."

“That’s okay; it was worth a shot.” I sigh.

“He’s really good at picking locks,” he offers. “I don’t know if that helps?”

“Picking locks? Like the electronic kind that the company installs?” I begin to feel hopeful again.

“No, I mean just picking regular locks. He’s kind of a genius, now that I think about it. And whenever someone locks themselves out of someplace, they call him.”

That still doesn’t explain how he’d access the digital lock and the security cameras, so it doesn’t mean much to me.

“I appreciate your help. I guess I need to call another car.”

“You should try the brewery while you’re waiting. It’s a popular place, so I bet it’s good,” he says, staring wistfully across the street. No doubt recalling the days when he used to drink beer.

“Okay, thanks for the tips. I guess I’ll try it out.”

I choose a table outside under a large colorful umbrella and while Denver is nice too, I realize I miss being surrounded by mountain peaks the way Glenwood Springs is.

And I still haven’t been to the pools. I can’t move away until I at least try soaking in the mineral water. If they haven’t already made plans to run me out of town, I’ll try it first thing when I get back.

The server brings me a cherry sour beer. I don’t know what a sour beer even is, but I like sour candy. I take a small sip and my mouth puckers. Wow. They aren’t kidding about

the sour. And yet it's surprisingly good. It's hard to describe the taste though.

But I think it would be even better with a pile of onion rings, so I order some of those too. If I'm forced to leave Colorado, then I'll go down eating. Besides, I'm convinced the fried snack will help me think better. I'm sure it's been scientifically proven somewhere.

I watch an employee unlock a door on the outside of the building leading to a supply closet. He takes out a stack of napkins and paper towels and then it hits me. ***It's not what you think.*** I pull out my phone to make a call, but then I stare at it.

Will he even take my call? If not, perhaps someone at the desk can answer my question. I continue to stare at the phone, pondering my options. Sheriff Mack definitely won't take my call. Not sure if Wendy or Juliet would now.

Not that they should. I've been horrible to them. I don't even know if it's important. But if my hunch is correct, then this time I really could solve the case. I take a deep breath and call the hotel. Mr. Sinclair's secretary answers.

"Hi Bertha, it's Holly Daniel."

"Hi there Holly, what's up? I have your last paycheck on my desk, if that's what you're looking for."

"Actually, I was wondering if Mr. Sinclair is in?"

The lengthy pause is all I need to know. He doesn't want to talk to me. I don't blame him. I wouldn't want to talk to me either.

“No, I’m sorry, he isn’t in right now.”

“Maybe you could help me,” I tell her.

Again, a long pause.

“It will just take a moment, I swear. But it’s really important. At least, I think it is.”

“What is it?” she asks. I wonder if she’s looking at Sinclair right now. Perhaps he’s telling her to hang up on me.

“When I was talking to Mr. Sinclair earlier, he mentioned that when Lucy M was at the hotel, her room was next to Leroy Rees but there wasn’t an adjoining door.” All I hear is breathing on the other end. “But I know Anne was on the other side of Lucy’s room. Did those rooms have an adjoining door?”

Still more breathing. “Please, Bertha, it’s really important, and I promise I’ll never bug you again.”

“Let me check.”

I stay on the line with my fingers crossed and my face turned to the heavens, whispering please, please, please. At this point, I need all the help I can get.

Bertha comes back after a bit and she’s whispering. “Yes, it looks like Anne and Lucy M shared an adjoining door. I have to go now.”

Silence. I wish I knew for sure if the lock on the adjoining room door was a standard lock and not a digital one, but I’m willing to bet that it is.

I'm relieved to be back on the train and headed home. I'm eager to return, make things right with my new friends, and hopefully catch a thief. As hard as it is to admit I was wrong, I realize now that if I had just done what I agreed to do - and what I alone *can* do - I could have accomplished so much more. My attitude hasn't helped me either.

My next step is to set a trap for Ian and Anne, and I need everyone's help for that. I still don't have all the answers. But perhaps the Sheriff will have some ideas.

When the porter comes by again asking for my ticket, I realize that, unlike flying, they don't ask to see an ID. "Excuse me, sir," I tug on his sleeve as he walks away.

He turns. "Yes, miss?"

"I notice you don't require ID. Just my ticket."

"Right."

"You never ask for ID?"

"We sometimes do, but we just need to see your ticket most of the time."

It's not what you think.

"So, I could be on this train under a false name?"

Now he's looking at me like he wonders what I'm up to.

"I mean just for the heck of it, you know. I'm always interested in these types of things."

"You can show me your ID if you want," he explains, rapidly losing patience with me.

"Nope! There's no problem. Everything is good." I smile at him.

"Okay, I'll be on my way then."

"Thank you for your help!" I call out as he walks away, shaking his head and muttering. If he thinks I'm weird now, wait until I talk to the ghost sitting next to me. What if Ian took the train to Glenwood?

He could give a false name, and there'd be no way to trace it to him if they didn't ask for his ID. Sheriff Mack will be shocked when I tell him what I've learned.

I know he said next time I do something like this, he'll arrest me, but it's worth it. If I have to go to jail to solve this mystery, then so be it. I'm willing to take the chance.

I turn to the ghost sitting next to me. "I need your help."

"I thought you'd never ask!" he gleefully rubs his hands together. "What can I do?"

"Can you ask all the ghosts on the train to come to this car? I have some questions for them."

“I’m on it!” he exclaims as he rushes off in search of the others.

Soon there are many ghosts in the car, and more arriving. I try not to think about why so many have died on the train. I’m nervous about speaking with them in front of the other passengers, but there’s no time to waste.

Besides, who hasn’t heard someone talking to themselves on public transportation, right? I locate a picture of Ian on his company’s website as the ghosts gather around me.

“Have any of you seen this man on the train in the last month?” I hold up my smartphone, which I’m sure looks so bizarre to the living passengers. Several of them peer at the phone, along with the ghosts, just in case it’s important and I might actually be talking to them.

Three of the spirits raise their hands.

“You’ve seen him?”

“Yes! He rode the train from Denver to Glenwood on the 15th,” one tells me.

The night Lucy’s tiara was stolen! “Are you sure?” I ask. “This is very important.”

“I’m absolutely certain,” a young-looking ghost says. “Because that’s when a fight broke out between two guys over some girl when they realized they were both dating her. It was the most excitement we’ve had around here in a while.”

Well, what do you know? I just solved the case by talking to ghosts. Although, it was talking to ghosts who aren’t at

the hotel, but still. I guess I'm not too bad at this after all. The rest of the train ride drags by.

I'm so excited to get home and put my plan into action. Which means I should probably think of a plan. So far, I mostly just have ideas, but I'm hoping the others can help. Of course, I have to convince them to speak to me again. I've made a mess of things, but I'll make it right if it's the last thing I do.



I walk into the house and drop my duffle bag on the floor, hoping to encourage Clara to appear, but no luck. "Hey, Clara! I'm home!" Nothing. Rats.

She's probably still mad at me. She has every right to be. They all do. At least Mystery is happy to see me. She bounds down the stairs straight at me.

Although it looks like she's happier to see my bag than she is me. She sniffs it over carefully. I guess if Clara can smell things, then a ghost cat certainly can.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"What did you bring me?" she scratches and paws at the duffle bag.

"I didn't bring you anything. What are you talking about?"

"You went all the way to Denver and didn't bring me anything?"

"Uh. No. Was I supposed to?"

“Tradition states that you bring your house cat a present when you go on a trip,” she complains.

“I’ve never heard of that. I don’t think that’s an actual tradition. I think you just made that up. Besides, you’re a ghost. What would I bring back for you that you could use?”

She gives me one of her spicy feline glares, turns on her heel, and stalks off with her tail straight in the air. Great. Now I’ve made the cat mad too. Again.

“Anybody else want to be mad at me?” I shout into the empty house. Then I remember that attitude got me into this situation to begin with. I take a deep breath. Time to get to work.

I text Wendy, Juliet, and yes, even Sheriff Mack and ask them to meet me at the bookstore. The Sheriff responds with, “Who is this?” When I tell him it’s me, he informs me he has better things to do.

Then I tell him that I have important news regarding the case and that if I’m lying, he could arrest me for wasting his time. He begrudgingly agrees.

When I don’t hear back from Juliet or Wendy, I text them again to tell them I don’t blame them for not wanting to talk to me, but I have new information on the case, and I really need their help.

After a while, they agree to meet me. This will be a tough hill to climb, but necessary. And if I’m right about Ian and Anne, and how could I not be, then we’re all about to blow this case wide open. I’m also secretly hoping that the hotel

will cancel the sale and stop eradicating the ghosts once we recover the tiara.

When I announce out loud that I want to apologize to her Clara finally appears. "I'm sorry that I got frustrated and yelled at you," I tell her.

"Several times!" Clara reminds me.

"I didn't yell at you that many..."

Clara plants her hands onto her hips and glares at me.

"Okay, okay, I yelled at you quite a bit. I'm sorry. I realize that if we're going to live here in peace then we have to get along."

"Mystery wants you to apologize to her too."

"You've got to be kidd... Fine. Mystery! I'm sorry!" I shout because I don't know where she is at the moment.

"Don't let it happen again!" Mystery shouts back.

"Are we good?" I ask Clara.

"I guess." She nods her head.



When we all arrive at the bookstore, I'm nervous as I stare at the three of them standing in front of me. The sheriff looks grumpier than ever. His arms are crossed over his chest, which I've noticed he likes to do when he wants to look imposing, and I'm sure he's eager for the chance to arrest me.

Wendy and Juliet look concerned and distrustful. As if they're worried something is wrong and yet not quite ready to believe me.

"I know that I haven't exactly been a model citizen since I've moved here..."

The sheriff harumphs. I glance over at him but keep going. He has every right to be skeptical.

"I'm committed to doing differently now." I turn to the sheriff. "I am, as you obviously already know, a spirit communicator." Wendy and Juliet look at each other in surprise, but I swear I see the beginning of a smile on Wendy's face.

"Mr. Sinclair at the Red Castle Hotel hired me primarily to talk to the ghosts about the tiara theft when I really wanted to just work as a bartender. But I made a deal with him. I would talk to the ghosts, figure out who stole the tiara, and in return, he would keep me on as a bartender.

"And I admit I've spent more time chasing down leads that went nowhere than communicating with the hotel spirits like I was supposed to. And now they're on the verge of selling the hotel and purging the ghosts. And a lot of that is my fault.

"For example, if I had talked to Fiona on the first night, I could have learned right away that Curtis wasn't in Mexico for spring break, but in the hospital having hernia surgery instead."

Now the sheriff and Wendy and Juliet are all looking at each other like they can't believe what they're hearing. "Who's Fiona?" Sheriff Mack asks.

"She's a ghost who lives at the hotel," I explain.

"Can't say anyone has ever told me *that* before." He crooks his head at me.

"I also realize I haven't been the easiest person to be around at times," I say directly to Wendy and Juliet. "I've looked to everyone else as the source of any problems I've had, and I have a bad temper. If I had worked better with everyone else, I don't think the hotel would be on the verge of being sold, you wouldn't have lost the wedding cake gig, and you wouldn't have lost the book signing event. And I apologize."

Wendy and Juliet smile and nod at me, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I think we'll be okay there. The sheriff is still looking skeptical, but I suppose that comes with the job.

He clears his throat. "You promised me something important. Is there more to this, or is it just true confession time? In which case, I believe you said I could arrest you."

Once upon a time, I would have responded with my own sarcastic comment. Now I know that will get us into another argument and possibly get me arrested.

"I'm about to reveal that now." I nod my head at him. "Ian and Anne stole the tiara."

Wendy gasps and Juliet puts her hand over her mouth. Even the sheriff looks surprised.

“And you base this on what?” he asks.

“I took the train into Denver this weekend to meet up with an old friend who’s in town for a conference, and I saw both of them at Union Station in Denver.”

“Are you serious?” Juliet exclaims. “What did you say to them? What did they say to you? I can’t believe it!”

I launch into the entire story of what happened in Denver, including my theory of how Ian got into Glenwood undetected. Juliet and Wendy get more excited the longer I talk.

The sheriff still looks unsure, but I don’t blame him. It all seems absurd that I could get this kind of information with a quick trip to Denver.

“Oh, my goodness, Holly. You solved the case!” Wendy is gleeful while Juliet hugs me.

“Just a moment.” Sheriff Mack cautions. “This is still mostly theory.” He holds his hand up when he sees the look of disappointment on Wendy and Juliet’s faces. “I appreciate the work you did in Denver, and I really, really appreciate everything you said just now, but it’s still just a theory. I can’t arrest someone simply because they’re good at picking locks.

“And that’s where you come in, in your official capacity,” I tell him.

“Go on,” he grunts.

“Bring in Anne and lean on her. If you can get her to confess and turn on Ian, we can trap him, get him to tell us

where the tiara is, and we're done!"

"Yes!" Juliet cheers. "That's it!"

"I think you all watch too much tv and listen to too many true crime podcasts," Sheriff Mack tells us.

"Do you have a better idea?" Wendy asks, glaring up at him. She's obviously not intimidated by him.

"Why don't you tell Anne that there's been a break in the case? Something like you have a confession, or you found one of the jewels from the tiara in a pawn shop or whatever. Make it sound convincing!" I suggest. "I don't think she can resist."

"But he can't just lie to her to get her to talk to him!" Wendy is aghast. "You can't, can you?" she asks when she realizes he isn't agreeing with her.

"Actually, I can."

"That settles it then!" I exclaim. "We must talk to Anne."

"But how?" Juliet asks.

"Sheriff Mack can call her and ask her to come to the station," I suggest. "He'll tell her that there's a break in the case, and he wants to update her."

He shakes his head. "If you're correct, and she and Ian are guilty, she'll just tip him off, and they'll both leave town before you can say 'talking ghosts'."

"Yeah, good point," I mumble as we all fall silent for a moment. "What about this. She's in the hotel bar every night drinking heavily. What if I lay the trap that way? I tell her something like hey, I heard they caught the guy who

stole the tiara... She'll still rush to contact Ian, but in this case, we *want* her to tip him off."

"But how will we know if and when she contacts him?" Wendy asks.

Again, we're silent. I can practically hear the gears turning in everyone's heads. "Oh!" I shout as they all turn to me. "I'll have one of the ghosts follow her around the hotel and report back to us!"

We hold our breath while staring at the sheriff.

"That might work," he says.

Then we all cheer.

"Ladies, you have to understand this isn't risk-free. If those two stole a priceless tiara, they aren't going to just hand over information because we ask them to. I can't have civilian injuries, or worse possibly, on my hands. You have to be careful. This isn't a game."

"It's our best chance to save the hotel and possibly even this town," I plead.

My palms sweat, and my heart thumps so loud that I'm worried Anne will hear it and ask me what's up. I'm not to do anything other than what Sheriff Mack told me. I'm supposed to greet Anne like always and make her a drink.

Although I already intend to make it a little stronger than I usually do, thinking that might get her to open up. I'm not supposed to draw her out or engage her in any unusual conversation otherwise.

If she confesses tonight, great, the police will move in, and we'll have her. Otherwise, I'm required to stick to the plan. I'll tell her I heard they arrested Ronald Thurman for stealing the tiara and that he confessed.

If she and Ian had nothing to do with the tiara heist, it won't matter. But assuming they stole it, she'll freak out and call Ian right away to tell him. Fiona will follow her

everywhere, so we'll know exactly when she calls and what she says.

After that, we're betting that Ian will insist on coming back to Glenwood to discuss their next move in person. Then the sheriff's office will arrest them. They'll have to confess.

And yes, I got my job back. Sheriff Mack explained the plan to Mr. Sinclair and while Sinclair refuses to get his hopes up he's willing to play along.

"Hey there, Anne! How's it going!"

"Hanging in there. How about yourself?" she asks, taking a seat at the bar.

"I'm hanging in there too. What can I get for you this evening?" My voice cracks a bit, and she looks at me strangely, but I clear my throat before she can ask. "Allergies." I smile at her.

She nods her head like she doesn't really care. Phew.

"How about a dirty martini tonight?"

"Coming right up!" I tell her as I prepare the drink. I hope she doesn't notice my shaking hands. This has to work. It just has to.

I place the drink in front of her and take a deep breath while she takes a big swig of it. Yikes, slow down there, girl. I wait for her to get several sips in before I start.

"I assume you already heard the good news!"

"What good news is that?" she asks, taking another big swallow before I answer.

“How could you not know? They caught the person who stole Lucy’s tiara!”

I swear she nearly does a spit take at the news. Instead, she tries to swallow again and almost chokes on an olive.

“Are you okay? Be careful there. I assumed you knew!”

“What happened? What do you mean, they caught him? Did he say anything? Where is he?”

“I’m not sure what he said to the police. I just know they caught him.”

“Did they catch him here in Glenwood?”

“Of course, they caught him here in Glenwood. Where else would they catch him? Denver?” I laugh because, of course, it’s the best joke ever.

“Oh, I don’t know. I just thought maybe he’d left town already when they caught him.”

I really want to see if I could draw her out and get her to confess to me, but the Sheriff gave me strict orders not to mess around. We have to catch both of them.

Even if she somehow confessed to me, once they get her back to the station, anything could happen. She could change her mind and ask for a lawyer and refuse to implicate Ian.

Then it would all be for nothing, and I’m not screwing up again. I trust that Sheriff Mack and his team know what they’re doing, and I’ll play the role they’ve asked me to play.

“This is incredible news, right? The bad guy was caught, and you can get the tiara back, and Lucy can go on tour

again.”

She giggles nervously. “Yes, of course, this is fabulous news.” She drains the last of her martini. “In fact, I’ll call Lucy right now and let her know!”

“You should do that! And congratulations.”

She throws a weak smile at me over her shoulder as she leaves the bar. Fiona, who has been sitting in the corner the entire time, follows her. Now we wait. And wait. The wait is killing me. It’s been about three weeks already, right? Fiona returns about 20 minutes later. I guess it just felt like three weeks.

“Hey! Is the coast clear?”

The Sheriff and two deputies come out of the backroom when they hear the signal.

“She never asked who they arrested for stealing the tiara,” the Sheriff says, grinning at me.

“Told you!” I gloat. “Did you notice she also said ‘he’ right away?”

“I did,” he says. “Well done.”

A compliment from Sheriff Mack. Will wonders never cease?

“But where is she now?” I ask, turning back to Fiona.

“She went back to her room. We have a deputy sitting outside watching.” the sheriff says.

“And I have someone on the inside if she calls him again.” Fiona tells us.

“What happened after she left?” I ask.

“She called Ian of course,” she explains as I repeat everything she says to the sheriff. “You should have seen the look on her face when he answered!”

I laugh again. Covert police work is fun.

“She said she was relieved he answered and that the bartender at the hotel told her they arrested someone for stealing the tiara. Then Ian must have told her she didn’t know what she was talking about. She repeated what you told her. Then he yelled at her so loud I could hear him through the phone. He said he’ll be on the first train tomorrow...”

“I knew it!” I shouted so abruptly the sheriff’s deputies jump. I keep forgetting they can’t hear the ghost.

“He’s getting on a train for Glenwood tomorrow.”

“Excellent!” the sheriff grins at me. “Part Two starts tomorrow.”

Fiona and I, in the heat of the moment, high-five each other, but of course, I just look like I’m swinging my hand through empty air. It’s the thought that counts, right? Although the deputies look at me like I’m weird.

When I see Clara watching me from the window, I wave at her and shout, “Come out and join us!” She instantly appears on the patio staring at the spread I’ve arranged for Juliet and Wendy.

I’ve gone all out with lemonade, finger sandwiches, cookies, cheese, fruit, and veggies. I don’t know how we’ll eat all of this.

“This looks like quite a party,” she says.

“I have quite an announcement!”

Mystery walks across the porch, pauses at the food, and smells it. “Where’s the tuna?”

“I’m not serving tuna. It’s a tea party.”

“It’s not a party unless you serve tuna,” she informs me.

“Cats aren’t supposed to eat fish anyway,” I remind her.

“Pssssshhhhh!” she rolls her eyes at me and stomps away, her fluffy tail swishing through the air.

Juliet and Wendy arrive, and we all sit down to dig into the goodies while discussing the latest town gossip.

"I have to know if Clara is here," Juliet says.

"She's right over there." I point to an empty chair on the porch while Clara waves. "She's waving hello at you."

"Really?" Wendy asks while the two of them wave back.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing at my new friends, waving at what is nothing more than thin air to them.

"She says it's nice to have company around for a change. The last owners were always afraid to have people over, for fear the so-called ghosts would act up and scare the guests."

"There's more than just Clara here?" Wendy asks while Clara giggles.

"No, there's just one ghost here unless you count the cat."

"The rumors always claimed there were multiple ghosts." Wendy points out.

"Nope. Just one little old lady who has a talent for causing trouble."

"Well, right on, Clara!" Wendy says in her direction while Clara beams.

"You told us you had big news for us. What's the big news?" Juliet asks.

"We have to wait for one more person," I tell her when, as if on cue, Sheriff Mac parks in front of my house.

"Popo!" Clara shouts, diving under the chaise lounge.

“You and Mystery should you stop calling him that!” I chastise her. “And come out from under the lounge. He can’t see you, anyway. Besides, I invited him here.”

“You invited him? To our tea party?” Wendy exclaims, forgetting her mouth is full of a colorful macaron.

“Technically, I didn’t invite him to our party. I just told him if he had the time, could he please stop by because I have something important to tell him. All of you.”

“I swear if you tell me you’re leaving town...” Juliet threatens.

“Nothing like that,” I laugh. “You may even say it’s just the opposite.”

“Good afternoon, Sheriff!” I call out as he approaches us.

“Hello, ladies. You didn’t tell me it was a party.”

“Lemonade? Macaron?” I ask as I hold the platter of brilliantly colored cookies out to him. I can tell he thinks he should decline. I’m sure he thinks I’m up to something by inviting him here.

“They look like tiny sandwiches,” he says.

“They’re cookies,” I explain.

“Oh. Okay.” His hand hovers over the tray. “I guess I should try one.”

He pops the delicate morsel into his mouth. “Oh wow. Those are really good.”

“Careful or we may have to call you Smilin’ Steve.” I tease him.

Juliet almost chokes on her own macaron.

"I don't think so," he says.

"Here. Have another one. Have several. I made plenty."

"Fine, I guess I will." He continues to chew thoughtfully while we all sit around in awkward silence. Clara has crawled out from under the lounge and is on the sheriff's arm, staring up at him and batting her eyes like she always does.

When she rests her hand on his arm, he glances down at the spot. He undoubtedly felt a sudden chill there but doesn't know why.

"I've started a paranormal investigation agency!" I blurt out.

"A what?" the sheriff asks while Juliet and Wendy get very excited.

"You're looking at this town's newest paranormal private investigator. I investigate mysteries related to paranormal activity. And I already have my first case.

"That's so exciting!" Juliet says. "Congratulations! What's the case about?"

"Mr. Beasley, the owner of the doll museum, is having trouble with poltergeists. He's even had some valuable dolls go missing! He wants me to get to the bottom of it."

When we hear a strange noise coming from Sheriff Mack, we all look on in shock. He's laughing! I didn't know he could laugh.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

“Mr. Beasley owns the doll museum.” He’s laughing so hard I think he’s going to hurt himself. None of us knows what to do next.

“But wait! Does this mean you won’t be bartending at the hotel anymore? Because I kind of like the idea of having a bartender for a friend.” Wendy pouts.

“I’ll fill in on nights when they need me, so you can still say you know a bartender.”

The sheriff sighs. “So instead of relinquishing this wacky need to butt into the middle of investigations, you’ll be doing it full time.”

“That’s right, Sheriff. And you can tease me all you want. It doesn’t bother me anymore. I’m a private investigator.”

“Oh boy,” he shakes his head. “Hey, can I have another one of those cookie sandwiches? And what are those little thingies over there?”

“Why don’t you sit down and let me fix you a plate?” I insist.

“Okay, maybe just for a bit,” he says.

Just as he sits down, Mystery cuts across the patio. “You didn’t tell me you invited the popo!” she exclaims, scurrying away again. This time I don’t bother to try correcting her.

I just shake my head. I may have strange roommates, but I also have the most incredible friends and live in a fantastic town, and I’m just getting started.

We're all relieved the following day when the Denver Police Department calls to let us know he got on the train. And now we wait again. I never realized police work required so much patience.

Thankfully, Ian gets off the train as we hoped, although I convinced myself he would sneak off undetected at Winter Park and get away. The deputies tail him to the hotel.

Fiona tells me that Ian called Anne and told her to meet him in the hotel's basement where he's hidden the tiara.

"Are you kidding me?" I shout upon learning this. "It's been here the entire time? I'm coming right over to look for it!"

"No! You can't go looking for it now. We don't know where it is. Besides, we need Ian and Anne to get it, so we can bust them red-handed." Sheriff Mack explains.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry about that. I got excited."

“We’ll get them. I promise,” he assures me.

“I’m on my way to the hotel now.”

“See you in a bit,” he says.

As I fire up the bus, Clara appears next to me, startling the daylights out of me as usual. “I’m not missing this one for the world,” she announces.

“Clara, you scared me!” I gasp, pressing my hand against my chest to quell my already rapidly beating heart.

“Sorry about that, but I don’t want to miss out on the excitement.” She insists.

“I think most of it will go down inside the hotel,” I explain.

“That’s okay. I just like the thought of being there. And who knows, maybe some of the drama will spill out onto the street, and I’ll have a front-row seat!”

“I doubt that, but suit yourself,” I tell her as I maneuver the bus out of the garage and onto the street. The hotel is only a few minutes away, but when we get stuck behind a stalled semi-truck, I nearly lose it.

“Are you kidding me?” I shout. It takes forever to get the semi out of the way and moving again, so I text the sheriff while we’re sitting in traffic to let him know I’m on my way. I don’t hear back, but I assume they’re busy setting up the sting.

When we finally pull up in front of the hotel, I jump out of the bus and run inside. “Remember to bring the fight out onto the street if you can!” Clara calls after me. I wave my hand in the air to let her know I heard her.

I dash into the lobby breathless, expecting to see Anne and Ian surrounded by law enforcement and in handcuffs. But I'm shocked to see the lobby is empty except for a couple of guests checking out, and it's all quiet otherwise. What the heck?

I check my phone, but no one has texted back yet or tried to call. I wonder if they're all still hiding. I hope I didn't walk into the middle of something. I carefully wander around the hotel, looking for everyone, and expecting something to happen.

Maybe they're still in the basement. I really want to go down there, but what if they're in the middle of the bust? Maybe I should wait here until I hear from someone.

Why did that stupid truck have to block traffic? I decide the best place to wait is in the bar. If they need me, they'll look for me there. I still don't understand why everyone suddenly disappeared.

As I'm tinkering around behind the bar, though, a ghost races in.

"Holly! Clara said to tell you that Ian grabbed Lucy M and is running away!"

"What?" I exclaim. "You're joking, right?"

"No! I saw it myself, but I didn't know what to do. Clara yelled out the window of a shockingly bright pink bus that I should come to find you!"

"Why is Lucy here? Where is everyone else?" I ask him. This doesn't make sense. What should I do? Why didn't I go

down to the basement when I got here to see what was going on?

This is horrible. We're a team. I can't just run off on my own and chase them down. But what if they get away? And I still don't understand how Lucy M got into the whole mix.

"Hurry!" he urges. "They're getting away!"

"Okay, let's go." I follow him outside where I assume I can just flag down the police and tell them what's happening. But when I get there, all I see is Clara hanging out the window, waving wildly.

"Ian took Lucy, and they're getting away! C'mon! We need to go after them!"

I glance back at the hotel once again. Where is everyone, and why is this happening? There was a time when I would have stayed out of this. I would have insisted it wasn't my business, and I had my own problems to worry about.

But now I realize it's up to me to handle this. I'm the one the ghost came to for help, and my roommate is the one who witnessed it. "Let's go!" I shout as I jump into the van.

"They there are!" Clara points at a large, older model sedan speeding up the street. "Step on it!"

"Where did he get the car?" I ask.

"I watched him steal it!" Clara explains.

I squeal out of the parking spot while an onlooker stares at us. "Woo hoo! This is what I'm talking about!" Clara shouts and waves at him out the window. Then she pounds on the side of the VW, shouting, "Giddyup horsey!"

He obviously can't see her, but if he thinks me peeling out in a hot pink VW looks odd, he should see the old lady next to me in a nightgown shouting and cheering us on.

"Clara, I got into the hotel, and no one was there. I don't know where they went."

"Do they know that Ian kidnapped Lucy?"

"I don't think so! I didn't realize Lucy was in town. I don't know how any of this happened." I realize I should call them, but then I remember I left my phone sitting on top of the bar.

I was so startled when the ghost came to get me that I left my phone behind. I never, ever leave my phone behind otherwise, but this is when it happens? When I should call 911 to let the police know what I'm doing!

As I continue to chase after Ian, I hope someone from the sheriff's office will see us speeding and follow us. Of course, this never happens when I need it. If I'm speeding because I'm late for work, then I'll get busted. But there isn't a soul in sight when I really need them. We stay right on Ian's tail. "Where is he going? It isn't toward the highway."

"Oh, my goodness, I know where's he's going!" Clara exclaims.

"Where?"

"Linwood Cemetery!"

"What?"

"Linwood Cemetery where they buried Doc Holiday."

"You think he hid the tiara there?"

“I’d bet my last nickel on it!”

Ian pulls into the cemetery parking lot, but Lucy jumps out and runs when he stops the car. Unfortunately for her, she’s slow and awkward in those glittery 6-inch platform heels, and Ian quickly catches her.

Meanwhile, I park and bolt from the bus. It doesn’t occur to me until later that he could have had a gun or a knife, and perhaps I shouldn’t have chased after him without considering the alternatives.

I just know this is my town now, and this stunt with the tiara has hurt this place and my friends, and I’ll be darned if I let him get away with it.

OceanofPDF.com

“Let her go and give up the tiara!” I shout.

He laughs at me. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I said so!” Okay, that didn’t sound nearly as cool out loud as it sounded in my head.

He laughs again. “Ohhh, I’m scared!”

Jerk. And this guy deserves to be called a jerk. And more.

I turn to say something to Clara when I realize she isn’t next to me. She has to wait in the bus. I look back to see her waving me on. As strange as it may seem, she gives me courage, and I like the feeling of her cheering for me.

I continue to chase Ian and Lucy, hoping that reinforcements get here soon because I don’t know how much longer I can keep Ian here. What if he grabs the tiara and takes off? Then what? All of this will be for nothing.

“Not if I can help it!” I growl and run after him even faster.

He eventually arrives at a massive headstone and twirls around to face me, his arm across Lucy's neck. She looks terrified. I'm hoping that if I run straight at him, it might startle him into letting go of her.

Maybe she'll even help me detain him when she realizes it's two on one. But I stop in my tracks when he pulls a massive knife from his back pocket and holds it to Lucy's throat.

"One step closer, and I'll slice her throat!" he shouts.

"Okay, okay, I'm stopping!" I call back with my hands in the air. "I won't come any closer!"

"I knew it was you, *Carol!*" he hisses.

I stare back at him in shock.

"It seemed kind of weird that the bartender from the hotel insisted I come to a little bookstore for an estimate on security locks, but okay, whatever, I'll play along. And then I could tell something was off when I got there. The bookstore owner didn't seem happy to see me.

"Then when you nagged me about what I was doing the night the tiara was stolen, I thought, is this girl crazy or what? Is she one of those true crime fanatics? What's her problem?"

"Then I get back to work on Tuesday, and the receptionist tells me a Carol, who I supposedly know, was there asking all kinds of weird questions about the GPS system on my work van. I asked her to describe you.

“I wasn’t the least bit surprised when she described *you* perfectly. I was still trying to decide what to do about it when Anne called to tell me the bartender said someone got arrested.

“I knew it was time to come back here, get the tiara, and get out of dodge. It’s like I’m dealing with a bunch of morons!” he shouts. “I’m surrounded by them! But once I took care of your friends...”

“What did you do to my friends?” I panic as I realize the reason I couldn’t find them at the hotel was he’d done something to them.

“You’ll find out soon enough!” he sneers.

“And just as I’m about to make my big break, this fool shows up,” he jerks his head toward Lucy, “because apparently Anne called her to tell her there’d been an arrest. I knew I couldn’t just leave her there at the hotel, that I needed an insurance policy to make sure I could get out of town, so I grabbed her.”

Then he shoves Lucy to the ground, but as I take another step, he brandishes the knife in my direction. “I said don’t come any closer!”

“I’m staying right here!” I respond. Where the heck is Sheriff Mack? What did Ian do to them?

He points the knife in my direction as he bends down to dig at something. He continuously glances up at me and then over at Lucy. She seems too terrified to move while he frantically searches.

When he lifts a box from the back of the headstone, Lucy shrieks. "Is that my tiara? That better be my tiara!"

"It's my tiara now," he grins at her.

For a moment, I'm convinced she's gathered the courage to jump him, but when she moves, he thrusts the knife in her direction. "Stay on the ground!" he grunts. Having a large knife brandished in her face is enough to keep her still again - for now anyway.

As Ian walks backward ever so cautiously, I notice several ghosts appear as if they're curious about all the shouting. I'm not sure why it didn't occur to me until just now that there should be at least a few ghosts in a graveyard.

"What the heck is going on?" a glowing spirit asks.

"This man stole her tiara!" I explain as they all turn to look at Ian.

He whirls around to check who's behind him but seeing no one turns back to face me. "Who are you talking to?"

"The ghosts that are surrounding you," I tell him, suddenly feeling much calmer than I was a moment ago.

"What are you talking about, you weirdo?"

"I'm a spirit communicator. I see dead people!"

"Oh, right!" He laughs. "Why didn't I realize how crazy you were before?"

"Why did he steal her tiara?" a ghost asks.

"Because he's a greedy little dirtbag."

"But why should we care?" another one asks.

“Because he stole the tiara and brought so much adverse publicity to this town, the Red Castle Hotel is selling the property to a huge corporate chain. They’ve already started to exterminate the ghosts who live there. And one of them was my friend.”

At this, the ghosts turn to stare at Ian. I know he can’t see them, but he must feel something because he shudders. The energy is dark. “Hey, what are you trying to pull?” he says. “Knock it off!”

“Knock what off? I’m just crazy, remember?”

“Can any of you move objects?” I ask.

Most of them shake their heads no, but one wiggles his hand in the air.

“Can you knock the box out of his hands?”

“I can try!” he says.

Another ghost says, “I can’t move objects, but I can have some fun.” She floats within an inch of Ian and blows into his ear. I laugh when I see Ian’s hair move.

“Hey!” he protests, swiping at his ear where the ghost blew in it. “What kind of bugs do you have here?”

“That’s not a bug!” I tell him. “It’s a dead lady.”

When she does it again, he looks scared. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. I don’t care what you claim.”

Yet another ghost places his hand on Ian’s shoulder, making him jump around and wave his arms. Although refusing to let go of the tiara, I notice. “That was a ghost

putting his hand on your shoulder, in case you wondered,” I tell him.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts!” he screams while still hopping around, swatting at his ear and waving his arms. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull but knock it off!”

“I need him to hold still to connect with the box,” the spirit tells me. “It’s too hard when he’s moving around.”

The other ghosts pause their hijinks to let him try to move the box. He still isn’t successful, but Ian nearly drops the box on the third try, and now he’s scared. “Why did I have to hide this stupid thing in a graveyard?” he cries.

“Why did you have to steal it at all?” I chastise him. He’s still wiggling around too much for her to get a solid grip on the box.

Lucy seems to have come to her senses and glares at him like she’s ready to take him down single-handedly. “I hope you know that tiara was made by fairies, and it’s cursed if anyone but me tries to possess it.”

Is she serious?

“You’re both crazy! This whole town is crazy!” he shouts.

He’s so rattled by now that he’s forgotten he’s holding a knife. Lucy and I slowly advance on him.

When the spirit finally grabs at the box, Ian completely freaks out, throws it in the air, and runs off faster than I thought he could. Lucy lunges for the tiara, scoops it up, and opens the lid.

“Whoaaaaa,” I whisper in awe. The brilliant jewels sparkle in the sunlight in a blinding fashion, and I can see why she never takes it off.

Lucy practically cries tears of relief as she places the tiara back on her head. It’s all sparkly, and everything which I can certainly appreciate, but I’m not sure after all the trouble it’s caused, I’d be inclined to wear it out in public again.

“He’s getting away!” I argue. “We have to catch him!”

“I have my tiara back. That’s all I care about.” Lucy says.

“But we need to catch the thief and save the hotel and the ghosts who live there.” I insist, while the ghosts around me nod their heads. I kind of surprise myself with that. When did I get so invested in this town? When did I care about others like that?

Lucy still looks at me like she has no intention of chasing anyone, especially not a thief. Now that she has what she wants. But when I realize I don’t have what I need, I shake my head at her in disgust and take off after Ian, who has a big head start.

Nothing like the feeling of being chased by ghosts to make a person run like the wind. But just as I'm convinced I'll never catch up to him and he'll get away, Sheriff Mack, followed by several deputies, and Wendy and Juliet appear over the hill.

The police, upon seeing the huge knife in Ian's hand, all pull out their guns. "Freeze! Sheriff's department!" Ian turns around, planning to run in the opposite direction when he sees me.

"You heard them! Freeze!" I'm so full of adrenaline right now I'm fully prepared to tackle him on the spot. Knife or no knife. In fact, I'm so wound up that even when he drops the knife, I leap into the air and crash down on top of him in a very ungraceful tackle.

"Holly!" the sheriff shouts, as Ian kicks and screams beneath me. The sheriff runs over and tries to pull me off

Ian, but not before I get in a couple of good punches.

“Holly! Calm down! We’ve got him!” As the sheriff finally pulls me off him, the deputies descend on Ian and cuff him while hoisting him to his feet. I don’t think I can calm down.

“Holly, chill, it’s okay. You saved the day!” Wendy says.

“I did?” I ask in surprise.

“Yes!” Wendy and Juliet cry out in unison.

I almost laugh when I hear Ian babbling incoherently to the deputies as they lead him to their car. He goes on and on about ghosts and the hand of death reaching out from the grave to grab him.

“Are you okay?” Sheriff Mack asks, checking me over. I’m a little surprised by all his concern. I’m still waiting for him to yell at me for interfering again.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Just skinned up my elbow a little when I tackled Ian.” I show them all my slightly bloodied elbow.

“Get that checked out,” he tells me. “Have EMS clean it. Maybe a stitch or two.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” I brush him away. “Nothing a little Neosporin won’t cure.” I’m embarrassed but secretly pleased he’s so concerned. Wait until Clara hears about it.

“Where’s Lucy M?” he asks.

“I left her back there. Once she got her tiara, she was ready to leave.”

“Oh, brother.” He shakes his head. “I better go get her. Are you ladies okay by yourselves? If not, I can call a deputy

over.”

“We’re fine,” Juliet assures him. “Go find Lucy.”

The sheriff takes off after Lucy at a slow jog while Juliet and Wendy fuss over me.

“Girl, you flew through the air and totally tackled that guy! It was awesome!” Wendy dances around in circles, making shooting motions with her hands “Pew pew pew!”

Juliet and I shake our heads at each other.

“Are you seriously, okay? You went to the ground pretty hard there. He didn’t hurt you otherwise, did he?”

“I swear, I’m okay,” I assure her. “But I should get back to my bus. Clara is waiting, and she’ll be dying to hear the story.”

“Dying!” Wendy shouts and then laughs at her own joke. My new friends are something else. “Hang on, how is Clara here?”

“That part is a story for another day but she’s the one who alerted me to Ian kidnapping Lucy M.”

“I can’t believe Lucy M is actually here!” Juliet marvels.

As we walk back to the bus, I fill them in on all the details of what just went down.

“Wait!” I exclaim, stopping abruptly. “Where’s Anne? And what happened to you guys? It’s like you went into the hotel and disappeared.”

“Anne is in custody, and you’ll never believe what we’ve been through,” Wendy says.

“Although not quite as exciting as what you just did,” Juliet adds.

“When we got to the hotel, Sheriff Mack said that Ian told Anne to meet him in the basement. Specifically, the room in the farthest northeast corner, so he followed her.” Juliet explains.

“But he told us to stay upstairs and wait for you,” Wendy adds.

“So naturally, you followed him,” I respond.

“Duh!” they exclaim in unison.

“Did you know they used the basement as a morgue during World War II?” Juliet asks.

“No way! No one told me that. There must be tons of ghosts down there.”

“I’m sure there are! And it’s dark and cold down there as well.” Wendy nods her head. “But Anne went into the room, Sheriff Mack followed, then Ian showed up and trapped them by bolting the door.”

“Then we tried chasing him but got lost in all the twists and turns in the basement.” Juliet continues.

“How did you get out?”

“Wendy used a locating spell, and we finally made our way out of there. We told Mr. Sinclair what happened, and he knew exactly which room they were trapped in. We all ran down and let them out.”

“Then how did you find us at the cemetery?” This is all just unbelievable.

“Anne told Sheriff Mack that Ian had often joked about hiding valuables in the Linwood Cemetery because who would ever think to look there? We took a chance, and there you were!”

“I’m so glad you’re all okay! Was Sheriff Mack mad I went after Ian myself?”

“No!” Wendy exclaims. “First, he was worried. Then he was impressed.”

When we get back to the cemetery parking lot, Sheriff Mack is still there talking to Lucy M, and Clara is waving at us frantically.

“Hang on a sec, ladies. Clara is in the bus freaking out. She must be so worried about us. I’ll let her know we’re okay.”

As I approach the passenger side of the bus, I tell Clara, “No need to worry; we’re all o--”

“--did you see who’s over there?” she points excitedly.

I turn around. “That’s Lucy M. You *just* saw her get kidnapped.”

“I know! But now she’s just a few feet away talking to the Sheriff! Can you believe it?”

“I can now!” I tell her.

I return to Wendy and Juliet while we wait for Sheriff Mack to finish his conversation with Lucy. Eventually, a deputy pulls up in a patrol car. I assume to take her away to get her statement.

But as if we didn't already have enough drama for the day, Anne bolts from the back of the deputy's car running straight for Lucy, who then screams like a banshee. Anne lunges for the tiara on Lucy's head, and the two women fight.

OceanofPDF.com

Fingernails, hair, and obscenities fly fast and furious while the two men try to subdue them. Wendy, Juliet, and I are so stunned that we just stand there gaping at the scene in front of us. Clara hangs out of the bus, cheering them on. How is this even happening?

As both men finally get control of the women, Sheriff Mack is steaming. I should know, I've been on the receiving end of his wrath, and I'm well acquainted with that look.

"Deputy!" he practically spits. "What is wrong with you?"

"She insisted we come back here because she had something to tell you. I didn't realize this would happen."

"You ungrateful witch!" Lucy screams at Anne.

"Hey now," Juliet says.

"Me? Me?" Anne screams back. "I'm ungrateful? For the last three years, I've seen to your every need. I've never even had a vacation! I do everything for you! I've sacrificed

everything for you, and I've never even gotten so much as a thank you! And for what? So, you can get richer and richer! You and that stupid fake tiara!"

Juliet, Wendy, Lucy, and I all gasp. Albeit for different reasons.

"It's fake?" I hiss.

"It has to be," Wendy explains. "There's no way fairies would make a tiara for some silly human to wear like a self-appointed princess."

"How dare you call my tiara fake!" Lucy M shouts.

"You got it at a thrift store!" Anne snarks back.

"I still can't believe this is happening," I exclaim right before the three of us start to laugh uncontrollably. We've all just been through a nightmare week, and for what? A thrift store tiara. What else can we do but laugh?

"Ask her how she got into Lucy's room! I've got to know!" Clara shouts.

Good point. "Excuse me," I interrupt while Sherri Mack sends me a salty look. "How did you get into Lucy's room? Ian picked the lock, didn't he?"

Anne rolls her eyes at us. "The wicked witch of the west here..."

"She really needs to stop disparaging witches like that," Juliet murmurs.

"...takes super strong sleeping pills at night. Elephants could run through her room, and she wouldn't hear them. Ian gave me an ultra-powerful magnet that works only on

certain locks. We were lucky, and it worked on the door to our adjoining rooms. I snuck in, took the tiara, and then hid it inside the toilet tank.”

“You put my precious tiara in the toilet?” Lucy screams.

“After all that, she’s concerned about her tiara being in the toilet?” Wendy whispers.

I put my hand over my mouth as I snicker. I think we could host our own Mystery Science Theater show.

“After the excitement died down and the police left, I put the tiara in my suitcase and eventually passed it on to Ian. We were going to sell it and split the proceeds after the authorities gave up. We knew everyone would focus on the security camera and the digital locks. The whole thing hinged on it.”

Anne turns to me. “How did you figure out it was us?”

I look at Sheriff Mack and wink. “A ghost told me.”

Then he and the deputy struggle to take the two ladies, who are still screaming at each other, to separate cars.

He glances back over his shoulder. “Did you seriously just wink at me?”

I shrug.

“Taze ‘em!” Clara shouts as they walk past the bus.

After today's excitement, we're all too pumped to just go our separate ways, so we grab a pizza and head back to the bookstore to wait for word from Sheriff Mack.

We crowd around him when he finally stops by. We're clamoring for answers.

"I feel like you already have most of the answers yourselves," he protests.

"How did Anne and Ian get together in the first place?" I ask.

"She said he saw her in a concert venue parking lot in Denver. She was on the phone with her mother, apologizing that she couldn't make it to her parents' 25th wedding anniversary party, because she couldn't get the time off from touring. She and Ian talked and kept in touch. He became someone she could confide in. Eventually, they cooked up a scheme to steal the tiara."

“But Anne said it came from a thrift store, so she knew it wasn’t the priceless piece of jewelry that Lucy claimed it was. They were stealing costume jewelry.”

“Anne knew that, but Ian didn’t. She was so mad at Lucy that she wanted to punish her. And they lied about it for so long that even Anne almost forgot it was worthless after a while.”

“Why did she continue to hang around the hotel?” Juliet asks.

He shakes his head. “Ian told her he needed her there to monitor the situation. She was supposed to let him know when things cooled down so he could come get the tiara and fence it.”

“She should forget being a pop star’s assistant and become an actress because she had me fooled,” I admit. But now we have some news that I bet you don’t know.”

“I shudder to think.”

“It’s good news, we promise!” Wendy exclaims. “We stopped at the hotel to update Mr. Sinclair on the day’s events.”

“Given that he had a hand in helping us rescue you today!” Juliet adds.

“I remember,” he says.

“They’ve canceled both the sale of the hotel and the ghost extermination!” I shout, jumping up and down.

“That’s excellent news.” Sheriff Mack says with a rare smile.



On our way home that evening several onlookers wave at the pink bus as usual. This time I happily wave back, along with Clara of course, and honk the horn. Several little kids jump and up and down and cheer at that. For the first time in forever I feel like jumping up and down too.

OceanofPDF.com

Thank you for reading The Case of the Haunted Hotel!
If you enjoyed it, please leave me a 5-star review!

If you're interested you can try out my first series Marcall's Breakfast Cafe Paranormal Cozy Mystery Series. Right now they're FREE with Kindle Unlimited or only 99 cents to buy.

An Eggscellent Day for Murder

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09F525QMN>

24 Carrot Caper

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09F72MNCQ>

Daggers and Donuts

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09FH7CBZX>

Cupcakes and Corpses

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09GNRPF4B>

A Crime of Cranberry

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09HRJ297R>

Peppermints & Pandemonium

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09HRJ297R>

Sign up for my email list here

<https://mailchi.mp/9ebce0da866a/email-signup-list>

Visit my website

biskinnerauthor.com

Follow me on Instagram **@bethiskinner** Facebook
@biskinnerauthor TikTok **@biskinner**

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright 2022 by Author B I Skinner. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

OceanofPDF.com