

Madame Strange, Teller of the Future
By R. A. Conti

Book 3 - Web of Lies

Chapter 10

Bianca had been driving all day. She was not due anywhere and felt free of concerns, worries, and obligations. All she looked forward to was pulling into a rest stop, finding a secluded spot under the trees, and enjoying a quiet night's sleep.

A small group of RVs clustered at the corner of the huge parking lot. Bianca saw a spot at the edge of the blacktop and pulled in. She turned off her motor and sat in the stillness. No sounds came from outside. She hoped the night would remain peaceful.

There was a chill in the air. Bianca rarely slept in pajamas but thought they would feel more comfortable tonight. Rummaging in her small bureau, she found an old pair of flannel pajamas, put them on, and sighed contentedly.

She pulled out a CD she liked hearing after long drives. It was a collection of Carter Family songs recorded in the 1930s. Bianca loved the honest and simple purity of the lyrics, tunes, and voices. She had never seen any of the places the songs were about, but she knew the kind of people whose lives the songs mentioned. Not only did she know those people, she liked them, mostly.

The Carter Family's era was gone but their truths lived on. Bianca thought those truths were eternal but she wasn't certain. It didn't make any difference, anyway. No one was eternal. No world was eternal. Everything changed. Things got worse but they got better, too.

Bianca had learned to accept the ebb and flow of life a long time ago. She'd found her place in the flow, and was content to serve the Mystery at the heart of Being. The simple songs spoke to her of that Mystery. That was why she liked listening to them when she was alone and tired.

Her deep sleep didn't last long. Someone banged on the door. "Hello? Hello! Anybody inside? I need your help, please."

Bianca didn't want to leave her cozy bed but knew she had to. She hoped she would return soon. *That sleep felt good. I need more, she thought. Lots more.*

"Just a minute," she said as she found an old robe and then unlocked the door.

"Oh, thank God you're awake," the young man said. "I really need you."

"What's the problem?"

"I saw the lettering on your RV, *Madam Strange, Teller of the Future*. I need a reading awful bad."

"Oh. Um..., what time is it?" Bianca asked.

"I don't know..., around midnight, I guess."

“I was sleeping. I’m not good with readings unless I’m rested. Couldn’t we do it tomorrow?”

“No. It must be right now. Please. Just do whatever you can. You’re my last hope.”

“Oh, well, since you put it *that* way, come on in.”

They sat at Bianca’s tiny kitchen table. “So what can I help you with?”

“It’s my sister.”

“Oh, is she ill? I’m sorry.”

“No.”

“Has she disappeared, then?”

“No!” the man replied sharply.

“So what’s the problem?”

“She’s come back.”

“That’s good, right?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Why not?”

“She died a year ago.”

“Oh.” Bianca assumed she wasn’t going to get any more sleep. “Do you mind if I make some coffee?” she asked. I’ll be quick. “Would you like some?” The young man shook his head.

Moments later, Bianca sat down with a steaming cup of black coffee and her crystal ball. She looked at the man. “Start with your name,” she said.

“Jerry.”

“And your sister’s name?”

“Winnie.”

“Tell me about Winnie.”

“She left us a year ago after a battle with cancer. My parents did all they could for her. She died peacefully. Everyone she loved was with her. We gave her a small but lovely funeral. It was hard saying good-bye but we got through it. Mom, dad, and I cried for days, I think.”

“I’m sorry for your family’s loss. Did her cancer last a long time?”

“No- it was fast. But we watched her suffer and it seemed like it went on longer than it really did.”

“That’s hard, I know.”

“We moved on. We told ourselves she was at peace. Her painful ordeal was over.” Jerry paused. Bianca felt his uneasiness.

“But it’s not, is it?”

“No. Something’s happened.”

“When you say she’s returned- you mean like a ghost?”

“Ghosts aren’t real,” Jerry declared.

Bianca didn’t want to argue with him. “Then... how?” she asked.

“She’s here in the flesh. She eats, sleeps, talks, and remembers stuff. It’s like she never went away. In fact, as near as we can tell, she doesn’t know she died.”

“Many ghosts don’t.” Jerry frowned at Bianca’s comment. She decided to go on. “So why is there a problem? You have your sister back. She seems like she was before. Isn’t that what you and your parents would have wanted?”

“Well, yes, of course we wished she hadn’t died. But, we don’t know how she came back. We don’t understand why it happened. It isn’t natural.”

“And that bothers you?”

“Wouldn’t it bother *you*?” Bianca didn’t reply. She waited for Jerry to go on. *There’s more he’s not telling me*, she suspected.

“Um, Jerry. I don’t see what the problem is here. You have to be more specific, or I can’t help you. Why did you come to me? I tell fortunes. I don’t deal with medical problems.”

“I wanted you to tell us our fortune.”

“Okay, specifically, what did you want to know?”

“What’s our future gonna be?”

“I don’t know.” Bianca knew her blunt admission wouldn’t make Jerry leave but she had to shock him into revealing the truth, whatever it was.

“You can’t see anything?” Jerry asked. Bianca shook her head. “*Nothing?*” He seemed disappointed.

“Why don’t you tell me what you *want* me to see? Maybe then I’ll be able to tell you more.”

“I want to know if she’s back for good or only for a time and she’ll be leaving again.”

Bianca looked at Jerry. He waited. “That’s not what you truly want to know, Jerry,” she said, finally.

Jerry looked at Bianca. He wondered if she knew something he didn’t. “It’s not?” he asked.

“You want to know if she’s back from the dead, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, I guess you’re right. I mean it’s creepy.”

“You want to know if she’s truly your sister or some sort of trick that nature, or God, or maybe Satan is playing on your family.” Jerry nodded. “I don’t know, Jerry. I’m just a fortune-teller, not a psychic.”

“Don’t you have to be a psychic to be a fortune-teller?”

“That’s why you woke me up? You thought I was a psychic? I’m sorry to disappoint you. I don’t understand what’s happening with your sister. I don’t know anyone who could help you figure this out.”

“Okay. I’m sorry I woke you.”

Jerry departed feeling let down. Bianca remained wide-awake. She had made the coffee extra strong. *Time for more Carter Family*, she thought. She switched on the CD player. Their soothing voices drifted through the RV. She went back to bed. The CD played through several times before Bianca fell back to sleep.

A timid knock on the door awoke Bianca too early. She felt tempted to yell 'go away' but controlled herself.

"Who is it?"

"Winnie, Jerry's sister."

"Just a minute." Bianca got up, threw on her robe, and opened the door.

"Could I talk to you?"

"Of course. Come in."

They sat at Bianca's tiny kitchen table. "Did you come for a reading?"

"A reading? Um, no. I came because I saw my brother leaving here last night."

"Yes. He and I spoke."

"About what?" Winnie asked.

"I'm sorry, but that's confidential."

"Was it *me*?" Bianca tried not to show a response. "So it was. Well, okay, then. There're some things you should know."

"I'm listening."

"He's been acting strange since I came back."

"Came back from where?"

"My brief marriage."

"When did you get married?"

"About a year ago. I left with my husband. He got a new job on the West Coast," Winnie explained.

"What happened?"

"He not only found a new job. He also found a new woman."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. At least I found out early what a bastard he was. I came back home. My parents welcomed me. They tried to make me forget him and move on. But, Jerry wouldn't talk to me. I couldn't understand why. We were never close but were always friendly toward each other. We never fought. But now he looks at me as if he's afraid of me."

"Does Jerry have mental problems?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he on any medication? Or has he been told he should be on medication?"

"I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"I think he's delusional," Bianca explained.

"My brother? He's always been a down-to-earth guy."

"Maybe you don't know him as well as you thought."

"Why do you say that? What did he tell you?"

"I can't go into details. I suggest you try to talk to him but be aware that he's very sensitive and may be troubled. Perhaps there's something else going on in his life that's affecting his relationship with you."

“There *isn't* a relationship. Just the opposite. He treats me as if he's afraid of me or as if I don't exist.”

“But you clearly do.” Bianca got up, saw Winnie out the door, and then wondered what the hell was going on. *Who are these people?* she asked herself. *And what kind of shit are they trying to pull?*

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Bianca didn't think there was anything she could do to help Jerry and Winnie. She wanted to pull out of the rest stop, leave them behind, and roll on down the highway. However, she was not getting rid of them that easily.

She decided not to return to bed after Winnie left. The sun was up. The rest stop was busier and noisier. She assumed the other RVs would be on their way just as she wanted to be. Jerry and Winnie were probably getting ready to leave as well. However, they were not through with her yet.

Bianca saw no need to rush her departure. She ate breakfast in her pajamas and enjoyed listening to the hustle and bustle of the activity outside. After breakfast, she opened her laptop to check her email. There were a couple of new job offers at carnivals in the region. She looked at her calendar, responded to the emails, and closed the laptop. Just as she was about to shower there was a knock at her door. Bianca already knew who was there.

“We wanted to talk to you,” Jerry said.

“I don't think I can help you and I'm kind of in a hurry to leave.”

“It'll just take a few minutes,” Winnie pleaded.

“All right, but I have to get on my way. I'm supposed to be two hundred miles from here by tonight.”

“We think we might have given you the wrong impression,” Winnie said after they sat down.

“There's nothing wrong with our relationship,” Jerry added.

“Glad to hear it.”

“But there is something wrong with the world,” Winnie said.

“What do you mean?”

“You're the first person we've been able to talk to in... I don't know... how long would you say, Jerry?”

“I've lost track.”

“I don't understand.”

“We've knocked on doors before but nobody answered. We couldn't tell if they didn't hear us or they were ignoring us. But, you heard us and let us in. You're different.”

“I'm just a traveling fortune-teller.”

“We think you're much more,” Jerry said.

“You're likely mistaken.”

“We think you can help us,” Winnie replied.

“Help you, how?” Bianca asked.

“Get back home.”

“You’re asking an awful lot.”

“Please,” Winnie pleaded.

“We should tell her,” Jerry said.

“Tell me what?”

“The truth. *Our* truth.”

“I’m listening, but I’m not promising anything. Do you understand?” They nodded.

“Our parents stopped here almost twenty years ago when we were little children. The whole family went to the bathrooms. But then our mother and father drove off and left us behind. We thought it was a mistake at first but they never came back looking for us.” Bianca doubted their tale immediately. *They’re lying to me, again*, she thought. *I’ve had about enough of these two.*

“You’re expecting me to believe you survived here all this time?”

“They left us in the dead of winter. We ran into the woods, scared out of our minds. We shouldn’t have done that. It got very cold that night, too cold. Neither of us knew what to do. We didn’t survive the night.”

“You’re asking me to believe you’re ghosts?”

“We are.”

“Why do you want to find your parents, even if you could, somehow?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jerry asked. Bianca shook her head. “To haunt them.”

“Do you know anything about haunting?” Her question surprised the siblings. What was there to know? “I didn’t think so. It’s a lot more than just showing up unexpectedly where you’re not wanted.”

“Maybe you could teach us?” Winnie asked.

“Even if I could, there’s no way we could find your parents.”

“What about that computer?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess that could help.”

“Their names are Jonathan and Darla Bixby,” Winnie said. Bianca thought she ought to look, at least, although it seemed likely there were many couples named Bixby.

They appeared on the fourth line of the search results. With photos.

“Our parents have a website?” Jerry asked.

“That seems to be the case.” They all read the screen. ‘Help Us Find Our Abducted Children’

“Is that us?” Winnie asked. “See what else it says.”

Bianca clicked on the link. The Bixby’s website appeared. She clicked on the ‘About’ page. ‘The couple have been searching for Winifred and Gerald who were abducted from a highway rest stop in Ohio 18 years ago. The Bixby’s followed numerous clues looking for the trail of their beloved children. The clues appeared in strange forms. Some were in the outside

world, others appeared in dreams or visions. The Bixby's have followed each clue until it was exhausted. However, they never gave up hope. They appeal to everyone to help in any way they can."

"Looks like their story is different from what you've told me," Bianca commented.

"This is a lie!" Winnie shouted.

"Calm down, Winnie. This just makes it more important for us to find them and expose what they did to us. Will you help now, Bianca? Please?"

"I have to think about it."

"What's to think about?" Jerry asked.

"Everything. This doesn't feel right to me. I can't figure out what the truth is. I don't think you or your parents- if that's who *these* two people really are- can be trusted."

"Please help us. You're our only hope."

Bianca stood up and walked to the door. "You should leave now."

"You mean you won't help us?" Winnie asked.

"I need to think about this. Alone."

"Then what?" Jerry said.

"I'll decide what to do."

"When?"

"By nightfall, maybe before."

"How will we know?" Winnie asked.

"If I'm here at dusk you'll know my answer. If I'm gone, well..."

"Please. You're our only hope."

"You said that last night, Jerry, just before you told me lies about your sister. I need time to sort this out and find a path to the truth. Please leave." Jerry and Winnie walked out dejectedly. They felt they had lost their only possibility of leaving that place in years.

"So what do you think?" Winnie asked after they left the RV. "Will she do it?"

"I honestly can't say. She's the best one we've seen so far. But she seems the most obstinate, too."

"She's strong, that's for sure."

"And she may have other powers we can't see yet."

"That's what we need, right? Powers?"

"Yeah. The more powerful she is, the easier this would be for us."

"Then what can we do to persuade her?"

"Let's just watch her, for now. It will be a good thing if she doesn't just start up and go. At least it will mean she's thinking about us."

Bianca reviewed what had happened since Jerry came to her RV at midnight. She could not be certain of anything about the siblings. *Well, there's one thing I know for sure, she thought, they're both ghosts.* That knowledge wasn't much use. She wasn't sure if she cared why they were ghosts or what their true story was.

Bianca wished her crystal ball would show her future. She had tried a few times, with mixed results. Moreover, the ball often proved unreliable when she looked into someone's past to understand their present circumstances. Sometimes the images were clear and useful. Other times they were murky and required interpretation. Once or twice, the ball remained void. She thought that's how it would be if she inquired about Jerry and Winnie.

She would have to figure out what to do on her own.

Chapter 12

Bianca didn't look in her rearview mirror as she pulled out of the rest stop just after lunch. She hoped Jerry and Winnie hadn't seen her leave. They, however, knew what her decision was before she made it and climbed atop the RV awaiting her departure. Bianca didn't hear them. Ghosts make no noises unless they want to.

Bianca pulled into a small roadside stop two hours later. It was time to use the bathroom. She sat on the toilet, thought about her destination, and looked forward to seeing some old friends in the carnival she was joining. There was a knock on the door. Bianca assumed it was another motorist asking for help with directions. She finished and went to the door. Jerry and Winnie greeted her.

"What the fuck?"

"Hello, Bianca," Winnie said. "We told you that you were our only hope, didn't we? Well, we meant it. You have to help us."

"We won't harm you or anything, but we had no choice. Neither do you."

Bianca glared at them. She wondered if there was a way to escape. There wasn't.

"Come in," she said. They entered and stood looking at her. She felt they were waiting for something. "What is it you want from me?"

"Take us to our parents."

"Where are they?"

"Look them up again," Jerry said.

"I can't. There's no Wi-Fi here."

"What about your phone?"

"Oh, yeah." Bianca took out her phone, Googled the Bixbys, and read their address. "It seems they're in suburban Philadelphia. I was planning to go into New York State."

"I think your plans just changed," Winnie said coldly. For the first time, Bianca sensed menace in Winnie's tone of voice. She didn't know what they could do to her if she didn't cooperate and didn't want to find out. Bianca wasn't certain if she could fight them if she had to.

In the past, Bianca had sporadic encounters with ghosts. They sometimes appeared in her crystal ball. The ghosts she saw were customers who came to her for their futures and she was seeing them after they died. What she saw often chilled her. She rarely mentioned it to them. Instead, she made up an evasive story for the unsuspecting client.

There were other encounters with ghosts that were not in her crystal ball. They were in the real world. Bianca had learned that ghosts were unpredictable. She never made assumptions about what they would do. All she knew for certain was that she had to be careful.

Bianca wasn't afraid of death. Not her own, anyway. Most people were, and they didn't like being reminded about it. How do you tell someone you're seeing them dead? She had never figured out a way to do that. That sort of honesty would be bad for her fortune-telling business, anyway.

However, this wasn't business. These ghosts were real. They wanted something from her, and it seemed there was no way to escape doing what they wanted. Bianca felt trapped. She had been trapped enough times before to learn that sometimes what seemed to be a trap wasn't one. Maybe those who did the trapping were the ones who were trapped. Bianca would have to wait to see how this ordeal with Winnie and Jerry played out before she could decide what she ought to do.

"Mrs. Bixby?"

"Yes."

"Hello. My name is Bianca Estranho. I saw your website. I've had a couple of dreams," Bianca lied.

"Oh? Please come in." Bianca entered the modest row house in suburban Philadelphia. Darla glanced outside at Bianca's RV and read the words painted on the side. The RV looked out of place on the quiet residential street. Bianca wondered how soon someone would ask her to move it.

"Jonathan!" Darla called.

"Coming." Mr. Bixby walked in from an adjoining room. Two children tagged along gleefully.

"He loves playing with our grandkids," Darla explained.

"You have grandchildren? The website didn't mention that."

"Yes. We had other kids besides Gerald and Winnie. Losing them was a blow, of course, but we still had to keep the family going."

"Of course."

"This is Bianca. She might have information for us." *I've got more than information,* Bianca thought. *I've got two ghosts who claim they belong to you. They're planning to haunt you.*

"Please sit down. Can I get you anything?" Darla asked. Bianca shook her head.

"So, you said you had dreams," Jonathan said. "Please tell us more."

"I was sleeping at a rest stop in Ohio. I saw two people in my dreams. I didn't know either of them. They've never been my customers."

"Customers?" Jonathan asked.

"Bianca's a fortune-teller. I hope it's okay to call you that."

"Of course."

“So you’re somewhat psychic, I guess.”

“A little. I can never be sure. I won’t claim special powers or anything like that. Let’s just say I’m highly intuitive. I’ve learned over the years that when I get a strong intuition- like someone appearing in two successive dreams- it might mean something. I saw on your website that you’ve sought leads from various sources. I felt I owed it to you to share what happened in my dream.”

“We appreciate that, don’t we dear?” Jonathan commented. Darla nodded. “Please go on.”

“Well- how can I put this delicately- two people came to me and told me about you. They claim they were deliberately abandoned by you years ago when they were younger than your grandchildren.”

“Gerald and Winifred were abducted.”

“That’s what your *website* says,” Bianca remarked.

“What are you suggesting?” Jonathan asked.

“Maybe *they* don’t think they were abducted. Maybe they were brainwashed, or something. Remember, this was only my dream. But I thought it was too strong a coincidence to ignore.”

“How did they look in your dream?”

“They were adults.”

“They didn’t appear as little kids?”

“No. That’s what I thought was so strange. I would have expected them to appear as kids if I was dreaming about what I read on your website. If that had happened, I would have dismissed it and went on to my next job. But them appearing as adults seemed significant to me.”

“So what do you think that means?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where were you?” Darla asked.

“At the Towpath rest stop.”

Darla gasped. “That’s where we were stopped when they were abducted.”

“That’s what I thought. You think it’s a coincidence that I dreamed about them there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s a coincidence. That’s why I drove all this way to talk to you.”

“It may not be a coincidence, but I don’t see what it means. Jonathan, how could this be useful?”

“It’s not much of a lead. I guess it could tell us they’re still alive somewhere. So that’s something, right?”

“You didn’t assume they were still alive?” Bianca asked.

“We assumed the worst a while back but never admitted it on our website. It seemed hopeless.”

“So I’ve brought you some hope, at least.” *And I’ve brought you so much more. You have no idea.* Bianca wondered if she could prevent Winnie and Jerry from doing what they came to

do. *I still don't know who's telling the truth*, she thought. She didn't know if she could stop Winnie and Jerry from haunting an innocent grieving family.

"Yes, you have," Jonathan said. "Forgive me. This is quite a shock. I don't know what we ought to do about it. Is there more you could tell us, like where they might be?"

"Well, they came to me while I slept at the very rest stop where you last saw them, so I would guess they're somewhere in that area. But that's just a guess."

"Interesting. We canvassed the area thoroughly. Nothing came up. Since it was a rest stop visited by thousands of cars every day we assumed they were taken away as soon as they were abducted."

"A logical assumption. But maybe you ought to look again?" Bianca got a strong sense one or both of the Bixbys didn't want to look again. Not at the area near the rest stop. Or anywhere else. She couldn't tell if they were tired of searching unsuccessfully or they didn't want to find out what happened to Winnie and Jerry because they had abandoned them as the children claimed.

It seemed every step Bianca took enmeshed her deeper into the mystery surrounding this family. She felt her entanglement in this strange dilemma was not finished. Bianca wished, again, that she could see her personal future in that crystal ball of hers.

Chapter 13

Bianca walked through the RV door and saw Jerry and Winnie seated at the small kitchen table. "You're still here?"

"Where did you expect us to be?" Jerry asked.

"I brought you where you asked. So why are you still in my RV?"

"We can't go in there," Winnie explained.

"Why not?"

"We don't know. We just can't."

"So now what happens? Am I stuck with you forever?" Bianca felt exasperated. "I'm leaving here. This is not my problem. It's yours. I didn't even want to be here. I only came because you threatened me."

"We never threatened you," Winnie insisted. "What could we have done to hurt you?"

"You're ghosts and you still don't know what you can do?" Bianca knew what ghosts could do to the living. She had seen it a few times.

Then she thought about the situation and realized why she doubted Jerry and Winnie's story. *They might not be lying*, Bianca thought. *They might not know the truth about what happened to them*. Bianca still felt her priority was to keep Jerry and Winnie from harming the Bixbys. However, she had to know more. *This just keeps getting worse. I keep getting sucked further and further in. Where will it end?*

"Oh, it's you again," Jonathan Bixby said.

“Hello. Maybe I could do something to help you find out more about Jerry and Winnie. I do possess some psychic ability. But I would need to know more about them.”

“Why, that’s very kind of you. We’re grateful you brought us hope but we had no idea what to do next. Please come in.”

“Actually, it would be better if you came to my RV. That’s where my crystal ball is. It’s the only place it works,” she lied. “I don’t know why.”

“Well, we have the grandkids here now. We can’t leave them alone. Could you stay around until they go home? Why don’t you have dinner with us?”

“That’s kind of you. I’ve been traveling for almost a week. A home-cooked meal would be lovely.” *And I can get to know you a little better,* Bianca thought. *Maybe I can pick up something that would help me figure out the truth.*

Darla and Jonathan chatted about their family over dinner. Darla seemed uncomfortable talking about Jerry and Winnie but enthusiastically praised her other children and grandchildren. Bianca talked about her life on the road going from carnival to carnival. She left out all the other stuff she did. Bianca never bragged about her involvement in people’s lives.

“So you never married, never had children?” Darla asked.

“None that I know of,” Bianca joked. Jonathan guffawed. Darla glared at him. She suspected her husband was smitten with Bianca but didn’t know why. *Is it because she’s attractive, because she lives on the road, or because she’s a fortune-teller?* Darla wondered. *It doesn’t make any difference, anyway. She’ll be gone soon. I’ll just have to make sure I don’t leave them alone.*

Darla’s insecurity about her marriage made her feel jealous of the smallest attention Jonathan paid to other women. She seduced him whenever she felt threatened. Darla overwhelmed him with sexual gifts to make him forget his attraction elsewhere. That was why the couple had five children. Jonathan wasn’t genuinely attracted to those other women, but he liked the attention Darla lavished on him and enjoyed her erotic favors. He also loved the children that resulted from their sexual extravagances.

Jonathan was always more devoted to their babies than Darla was. She provided motherly support but Jonathan did all he could to engage, entertain, and bond with the babies as early as possible. They grew up with a strong sense of their father’s love. Their mother’s love was less a deep feeling and more of an assumption. They knew their mother loved them but she rarely made them feel her love.

The abduction affected Jonathan more deeply than Darla. She felt shocked but would have been content letting the police handle everything. The website and nationwide search were Jonathan’s ideas. His obsession with the search distracted him from Darla but she never raised objections. She waited until all the possibilities were exhausted and hoped he would forget about Jerry and Winnie. He had let the search lapse until Bianca showed up. Now Darla felt threatened not only by Jonathan’s renewed obsession with the search but by Bianca’s presence.

“Tell me about that day you were at the rest stop in Ohio,” Bianca asked. She wanted to gauge how they reacted to her question. She knew the memory was likely to be difficult but it was necessary to ask.

“We were driving west. We had lost everything- both jobs, our house, all our possessions. All we had was our car and the kids. They were hungry and there was no food and almost no money. We couldn’t decide between buying food or gas. If we bought food, we would likely run out of gas somewhere in rural Ohio snow and we would all be dead from the cold. If we bought gas, we could make it further down the road and maybe find a miracle.”

“A miracle?”

“One of us could get a job. We asked everywhere we stopped but there was no work. Anyway, at that rest stop, we left the kids in the car and went inside. We didn’t want them to smell the food or see people eating. We spent some time asking if there were jobs. When we came back, they were gone. We told the cops right away...” Jonathan began tearing up. Bianca waited for him to continue.

“They searched the rest stop, of course. That was before there were cameras everywhere so there was no way to see what vehicles arrived or departed, or maybe see if someone approached our car and took Jerry and Winnie away. The cops put an alert on the radio. But, it was too late. Our kids were gone.” Jonathan began crying.

Jerry and Winnie told me their mom and dad drove off without them, Bianca thought. Jerry’s grief looks real. Why isn’t Darla also crying? I would think this memory could be worse for a mother than for a father.

“The cops and others at the rest stop took up a collection for us. We were gonna stay in the area while the search was underway but one of the people we met knew of a job I could get immediately. Ironically, it was back here where we started. If we hadn’t left right away to drive back to Philly, our lives could have ended right there in Ohio. So, we left.

“We kept in touch with the cops. After we got back on our feet, I set up the website to publicize what happened and thank all the people who helped us. The site got a lot of traffic, and several leads but nothing panned out. I’ll guess never know what happened to my kids...” Jonathan started sobbing again.

Darla was silent. *Either she internalizes her feelings compulsively or something else is going on here, Bianca thought.* She didn’t want to speculate about possible reasons Darla seemed emotionless. Bianca felt no closer to the truth. The meal was great but she still had no sense of what was going on with the Bixby family.

Chapter 14

“So, did you learn anything?” Winnie asked.

“No. Did you?” Bianca replied sharply. It seemed obvious the two ghosts were unaware of the abilities they possessed. They could easily probe the minds of anyone they wanted to.

They could discover hidden feelings or memories. Bianca had seen other ghosts do it. It was easy.

“So, now what?” Jerry asked.

“You tell me. I’m not even supposed to be here. I already did what you demanded. I don’t owe you anything more. I want to just leave and let you figure out what you’re gonna do next. This isn’t my problem, it’s yours.”

“But don’t you go around helping people? Isn’t that what you do? Isn’t the fortune-teller thing just a front?” Jerry’s question shocked Bianca. *How does he know that? Has he been probing me without my knowing it? Maybe these guys are better than I thought.*

“People, yes. Ghosts, no.”

“You don’t believe us, do you?” Bianca nodded. “Why?”

“I don’t believe what anyone in this family is telling me. Something else is going on but I can’t figure out what it is. And I’m fed up with being manipulated.”

“We’re not manipulating you!”

“You forced me to come here. You’re expecting me to get information from your parents- if these people even are your real parents. Maybe that’s a lie, too.”

“But they know our names,” Jerry protested. “They know who we are.”

“Oh, yes. They lost children named Gerald and Winifred. But, how do I know if you two are the *same* Gerald and Winifred? Maybe you’re impostors. Or, delusional. Maybe you only *think* you’re Gerald and Winifred. *Or, maybe I’m talking to two crazy ghosts,* Bianca thought. *How can this get any worse?*

“She’s right,” Winnie said. Her comment surprised Bianca.

“So, are you going to tell me the truth now?”

“Well, no.”

“Why the hell not? Don’t you think you owe me?”

“It’s not that easy.”

“What do you mean?”

“What Jerry means is that we don’t know what the truth is, Bianca. I’m sorry. We thought we knew but we’re not sure now. Of the truth or anything else.”

“I see...”

“Don’t be angry with us.”

“How could I not be angry? You used me, and now I’m trapped in whatever bizarre family drama is unfolding here. I should just dump the two of you out on the street and peel away from here. You can work it out with the Bixbys.”

“You could, but you won’t. That’s not what you do.” Bianca knew Winnie was right. There was a reason these ghosts found her and drew her into this labyrinth. The deeper she went, the stranger things became. Bianca didn’t want to leave now, even if she could. She wanted to know the truth. Her help was needed, obviously, but what she could do and how she could do it escaped her. *There’s no way out but in,* Bianca thought, grimly. *I’m stuck here until this plays out.*

Bianca sighed. "So now what?" she asked. "What do I do next? I'm out of ideas." She knew by their silence that they were, too.

Their impasse lasted a moment or two. There was a knock on the RV door. Bianca opened it and saw Darla. "Could I speak to you?" she asked. "Oh, I'm, sorry. I see you have company. I'll come back later."

"No, it's okay. Please come in, Darla." Bianca paused to consider the opportunity that had arisen suddenly. The ghosts and their alleged mother were together for the first time in many years. What would happen next? What could she make happen next?

"Darla, this is Winnie..., and her brother Jerry." Darla didn't react when she heard the names. Bianca waited. "Didn't you have children named Jerry and Winnie?" she asked.

Darla nodded nervously. Bianca's question pained her. "My Winnie and Jerry are gone..., long gone. I think about them often." Bianca nodded. Jerry and Winnie waited silently.

"Is there a reason you came to see me?" Bianca asked.

"Um, yes. But, I don't want to speak in front of your other guests. It's sort of private."

"We'll leave so you can talk," Jerry said. He started for the door. Winnie followed.

Bianca let them go.

"Your friends-."

"I hardly know them. We only met a few hours ago." Bianca gestured for Darla to sit at the table. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Well, I came to beg you not to give my husband any false hope. He's been through a lot. I'd hoped the ordeal was over but now he's gone back to being the way he was at the height of the search."

"How was he?"

"Excitable, agitated, uneasy. He almost lost his job a couple of times. I had to steady him and pull him through."

"And what about you? How did you handle everything?"

"I guess I was more realistic from the beginning. I knew they were gone... forever."

"You had no doubts, no hope?"

"Hope seemed unrealistic."

"Hope is *never* unrealistic."

Darla seemed unhappy with Bianca's comment. "Please, I beg you, don't give him false hope. I don't know what another disappointment would do to him."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Bianca felt sorry for Darla. *Maybe I misjudged her*, she thought. *Maybe she had nothing to do with her children's disappearance.* Bianca felt more frustrated than before. The mystery deepened and there seemed no way out of it.

"I'm only trying to help," Bianca apologized.

"I know, and I appreciate your interest. It's just that I don't want to go through all that again. And, I don't want Johnathan to go through it again, either. It was horrible."

"I can imagine."

"I'm guessing you can do more than imagine."

“What do you mean?”

“You’re psychic, right?”

“Somewhat, yes.”

“You get inside people’s heads, don’t you?”

“Well, sometimes- but not often. I don’t do it by choice. It just happens.”

“But you do know what goes on inside people, not just because they tell you, but because you can see and feel it for yourself.”

“You could say that, yes.”

“And you must have run across people with experiences like ours.”

“Once or twice.”

“So, you know what it feels like to lose a child.”

“I’ve had glimpses, yes.”

“I invite you to use your powers on me. Look inside me. See if my feelings are genuine. I know you’ve doubted me. Check me out, Bianca. See for yourself.”

How does she know I suspected her? Bianca wondered. The answer seemed obvious.

“You’re like me, aren’t you?” Bianca asked. Darla nodded. “Does anyone else know?”

Darla shook her head. “I’ve never told anyone. I don’t think anyone would have believed me if I had. And, it’s like you said- it just happens. I can’t control it.”

“And, you know what happened to your children, don’t you?”

Darla looked down at the empty table. There was a long silence. Bianca wondered if she should offer tea. “Nothing happened to them,” Darla whispered, finally.

“What do you mean?”

“They didn’t exist.”

“What do you mean?”

“We never had children named Jerry and Winnie.”

“The whole thing was a hoax?”

“More or less, yes.”

“But why?”

“It was because of our other children.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I wanted to frighten the other children. We were traveling. They kept wandering off. I told them the story about Jerry and Winnie to scare them. But it went too far.”

Bianca sensed the truth Darla was hiding. “You didn’t just *tell* them, did you?”

“No. I hypnotized them. Jonathan, too. It was the only way I could keep everyone in line. I was losing him..., and them.”

“Losing?”

“Jonathan was threatening to leave me. He wanted to take the children with him. He would have been the abductor, you see. So, I made up other children and also an abduction to frighten him into staying. It was easy.”

“I guess it seemed easy back then, but it doesn’t look that way now, does it?” Darla shook her head. “You could have just worked things out with Jonathan.”

“I tried. He wouldn’t listen.”

“I pity you, Darla. You’ve done incalculable damage.”

“It was the only way.”

“I doubt it.” Bianca didn’t believe any of Darla’s story. She wondered if Darla could sense her doubt or anything at all. They sat in silence, again.

“There’s something I needed to ask you,” Darla said.

“That’s the real reason you came, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Darla hesitated. Bianca waited. “Um, why did you come here, Bianca? What brought you here?”

“Those two people who just left asked me to bring them here.”

“Who are they?”

“They’re your abducted children.”

“Oh, God,” Darla whimpered. “What have I done?”

“That’s not the right question.” Darla looked at Bianca. She saw no compassion in Bianca’s eyes. Bianca suspected Darla had lied yet again. “The question is, why are you *still* lying?”

Darla angrily jumped up and started toward the door. Bianca grabbed her arm. “You can’t run away anymore. What you did has come back to haunt you, literally. I can go away but they won’t.” Darla wrenched her arm from Bianca’s grip and left the RV. Winnie and Jerry appeared immediately.

“Did you hear any of that?” Bianca asked.

“We did.”

“Your mother is a sick woman. Are you sure you want to stay here? I could take you back where we met, far away from them.”

“We came to hurt them.”

“I know, but I feel she’s already been hurt far more than you could ever do.”

“Oh, no. There’s a *lot* more we could do. Her guilt was all inside her, until now,” Winnie said.

“But it’s outside, in a sense, now that we’re here.”

“Her suffering has only just begun,” Winnie added. Bianca grimaced. She knew what kinds of hurting ghosts could do.

Chapter 15

Bianca had made no progress toward a solution and was no closer to the truth. It seemed everyone was lying to her- Winnie, Jerry, and Darla. She was starting to doubt there was any truth to be found. Once again, Bianca didn’t know what to do.

Until now, she had felt no personal risk or threat, just inconvenience. Now she wondered if she would ever be free of this strange entanglement. There seemed to be no way out.

Bianca had not yet heard from one member of the Bixby family: Jonathan. She prayed the real story would emerge when he finally came to see her but she was not optimistic. All she could do was wait.

Bianca settled in for an evening alone in the RV. She reached for her CD player but didn't want to hear the Carter Family this time. *I need some Philip Glass to cleanse my brain cells*, she thought. Bianca found her old CD of *Glassworks* and put it on. Glass's music enveloped her and she surrendered herself to the flow. The music reminded her of a river. Not just any river. A long one that ran not just through miles of geography but flowed through eons of time as well. The music was working, healing her deeply, as it always did. Bianca sighed.

Jonathan showed up early the next morning. Bianca knew he was outside her door before he knocked. "Please come in," she called. He entered hesitantly. "I was waiting for you." The RV smelled of coffee. Jonathan noticed. "Want some?" Bianca asked. He nodded. "Sit." She got a cup and filled it. "Black, right?" she asked.

"How did you know?" Bianca ignored his question. She did not want to talk about coffee. She handed him a cup and then sat down.

"I wanted to thank you for coming all the way here to talk to us," Jonathan began. Bianca felt that was not why he came at all. There was something else on his mind. She tried to see inside him but no clear feelings or thoughts surfaced.

Bianca waited in silence. She had all day. She couldn't go anywhere or do anything else until this ordeal ended and it seemed as if it would never end. *I expect he'll lie to me, too*, she thought. *But, maybe I can get a little closer to the truth.*

Bianca wasn't a Christian. She didn't belong to or follow any religion. She had nothing against religions. None of them appealed to her. She had read many sacred texts and recalled Jesus and Pilate in John 18:30. 'What is truth?' retorted Pilate.' She didn't identify herself with Pilate, but she wondered if she would ever learn the truth about this strange Bixby family.

"Jerry and Winnie were my life," Jonathan began, speaking softly. "Losing them shattered my world. I've never recovered. I act as if I have, but it's just a false front. I do it for Darla and my other kids. Inside, I still feel empty. I think I always will."

Winnie and Jerry appeared inside the RV. Only Bianca saw them.

Jonathan sighed. "I've relived that day every day since. What could I have done differently? Where did it go wrong? Was it my fault?" Jonathan appeared genuinely distraught, but Bianca had learned to distrust everything she saw or heard from these people.

"Tell me what happened."

"It was simple- something we had done many times on other trips. I took Jerry into the men's room with me. Darla took Winnie with her. Both rooms were crowded. We got distracted by what we were doing, turned around for a moment, and when we turned back, the kids were gone. No one in the restrooms had seen them or knew what happened. It was as if they had been invisible.

“I heard someone yelling outside the men’s room and ran out. It was Darla. She looked at me and shrieked, ‘I can’t find Winnie!’ Then she noticed Jerry wasn’t with me. ‘Where’s Jerry?’ she screamed. ‘I don’t know,’ was all I could say.

“People started looking immediately. I somehow knew they wouldn’t find our kids. I felt guilty for being so certain they were gone but I was. I didn’t say anything to Darla. She started going up to children who looked around the same ages as Jerry and Winnie, frightening their parents. People explained our kids had disappeared. It was chaos for a while.

“Then people drifted on their way. We were left with police and the rest stop manager. Even though it only just happened, I felt like my kids had been erased from the world. It was like when you’re dreaming and you find something and hold it in your hand and then you wake up and it’s not there and you feel strange. I just had it! It was right here! Where did it go?”

Jonathan looked at Bianca. She listened impassively. “Since then I’ve felt like I’ve lived in a nightmare that won’t end. I hoped you coming here out of the blue meant we could get closure but I guess that’s not gonna happen. But, I thank you anyway. I guess the nightmare isn’t over.”

“Sometimes they don’t end.”

“I just want to wake up and see Jerry and Winnie again,” Jonathan sobbed. “Is that asking so much?”

“Dad?” Winnie said. Jonathan didn’t hear her. “Dad?” she repeated, louder.

“Dad?” Jerry said. “We’re right here.” Jonathan didn’t respond. Bianca looked at them. She wondered if she should tell Jonathan they were there. *Would he believe me? Or, would it break him, finally?* Bianca didn’t want to risk it. She recalled the story Darla told her and had another idea.

“Why did you do it?” Bianca asked.

“Do what?”

“Lie about your children being abducted?”

“It wasn’t a lie.”

“Yes, it was. You and Darla never had any children named Jerry and Winnie, did you?”

“You must be insanely cruel to say something like that.”

“Am I? I think it’s the truth.” Winnie and Jerry looked at her. They had no idea what she was doing. “You and Darla played a cruel prank on everyone that day. Why? To get attention, sympathy, money?”

“No! Shut up! You’re evil!”

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Jonathan jumped up and spilled his coffee on the table and seat. He ran past Winnie and Jerry and out the door.

“Why did you do that?” Winnie asked.

“Everybody’s been lying to me. I’m trapped with this insane family until the truth comes out. I was trying to provoke him. I guess I failed.”

Bianca decided to try leaving immediately. Maybe she had broken the Bixby family’s hold over her. She checked her cabinet doors to make sure they were tight, put her books and

CDs back in their compartments, and eased herself in the driver's seat. She turned the key to start the RV. *Will it even start?* she wondered. It seemed as if she had been stuck here for ages. Maybe the battery was dead.

The engine sputtered and then started. Bianca shifted into Drive, released the handbrake, and eased away from the curb. Darla jumped in front of the RV. Bianca hit the brake. She wasn't surprised. She opened the window. "Get out of the way!" she ordered.

"Don't leave! Not yet! We need your help!"

"I've done all I can. You're on your own now."

"Don't do it," Winnie said, from behind Bianca. "I know you want to. Don't."

"I'm useless here and I have a life to get back to."

"Not anymore," Jerry said.

Bianca froze.

"What Jerry means is that your work isn't done yet. We still need you."

"But I've done everything I can. There's nothing else left," Bianca protested. "I brought you here. I've spoken to the people you claim are your parents. No one seems to possess a modicum of truth. I don't know if *everyone* is lying but it sure seems like you are. I'm caught in the middle of a web of lies and I can't see any way out."

"You have to break the web," Winnie said, calmly. She didn't know why she said it. The words just came to her at that moment and they seemed relevant. "But first you have to kill the spider that made it." Bianca realized that not only was the truth eluding her, it was also possible no one- not Jerry, Winnie, Jonathan, or Darla- knew what the truth was either.

Bianca was good at finding webs. She had a new purpose.

Chapter 16

"Maybe I'm not the one who is supposed to find the truth," Bianca said. She had assembled the Bixby family members in her small RV. She could see them all. Jonathan and Darla could not. "Maybe all of you are."

"All of us?" Darla asked.

"You, Jonathan, Jerry, and Winnie."

"I don't see Jerry and Winnie," Jonathan said.

"They're here, too."

"Kids?" Darla said. Nothing happened.

"Show yourselves," Bianca ordered. Jerry and Winnie appeared. Jonathan gasped.

Darla smiled. "I thought so."

"You two... you're *our* Jerry and Winnie?" Jonathan asked. They nodded. "But how? What happened?"

"We don't know, Dad. That's the problem."

"They came to me separately when I was parked overnight at the same rest stop where they disappeared. I reluctantly agreed to help them but I haven't been much help."

“Oh, but you have,” Jerry commented. “You brought us all together.”

“You think that’s what this is all about?” Bianca asked. No one answered. It seemed obvious everyone wanted an explanation but no one had any idea what it might be.

“So, I thought the best way we could proceed was to tackle this together. Each of you has told me a different story. I’ve felt totally confused and didn’t know who to believe. What I think now is that all the stories you told me are your genuine memories. Only I’m not certain any of the stores are true.”

“None of them?” Winnie asked. Bianca shook her head.

“Someone or something is messing with you. That’s the only way I can put this. I thought at first that three of you might be victims of the fourth. Now I think you’re *all* victims- but of whom or what?”

“You have no idea?” Jonathan asked.

Bianca shook her head.

“I hoped getting you all together would make other memories jell and new information might come out.” No one spoke. They all looked bewildered. “What about other people in your family, people you haven’t told me about? Parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, even. Is there someone who might be able to help us figure this out?”

Silence. Bianca couldn’t tell if they were clueless or hiding something. She feared the latter but did not have time to dwell on her anxiety.

She was about to find out she was wrong about everything.

The RV door swung open. A short slender black woman dressed in white looked in. “Good. I’ve finally got you Bixbys where I want you.”

“Monica?” Darla said.

The woman barged in.

“So, you *do* recognize me, Darla. How nice. Too bad you lied about the most important night of my life.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our prom. I know it was a long time ago. Do you remember it?”

“Vaguely.”

“I guess I should have expected you to say that. You lied a lot back then. You’re probably still a liar.”

“Monica, what’s going on?”

“You and Craig left. Do you remember? You said you were going off to celebrate. I knew what that meant. I knew all about Craig and the other girls he ‘celebrated’ with whenever he could. I warned you. I pleaded with you. But you laughed scornfully and went anyway.”

“So, what if I did? That was a *long* time ago.”

“You promised to come back for me. I had no way to get home. My mother didn’t even know I was at the prom and would have grounded me if she found out.”

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“When Craig left you he came for me. Only he didn’t want to fuck me. He’d tried before. He wanted to kill me. That was because you refused him at the last minute. He blamed me for warning you and ruining his game.”

“But he drove me home.”

“So, you *do* remember.”

“Not much else about that night. I got pretty wasted. But I know he took me home.”

“And then came back to the prom for me. He said you made him promise to pick me up and take me home. That’s the only reason I went with him.”

“Well, I was looking out for you.”

“But then, when I disappeared, you lied and said Craig was with you the entire night. That he never left you. No one knew what happened to me. You chose Craig over me. I’ve never forgiven you. And now I’m gonna wipe out your family the way Craig wiped out my future, with your help.”

“But he *was* with me all night.”

“No, he wasn’t. You were too drunk to notice he’d left.”

“Monica, I’m sorry. This all happened a long time ago. I don’t remember it clearly.”

“But *I* do. You’re gonna pay, Darla. I’ve already taken Jerry and Winnie. Now I’m gonna take you and your husband. I may take your other children, too. I haven’t decided yet. It depends on how I feel after I’ve taken you. Maybe that will be enough revenge and it will satisfy me. And maybe... it won’t.”

“Look,” Bianca interrupted. “I hate to interrupt this little reunion. I don’t know who you are, but I have nothing to do with all of this.”

“You are what’s known as an innocent bystander,” Monica mocked.

“Yes, I am.”

“But you’re part of this now, so you can’t leave.”

“What do you plan to do with me?”

“I haven’t decided. But it will go better for you if you don’t interfere.”

Bianca knew she would have to interfere but she didn’t know how to do it. “What are you planning to do with them?” she asked.

“End them.”

“You mean kill them?”

“No, I mean end them. I will make them deader than dead. They won’t even be ghosts. They will vanish. They will be erased.”

“Is that even possible?” Bianca asked.

“I wouldn’t say if it couldn’t be done.”

“But you haven’t said *how* it will be done.”

“Patience, Bianca Estranho. You’ll find out when they do.” Bianca remained silent for a few moments. Her mind raced as she considered possible solutions. *There must be a way I can save these people*, she thought. *Or else, why would I be here?*

“I have another idea,” she said.

“Don’t interfere!”

“I’m not interfering! I can help you.”

“How?”

“Darla is not the one you ought to punish.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who murdered you?”

“Craig.”

“What happened to him?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know.”

“What if I helped you find him?”

“You would do that?”

“If you agreed to let these people go, I would do everything I could to help you find Craig. Isn’t he the one you want, anyway? Darla lied. That’s awful. Craig is a murderer and that’s infinitely worse. Since the police didn’t catch him, maybe you and I can.”

Monica considered Bianca’s offer. Darla and Jonathan looked at Bianca. They wondered if she could save them. Maybe Monica would reject her suggestion. Everyone waited.

“Okay. I’ll do as you say- but only temporarily. If I don’t get Craig, I’m coming back for them.”

“And if you get him, you’ll leave them alone?” Bianca asked. She wanted to pin Monica down. “You swear?”

“Yes. But, if you betray me or try to trick me, I’ll take them *and* you. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Perfectly. Now let them leave so we can get started.”

Later, Jonathan and Darla were alone in their bedroom. Darla hadn’t calmed down. Jonathan felt confused. The ordeal in Bianca’s RV overwhelmed him. He didn’t know what to make of what he’d learned about his wife’s past.

“Who was this Craig?”

“I dated him in high school.”

“Did you and he...?”

“Once or twice.” Jonathan felt his wife was lying. He suspected it was more than ‘once or twice’.

“You told me *I* was your first.”

“You were my first *love*. He was just a guy.”

“But he *was* your first?” Jonathan pressed. Darla nodded.

“Is it important?” she asked.

“It is to me.”

“Why? I married *you*, not him. I’d forgotten him until Monica brought it up.”

“But I bet you’re remembering him now.”

“Why would I do that?”

“People never forget their first. It’s a known fact.”

“Did you?”

“You were my first. And *only*, Darla. I always thought it was the same for you.”

“Jonathan, why is this important to you?”

“Because I now see a pattern.”

“What pattern?”

“A pattern of lies.”

“What lies?”

“Monica wasn’t the only thing you lied about.”

“I had nothing to do with her murder!” Darla shrieked. “I didn’t even know about it until she mentioned it today. Back then, all anyone knew was that she disappeared. Her body was never found.”

“Kind of like Jerry and Winnie were never found.”

“Are you suggesting I had something to do with their disappearance?”

“How do I know it wasn’t Monica but you?”

“Jonathan! How could you say such a thing? What’s happened to you?”

“Maybe I’m seeing you for what you really are.”

Darla stormed out of the bedroom. She didn’t come back. Jonathan felt pleased she was gone.

He later dreamed of Jerry and Winnie when they were young and before they disappeared. It was a happy dream. No disappearance, loss, anguish, or grief. Just play, love, and the magic of family intimacy. He awoke refreshed, smiling, and eager to see them again. Maybe they could reconnect as a family. It would be a weird family but he felt willing to make any necessary accommodation to be with his children. They would make it work.

Jonathan didn’t know if he wanted to make his marriage to Darla work. He had assumed he knew his wife. Now he distrusted her. Perhaps he never would feel comfortable with Darla again. Maybe it didn’t matter. He had Jerry and Winnie back. They were all that mattered to him. He loved his kids, all his kids, more than anything else in the world.

Chapter 17

“So, where do we start?” Monica asked.

“The same place I started with Jerry and Winnie. The internet.”

“What’s that?”

“I guess it was still pretty new when you died. It’s an essential resource now. What was this Craig guy’s last name?”

“Edwards.”

“Let me Google him.”

“Do *what* to him?”

“Look him up.” Bianca typed in Craig’s name. “There are quite a few. We’ll have to check them out.”

“Just tell me where to go.”

“You can move that fast?”

“I can be anywhere in the blink of an eye. All I need is a location.”

There must be some sort of ghost GPS, Bianca thought. “Okay, let’s do the local ones first. Maybe he’s still around.” She gave Monica an address. Monica disappeared. Bianca waited anxiously.

Monica returned a few minutes later. “He’s too old. Gimme another one.” Bianca read another address. Monica vanished. “That one was too young. Can’t you narrow it down?”

“The more details you look for the less accurate the information becomes. It’s the nature of the beast. Google is notoriously unreliable.”

“They why use it?”

“It’s the best thing out there right now.”

“Well, do your best. Use your intuition or something.”

“How about a birth year? When were you born?”

“In 1977,” Monica replied. Bianca added the year to see if it made a difference. “There are still a few. It seems to be a popular name.”

“Stop procrastinating! Gimme an address.” Bianca read off another address and Monica vanished. Bianca got up and found the keys to her RV. She inserted them in the ignition and then hurried back to her laptop on the table. If she could drive away fast enough there was a chance Monica wouldn’t be able to locate her again.

“He was a Black guy.”

Bianca searched again. “Here’s another one.” She gave Monica the address and Monica vanished. Bianca never made it to the driver’s seat.

“It’s him! Now, all we have to do is decide how to punish him,” Monica said.

Bianca now had a new problem. It was how to prevent Monica from taking revenge on Craig Edwards.

“We?”

“You promised to help me.”

“I promised to help you *find* him and I did. In return, you promised to leave the Bixbys alone and I’m expecting you to keep your promise.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I’ve never threatened anyone in my life. I won’t start now.”

“Then you will help me finish what I need to do.”

“No. My obligation to you is finished. What happens now is between you and Craig Edwards.”

“I can’t do anything without you.”

“Why is that?”

“I can’t hurt him. I’m a ghost. Only another living person can harm him. I need you.”

Monica’s lack of understanding regarding her ghostly abilities surprised Bianca. *Maybe it’s a good thing she thinks she needs me*, Bianca thought. *She doesn’t... but she doesn’t know that.*

“I *won’t* harm him, Monica. That’s not what I do.”

“You have to or I will punish the Bixbys.”

“How? You’ve just said you can’t do anything to them.”

“Not the living ones- the children, Winnie and Jerry. They’re part of my realm, not yours.” Bianca knew Monica was correct. She had seen what ghosts did to other ghosts, and never forgot the horror she witnessed.

Monica vanished. Bianca felt grateful she was gone. She needed time to think. There were many moving parts to this crisis, and she couldn’t decide which were the most important. Should she concentrate on protecting the living Bixbys, the ghost Bixbys, or Craig Edwards? *Or, Bianca asked herself, maybe I should focus on Monica? She’s the key to everything, the spider who wove the web.*

“Tell me everything you can remember about Monica,” Bianca said.

“We were best friends,” Darla replied. “There’s a lot to tell. Why do you ask?”

“I need to find a possible weakness. There might be something in her past I can use to stop her from hurting anyone.”

“I thought she just wanted to hurt Craig Edwards? He kind of deserves it, don’t you think?”

“I don’t accept that. Moreover, she seems capable of hurting other people. She’s already threatened your family. I think she’s unstable and capable of anything.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Good. You should be scared. You’re dealing with strange powerful things. You can’t possibly imagine how bad this could get. I’m trying to stop anything worse from happening.”

Darla and Monica spent almost all their time together in school and out. They never argued and often joked they were like sisters, but closer than sisters could ever be. Monica had brothers. Darla no brother or sister. However, she had Monica.

“Weakness, Darla. I’m looking for weakness. Something that happened in her childhood or adolescence, something that hurt her or changed her. Did you ever have to help her with a problem or trauma?”

“There was only one in all the years I knew her. It was a big one. Her dad died suddenly when she was ten. Her mom was never the same. Monica had to step in and take care of her brothers, but not all the time. Some aunts and uncles helped out, too. Monica was never the same, either, but she and I remained steadfast friends. She told me stuff that was going on but she handled it. I admired her.”

“Maybe she was hiding her deepest feelings.”

“About what?”

“Losing her dad, having to take care of her siblings, worrying about her mother. That’s a lot for a kid to handle. She had to assume adult responsibility fast; she had no choice. But maybe it warped her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe she remained the little ten-year-old girl inside and just hid her real self from everyone. Did you ever see her cry?”

“Not once. She told me she wasn’t allowed to.”

“Who told her that she wasn’t allowed to? Her mother?”

“No. I think it was Monica herself.”

Bianca suspected Monica’s anger was not directed only at Craig. Much of her pain came from her father’s death. It had robbed Monica of a normal life. A child’s strong uncontrollable emotions raged within her as she took on new responsibilities. Then Craig robbed Monica of her own life. Now, Monica had nothing left to lose. Bianca knew she was likely to be illogical, unresponsive to reason, and unpersuadable.

Bianca didn’t want to stop Monica with force. She preferred healing Monica by changing her from within. Bianca had to think of a way to do that. It would start with making Monica want to give up her desire for revenge on Craig Edwards. If she could accept the fact that she could do nothing to change what happened in the past and see revenge as useless perhaps she could find healing for her other traumas as well.

She persuaded Monica to sit for a reading. She got out the crystal ball, sat it on the small kitchen table, and waited for Monica to appear. It was a trick. Ghosts don’t have futures because they are outside time. They don’t exist at all. Monica didn’t know that. Bianca did.

Ghosts do have pasts, however, and Bianca hoped she could explore Monica’s past while pretending to read her future. Bianca might find a key that could open Monica and heal her pain. She would have to come up with believable lies to distract Monica while probing her deepest secrets. If she couldn’t heal the pain, Bianca feared she would be unable to do anything to stop Monica from hurting people, alive and dead.

“This is a new one for me,” Bianca said after Monica appeared across the table. “I’ve never read a ghost’s future before.”

“Look, I only consented to this to find out how I might achieve my revenge. I’m not sure it will work but at least I might get some ideas from it.”

“Fine by me. Shall we get started?” Monica nodded. “Close your eyes and relax. I’ll watch the ball and see what appears.” A bright flash almost blinded Bianca. *What the hell was that?* she wondered. Monica didn’t seem to notice. The flash was followed by a deluge of overlapping images that made no sense. Bianca thought the crystal ball might overheat.

Then she saw a pattern. One image dominated all the others. It was a man. His face changed from memory to memory but Bianca recognized him each time he appeared. She tried to think of a way to ask Monica who he was.

“Are you seeing anything?” Monica asked impatiently.

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I am.”

“So, how do I get my revenge?”

“Well, I haven’t seen anything in your future yet. So far, I’m only seeing what I assume is your past. Sometimes it works that way.”

“I already know what my past is, Bianca.”

“*You* do, but the ball doesn’t. It has to catch up.”

“Tell it to hurry up.”

“There is one thing I’m noticing.”

“What’s that?”

“The same person keeps appearing. A man. I’ve seen his face maybe a hundred times since we started. He’s always smiling.”

“Oh, that’s my dad.”

“Wow! You must have loved him very much to recall him so fondly.”

“I did. But, I don’t anymore. He hurt me badly.”

Bianca recalled that Darla told her Monica’s father died when she was ten. She hoped Monica would tell her about what happened. “How did he hurt you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It has nothing to do with my revenge on Craig.”

“Suit yourself. But I can’t work with you unless you’re honest with me.”

“Drop it!” Bianca suspected she might have just found the key to Monica’s pain. She waited. More images flashed by in the crystal ball. Monica sat silently, impatient for the reading to produce a result. There was only one outcome she wanted.

“This is a waste of time!” she exclaimed, frustrated.

“It’s not finished yet.”

“Well, *I’m* finished. That thing’s a joke. You’re a fraud. I did what you wanted. Now you have to do what I want.” Bianca remained silent. “Okay? Do you understand what I’m saying? I have to move on.”

“I don’t.”

“You refuse to help me? I can hurt you, too, you know.”

“No, you can’t, and you know it.” Bianca knew the opposite was true, but Monica seemed unaware of what she could do if she fervently wanted to. It was time to bluff.

“Monica, I *am* trying to help you. You don’t seem to realize how mistaken you are about wanting to take revenge.”

“Mistaken? How?”

“Did you ever hear of karma?”

“It’s bullshit.”

“It’s real. If you do what you want to all the people you’ve threatened, you will incur bad karma that will haunt you for eons. You can’t escape it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Bianca lied. “Let me help you find another way.”

“There is no other way.”

“I think there is. And, I’m the right person to help you find it. I know a lot you don’t about the supernatural. I can help end your suffering.”

Until that moment, Monica hadn’t realized she was suffering. She didn’t know what to say. Bianca waited. The crystal ball sat empty of images. It had done its job. It had opened Monica so Bianca could offer her healing. However, Monica had to invite Bianca in.

“The reason why you saw my father so much in your crystal ball is that he died when I was ten,” Monica explained. “I never stopped thinking about him. I made an effort to remember every single moment he and I were together going back to my infancy. I wanted to freeze those memories in my mind and never let them fade. They didn’t. I was happy, even though he was gone. At least I still had my memories of him. Until…” Monica paused. She seemed ready to cry. Bianca waited for Monica to continue.

“I know this is hard, Monica, but you can trust me. Just tell me everything.”

“It’s too painful.”

“I can end your pain.”

“No one can end it. I will be with me for as long as I exist. It *is* me.”

“I disagree. Your pain can end and you can go on. But only if you want to.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what happened and then let me help you?”

Monica recounted the circumstances of her murder. “After Craig hit me hard, I was laying there, and I knew I was dying. I was hurt and angry but also strangely happy-.”

“Happy? Why?”

“I didn’t want to die but I knew I would see my daddy again. That made it almost okay.”

“You loved him very much and missed him very much,” Bianca said. Monica nodded.

“And then it was what happened after I died that ripped my soul to shreds.”

“What happened?”

“I found him right away. The world of the dead is a strange place. It seems that families gravitate together. It just happens, I don’t know how.”

“He must have been happy to see you- even though you were dead.” Monica broke down and cried but there was no wetness. Ghost tears are eerily dry but their feelings are real.

“He wasn’t.”

Bianca didn’t know what to say. She needed to take Monica into the darkest region of her pain but knew the hurt would increase the closer Monica came to the source. Bianca had to know what that source was so she could heal Monica. She hoped Monica would finish the journey before the pain became overwhelming. Could her father be the source?

“What do you mean, Monica? Tell me what happened.”

“I found my daddy. I went up to him. I threw my arms around him. I was happy. Can you imagine it? I was truly happy that I was dead, just because I got to see my daddy again.”

“But something happened?”

“I expected him to be as happy as I was…”

“He wasn’t?”

Monica shook her head. “He didn’t even *know* me. He didn’t say my name, smile at me, or call me his favorite daughter, like he used to joke. There was nothing. I felt devastated.”

“I’m sorry, Monica.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it! My daddy didn’t know me! Or, at least he pretended not to know me. I don’t know which is worse. Anyway, I hated him at that moment. I hated the world I just came from. And I hated everyone I knew in that world- not just Craig Edwards, who murdered me, but everyone else I knew, including my best friend Darla.”

“What happened with your father wasn’t his fault.”

“Well, whose fault was it, then?”

“There’s something you should know. Some people, like you, retain all their memories after they die. Other people lose everything. They don’t even know their names. Everything gets stripped away when they cross over into the afterlife. I think that’s what happened to your father.”

“You mean my daddy doesn’t hate me? Not really?”

“It’s sad to say, but your father doesn’t even *know* you. Or himself, for that matter. He doesn’t know anything about this world.”

“How could that happen?”

“Some people believe it has something to do with reincarnation but I’m not familiar with all the details. Maybe your daddy’s stay in the afterlife was supposed to be temporary. Maybe he was coming back-.”

“Here? To me?”

“Well, to someone.”

Monica became excited. “No, no, I see it now. He *was* coming back to me. He was waiting there until I got married and pregnant and he would have been my son. Craig Edwards stole my daddy from me. I’m gonna punish him so bad...”

Oh, God, we’re back here again, Bianca thought. I had hoped we could get past this.

Chapter 18

Bianca would have preferred not being there for many years to come but she had no choice. If she hoped to stop Monica, she had to find her father and convince him to change his daughter’s mind about revenge. Bianca had no idea how she would do that but she had to try.

The land of the dead was different for every person. It wasn’t a real place or realm. But then again it was. It depended on how someone experienced it. Bianca didn’t know how to anticipate the way it would appear to her. Searching for someone might be impossible. She might be all alone or surrounded by hordes of ghosts. Bianca didn’t expect any danger but she knew there was always the possibility that a living person who entered the land of the dead voluntarily might not be able to leave. Bianca was willing to take the risk. She didn’t have any choice.

The only heavens or hells were in the minds of those who dwelled there. There was no existence or non-existence, either. Both were illusions. Bianca anchored herself in the certainty

that she was not an illusion. She felt confident she could navigate the strange realm and find who she was looking for. She just didn't know how long a search could take. Time was different in the different realms. Bianca hoped she would not lose too much time in the real world while she searched in the afterlife. No time at all, if she was lucky.

Then Bianca remembered the instructions she received from an ancient shaman who appeared in a dream when she was ill with a high fever as a teenager. Her father worried she was going to die. He didn't tell her but she sensed his fear. "When you journey to the land of the dead, don't waste effort searching for someone; let the dead find you," the shaman said.

Bianca found a quiet spot and sat down. She crossed her legs, straightened her back, closed her eyes, cleared her mind, and summoned Monica's father's image. She prayed he would find her quickly.

"Where am I? How did I get here?" a voice asked. Monica opened her eyes and saw a ghost forming in front of her. "Who are you?" the ghost asked.

"It's not important who I am. Do you know who *you* are?"

"Um... is it important?"

"Yes, it's very important. Your daughter needs you."

"My... *daughter*?"

"You left her when she was ten. She's grieved for you since then. She looked for you when she arrived in this realm and then found you. But you didn't know her and she was shattered. I've come to help the two of you reconnect."

"My daughter...?"

"Do you know who you are?"

"Is it important?"

"Yes! Listen to me. Your name is Roger Witkowski. Your wife's name was Gladys. You lived in Philadelphia. You were killed by an infection that entered your body after minor surgery. You've been here for many years."

"Where am I?"

"This is the land of the dead."

"Are *you* dead?"

"No."

"How were you killed?"

"I'm *not* dead, Roger. I just came here to find you and reconnect you with your daughter. She needs you."

"My daughter?"

"Do you remember her?"

"Remember? What is remember?"

"Your *life*, Roger."

"What is life?"

His question stumped Bianca. The situation seemed hopeless. Not only was he disconnected from Monica, he was also disassociated from his memories and from life itself. He didn't know he was a ghost in the realm of the dead.

Maybe I need Monica here, Bianca thought. *Maybe if he sees her again that might jar his memory.* Bianca forgot that Roger died when Monica was ten and she lived until age seventeen. It was unlikely he would recognize her. He didn't even recognize himself.

Bianca thought she had reached an impasse. If Roger had no memories of his lifetime, he couldn't reconnect with Monica. Then Bianca thought of one more thing she could try. It would be a long shot but it could work.

She didn't have her crystal ball. It was only a device for focusing cosmic and psychic energies but it was a useful tool. She would have to become that tool. Bianca would do a reading with Roger and attempt to restore all his memories. It was possible they were still inside him but remained shrouded. Bianca would have to remove the veil. *I've never done an apocalypse before,* she thought, *but it's worth a try.*

She asked Roger to sit down.

"I'm going to help you remember. You don't have to do anything. Just sit there. I will do everything. But you must trust me. I will not harm you or let any harm come to you. Do you understand?"

"I think so." Roger still seemed passive and confused. Bianca wasn't certain any of his old life remained inside him. Maybe he was just an empty ghost. She had heard of them. They were the saddest residents of the afterworld. They had no place in the realms of the living or dead. They merely existed and roamed, unaware of anything from their past.

"Good. Let's begin."

The key is love, Bianca thought. The key to Roger might be cherished memories of his daughter Monica. *If I help him recall his love, maybe everything else will come back.*

Bianca tuned into Roger's memories. She could see them, although he couldn't, for now. Bianca watched for special memories. She saw an infant, a toddler, then a precocious little girl, and knew it was Monica. Glowing warmth permeated Roger's memories of his daughter. He had adored her from the moment he first saw her. All Bianca had to do was bundle Roger's disconnected memories together and try to reopen his mind. She, of course, had never done anything remotely like that before.

Then Bianca summoned her memory of Monica's appearance as a seventeen-year-old and added it to the images cascading through Roger's mind. She focused on those images of Monica and tried to remove other extraneous memories so that only his daughter remained.

"M... Mo... Monica?" Roger stuttered.

The air shimmered. Monica appeared slowly. She looked at her father. "Daddy?"

Roger opened his eyes. "Oh, my little girl. I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too! You don't know what it was like after you died."

"I'm sorry I left you. I couldn't help it. Something awful happened and before I could do anything about it, I was gone."

“I never forgot you.”

“Well, we’ve found each other now, and we’ll stay together, always.”

“That’s all I’ve wanted since the day you died- to be with you again. You’re my daddy and I love you more than anything else in the whole world.”

“And I love you, baby.” They tried hugging but since neither was corporeal, it didn’t work. Bianca felt sorry for them. Their intimacy would have to be emotional and never physical, but they could remain together if they wanted to. She hoped they would.

Bianca left the realm of the dead and went back to her RV. She wondered if she should tell Jonathan, Darla, Winnie, and Jerry the danger was over before she left. Monica hadn’t said she had given up on her revenge but Bianca felt certain she had. Bianca also hoped she would have no further encounters with the Bixby family or ghosts but she felt too exhausted to worry about either right now. The former was more likely than the latter, anyway.

As she drove away, Bianca looked forward to going back to her everyday life. She wanted to pretend she was just an ordinary carnival fortune-teller. And nothing more.