

## Chapter One

Gertrude Harvey yawned and stretched her slender body. The smell of coffee had awakened her. Mm, she thought sleepily, Don's up before me again. She lay still for a few more minutes savouring the luxury of being able to sleep as late as she wanted to. There was little traffic in this very old part of Charlottetown so nothing had disturbed her all night. The house, her childhood home, was solidly built and muted what little ambient noise there was.

"Up and at it, sleepy!" called Don from downstairs. "The day's a-wasting."

She stretched again and then rolled to a sitting position on the side of the bed, fishing for her slippers with her bare toes. What time is it, anyway? she wondered, peering at the bedside clock. Only nine yet, not bad for a Saturday. She came fully awake. We're going out to Jim's this evening. It'll be nice. It's the first time since we were married. She wandered off to the bathroom. A few minutes later she joined her husband of three weeks in the kitchen. "What's for breakfast?"

"Coffee and French toast," said Don. His large, athletic person was clad in a cable knit sweater. His nondescript brown hair and the sheep white of his sweater gave him a rather beige appearance.

"Mm, my favourite. I do love being taken care of."

"Everything's your favourite, and I do like taking care of you." He turned back to the task of cracking eggs. "The paper's there if you want to read it." He wiped the residue of raw egg from his fingers on Gertrude's flowered apron that covered his attire.

Gertrude settled herself at the heavy oak table with its square of embroidered cloth in the centre, picked up the Guardian and read the back page first. "Did you see this article? William Poste fell down the stairs at his home and sustained head injuries. He's in critical condition in the Neuro I.C.U."

"Yeah, it's too bad. I guess it happened while we were idling our time away in post-wedding bliss. That's just an update on his condition."

"I wonder what his wife'll do if he dies? She's pretty young, I heard."

"She'll have all his money. He's quite rich. His paintings have been fetching very large sums in the art markets. He's a legend in his own time, so they say." Don whipped the eggs one last time before dropping the bread into them.

Gertrude laughed. "Maybe she pushed him. Rumour has it that he wasn't very good to her."

"I don't know about that. She was always well dressed, the few times that I saw her. She didn't seem to lack for anything. She's a skinny little thing. She looks about thirteen playing dress-up." He dropped the dripping bread into the frying pan where it hissed and sputtered. "Just right," muttered Don to himself a few moments later as he turned each piece to the other side.

"Well there's more to being a good husband than just providing her with all the physical comforts."

“That’s true,” said Don. He slid a spatula under the toast and transferred it to a warmed plate. “Take you, for instance. If I recall, your dearest wish in life was to be able to cuddle anytime you wanted to.” He nuzzled her neck as he passed her plate. “Are you getting enough cuddling these days, my dear?”

“Almost.” Gertrude arched her neck for more attention.

“Almost! Almost! I’ll have to hire a stand-in to provide you with any more than this,” said Don.

“Who would you get?”

“Eat your breakfast,” said Don.

It was good to see Jim again. He was a ghost hunter employed by the Psychical Research Institute as a free lancer. His dog, Betsy, who so much resembled her master in girth and general colouring, greeted them, her shaggy tail beating rapidly back and forth in her joy. She woofed and pranced about their feet in the yard on muddy paws, barely able to contain herself. “Stay down, Betsy,” shouted Jim. His sturdy frame, clad in a brown sweater with white trim, filled the doorway. He stood aside. “Come on in folks, supper’s ready as soon as Mary Ann gets here.”

They entered the cozy old kitchen and hung their jackets in the accustomed place on the hooks behind the stove. The fire crackled cheerily in the cast iron stove, casting a warm glow over the entire room. The red and white table cloth, forever askew, covered the old-fashioned table between the windows. The red curtains had faded somewhat since the first time Gertrude had seen them and the pink geranium had succumbed to unintentional neglect and been replaced with a white one. On the mantel shelf, the grandmother clock still ticked noisily at every swing of its pendulum and wheezed into life to chime the hour and the half hour.

“It feels like home here,” said Gertrude. She claimed the rocking chair. “What’s keeping Mary Ann?”

“Oh, you know her, like the little dog’s tail, always behind,” said Jim. He stirred the gravy.

“Here she comes now,” said Don. Head lights swept the dusk in the yard. A minute later Mary Ann entered. “Am I late?” As usual her greying brown hair was in disarray. She rarely had time to comb it properly or thought much about it after the initial tidying of the day.

“Not very,” said Jim. “We were just going to send a search party.”

Mary Ann giggled, her plump cheeks rose and almost covered her eyes. “The cat had her kittens in my bed this morning. I forgot to make it, you know. I couldn’t get her to move them. I fixed up a very nice bed for them behind the stove but she just picked them right up and carried them back to mine. I don’t know where I’ll sleep tonight, they’re still there.”

“You’ll think of something,” said Jim. “Sit in everyone, supper’s ready.”

Chairs scraped as everyone found their usual places. “It’s sure nice to have you guys back,” said Mary Ann. “This place is dull without you now. Did you have a good time?” Her eyes twinkled. “You found everything all right?”

Gertrude blushed, unable to say a word.

“Mary Ann!” chided Jim. “Enough of that! You sound just like Molly.”

“Speaking of Molly,” said Don, “have you talked to her since she passed on?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Mary Ann. “I don’t know what’s happened to her in the last few weeks. I haven’t even heard from Lucy. Maybe I should try to contact them after supper, since they haven’t tried to contact me.”

“That might be fun,” said Gertrude. “I haven’t done any trance work since the last time we were here, so I haven’t heard from them either.”

“Eat up,” said Jim, “after supper is time enough to discuss Molly and Lucy. Pass the potatoes, Don.”

“This sure is good chicken, what did you do to it?” Gertrude helped herself to a second piece.

“It’s not chicken,” said Jim. “It’s rabbit. My friend that brought the deer meat last fall came by this morning with a pair already cleaned for me.”

“Oh!” said Gertrude. “Bunnies.”

“Not ‘bunnies.’ Wild rabbits that get into farmers’ gardens and eat the profits and proliferate like crazy.”

“I’ll have to pretend it’s chicken for now,” said Gertrude. “Pass the gravy, please.”

Supper continued with the sound of cutlery on china, accompanied by the cheerful snapping of the wood stove. The serving dishes made one last round. At last Jim said, “So what did you bring for dessert, Mary Ann?”

“I made an apple raisin pie. I thought we might have it warm with some ice cream, if you have any.”

“I sure do. It’s French vanilla. Will that suit?”

“Perfectly.” Mary Ann began to cut the pie.

“I’ll make coffee while I’m up, too,” said Jim.



Molly MacIntosh yawned and stretched luxuriously. “That’s the best sleep I’ve had in months,” she thought. She opened her eyes to the sunlit room, not quite recognizing where she was. Everything felt different this morning. She looked at her arms and hands still stretched above her head, startled to see them young and unwrinkled, like they used to be. Indeed, they felt limber and supple like a young girl’s. She pulled them down and inspected them closely, realizing as she did so that she didn’t need to squint her eyes to bring them into focus.

“What’s happened to me?” she thought in wonderment. She swung her legs lithely over the edge of the bed. “Where am I? This isn’t my room at the nursing home!”

She began shouting in sudden panic. “NURSE! NURSE! HELP! HELP! Oh, why doesn’t someone come?!”

The door opened with a tinkle of cutlery and glass, and her old friend Lucy’s smiling face appeared.

“You’re finally awake!” said Lucy. She set the tray on the bedside stand. “Have you had a good sleep?”

“Best sleep I’ve had in ages,” said Molly. “Is that breakfast?”

“Yes, I thought you might like to have a real one your first day here, so I manifested it for you.”

“Manifested?! Where am I? I thought you were dead!”

Lucy smiled sweetly. “Don’t you remember? You’ve come over too.”

Molly thought about this for a moment. “D’you mean I’m dead too?”

“That’s right. You came over three weeks ago. You’ve been asleep ever since.”

“Oh, yes.” Molly suddenly remembered. “The therapeutic sleep.” She began buttering her toast. “Is this the last breakfast I’ll have?”

“It’s the last one you’ll need,” replied Lucy. “You may want to continue the custom for a while. Some spirits do.”

“Nice room.” Molly looked around herself as she munched a bite of toast and egg. “Kind of like my room at Sunset Manor, only newer.”

“Not bad for a rest home,” said Lucy. “They try to make the surroundings you wake up in as much like what you’re used to as possible, that way you won’t be scared if you wake up unattended. This one’s called Sunrise Manor.”

Molly remembered the nursing home on Prince Edward Island where she had spent her last mortal days. The place had been old, its dark hallways and tiny rooms had seemed jail-like. At least it was clean, she thought to herself, and they did make an effort to brighten it up with paint and posters. The care was pretty good too, considering the conditions and the pay. She sopped up the last of her egg yolk with her last bite of bread.

“Have you seen Gertrude lately?” She took a sip of coffee. “Or Larry? Does he wear the capes and the Gainsborough hat with the big red feather here? Is he really our boss and is he just as bossy here as he was in the physical?”

Lucy straightened her cardigan and ran her fingers through her short brown hair. “To answer your questions in reverse order, yes Larry is still the same, still our boss and just as flamboyant and bossy. I haven’t bothered Gertrude and Don these last few weeks, after all, they are just newlyweds. I thought they’d like some time to themselves, and Gertrude’ll be working with Jim in his ghost hunting business, so we’ll be seeing plenty of them later. Larry’ll be by this morning sometime.”

Molly looked again at her wrinkle-free hands and arms, and wondered aloud, “Is the rest of me like this?”

“Like what?”

“You know. Young-looking. Sort of smooth and fine again, like I was when I was a young woman.”

“Yes, that was partly what all the sleeping was about.”

Molly began patting herself everywhere, finally running her fingers through her hair, expecting to find the thin white wisps that had covered only parts of her scalp a few weeks ago. “I have hair again!” She almost shouted in her delight.

Lucy laughed at her friend’s exuberance. “Of course you have hair, you silly thing. You’re completely renewed.”

“I’m not silly,” scowled Molly. “I looked pretty awful a few weeks ago. No teeth and just a hair here and there.” She suddenly realized she had teeth again too, and clicked them together joyously. She jumped off the bed and began searching the room frantically.

“What’s the matter?” asked Lucy in some alarm.

“Where’s there a mirror? I want to see myself.”

“There’s a long mirror in the lobby. You’re allowed to look in it for ten seconds before you go out just to check your attire. They don’t encourage vanity around here.”

“Humph!” said Molly. “I can see that they don’t. Ten seconds indeed! What have I got to wear anyway? You know how fussy I am, and the more drapery the better.”

Lucy laughed at her again. “You’ll get used to the limited viewing time. In the meantime, all you have to do is think about what you want to wear and it will manifest itself.”

“Hm,” replied Molly, “I think I’d like to wear my old blue caftan and that diamanté turban. Are they renewed too?”

“Everything is renewed here. You create it all again each time you think about it.”

“In that case, I think I’ll create a large diamond ring for my right hand, and a large sapphire ring for my left hand.” She thought for a moment. “Perhaps some large drop earrings to complement the diamanté turban too, don’t you think so, Lucy?”

Dessert had been consumed and coffee handed around when Jim said, “I have an announcement to make. If Gertrude is ready to come to work for me, I have a job to do.”

Gertrude felt her skin prickle with excitement. “A ghost hunt?” Her eyes widened.

“Sort of,” replied Jim. “Have you two been reading the papers lately, or have you been too busy?”

“We read this morning’s paper,” said Don. “What about it?”

“Did you see the little article on the back page updating Willie Poste’s condition?”

“We sure did,” said Gertrude. “What’s the story on him anyway?”

“Apparently he fell down the stairs from his studio and cracked his skull on the newel post at the bottom,” said Jim. “He’s been in a coma ever since. I guess he has a severely depressed skull fracture. They’re still hoping that he’ll regain consciousness.”

“That must’ve been quite a fall. His house is a lot like this one, isn’t it?” said Mary Ann. “Lots of steep stairs and landings and things. How’s his wife doing?”

“She was right there when it happened, poor thing, or it would have been worse. She called the ambulance right away when she couldn’t rouse him.”

“How do you know so much about it?” asked Gertrude.

“I know his wife slightly. I met her at a party three or four years ago. She was a promising artist herself, but she seemed to just drop out of sight after she married him. She called me yesterday morning in a very agitated state and asked if I could help her. It seems that there have been strange things happening at the house. She’s just about frantic with fear. For some reason she remembered my name and called me. She sounded pretty desperate. I guess the police have been questioning her quite closely as to the circumstances surrounding the fall, and that, along with the strange events, has completely unnerved her.”

“So what’s all this got to do with you?” asked Don.

“She wants me to come out there in my ghost-hunting capacity and see if I can find anything. I told her I’d get back to her tomorrow.”

“I suppose we could make a diagnostic visit,” said Mary Ann. “I am invited too, aren’t I?”

“Of course you’re invited, you’re always invited,” said Jim.

“Sounds interesting,” said Gertrude. “I can go, can’t I, Don?”

“As long as I can go too,” said Don. “I still get the willies every time I think of that disappearing baby in New England.”

“Well, it’s Willie’s house, so you may have to get them again.” Mary Ann grinned.

“As long as nothing happens to Gertrude. After all, I just found her!”

“Nothing is going to happen to her. She’s only going to go there to get a psychic feel for the place for us so we’ll know where to start. Maybe Molly and Lucy can give us a hand from the other side too.”

“Oh, goody!” said Mary Ann. “Let’s see if they’re handy right now and ask them.” She immediately began her trance-inducing routine.

“Hey! Slow down!” said Jim. “We don’t even know what we want them to do yet. Let’s set up an appointment to see Mrs. Poste first and go over and have a look around before we go involving the other side. Besides, we don’t even know where Molly and Lucy are, or if they’ll be able to help us.”

“They’re here right now. I just caught a glimpse of them before you called me back so abruptly. They’re sitting over there on the clock shelf where they usually do.”

Don and Jim couldn’t prevent themselves from turning to look at the clock shelf even though they knew they were not sensitive enough to see the two spirits.

Gertrude laughed at their response. “You guys! You’d think you could see them too.”

“If you’d all be quiet, I’d like to try to get tranced again,” said Mary Ann. “Do you want to come with me, Trudy?”

“Sure,” said Gertrude, “I haven’t seen Molly since before she died, and I’d like to ask her about Mom too.” She relaxed her mind and began her deep breathing routine to induce her trance. Suddenly Lucy appeared on the shelf, but who was that pretty young woman with the flowing black hair and bright black eyes beside her? She was smiling at Gertrude and Mary Ann as if she knew them.

“Hello, Lucy, it’s nice to see you again.” Gertrude greeted the spirit on the right side of the shelf. “Who’s your friend?”

“Humph!” said Molly. “Gertie doesn’t even recognize her old nemesis. That’s pretty bad.”

“Molly!” cried Gertrude. “It’s really you! My goodness, you’ve certainly changed.”

“Of course I’ve changed. Did you think I’d stay looking like an old witch forever?”

“Well, yes, er, no, I don’t really know what I thought,” said Gertrude. “And please don’t call me Gertie.”

“Humph!” said Molly again, “that’s probably the truth of the matter right there, you didn’t think at all.”

“Oh, I’m so excited!” chirped Mary Ann, as her consciousness arrived on the other side. “Did you two hear? We’re all going on a ghost hunt. That is, if you want to.”

“I guess we could give you a hand.” Molly tried hard to keep the sparkle of anticipation out of her eyes.

“Give them a hand indeed,” said Lucy. “You’ve never even been on a ghost hunt. You don’t know the first thing about it!”

“I can imagine, can’t I?”

“Imagine all you want, but don’t make up stories for truth about it.”

“Will you two quit your arguing please,” said Gertrude. “I want to ask you a few questions before we have to go back.”

“What d’you want to know?” asked Molly.

“Have you seen my mother?”

“No,” said Lucy, “she’s still asleep.”

“Asleep?”

“Yes, she has a lot of healing to do before she’s ready to take up her duties as a spirit. She was very confused when she came over. It was the result of her confusion in the physical.”

“Then why is Molly up and about so soon?”

“Except for her broken hip and general weakness from the pain, she was essentially healthy. Her mind was alert so she didn’t have to sleep as long. It takes much longer to heal when the mind is affected.”

“Will I be able to see Mom when she does wake up?”

“I don’t know. It depends on what her assignment is, and whether she wants to see you, and why you want to see her. She was only your mother in the physical, you know. Now she’s a spirit like us, with work of her own to do. She may not think it’s necessary to see you again.”

“Oh,” said Gertrude. “I find it difficult to understand that my mother wouldn’t want to see me, and that she’s not really my mother anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” said Lucy, “but that’s the way it is. You’ll understand better some day, and then it won’t seem so hard.”

“What’s this about a ghost hunt?” said Molly.

“This guy had an accident,” said Mary Ann, “and he’s been in a coma, and the last couple of days strange things have been happening in his house. His wife is in the house alone and she’s scared out of her wits.”

“Who is he?” asked Molly.

“He’s an artist, well-respected in the art circles.”

“Why doesn’t his wife just move out until he gets better? I don’t have any patience for people who don’t do the obvious,” said Molly.

“She can’t. She has nowhere to go. Her family has sort of abandoned her.”

“Nasty old so-and-so’s, weren’t they.”

“Molly! Watch your language. We don’t use those kinds of expressions here.”

“Why not? That wasn’t a bad word. I could have used a lot worse.”

“I know you could have, but those are earth standards and we have higher standards to attain to here. Besides, language like that takes away from your soul-stuff, and doesn’t serve any useful purpose.”

Gertrude chuckled to herself. So Molly has a thing or two to learn too, she thought. Aloud she said, “Back to this artist and his wife. She’s very frightened in the house by herself, especially at night, and she’s called Jim to ask him if he could get to the bottom of this apparent haunting. Do you want to help us?”

“Well, my dear,” said Lucy, “if we can, we’ll help you, of course, only if it’s a case of true haunting. If the party isn’t dead it’s not, and we really can’t do anything from this side.”

“Can’t we go along anyway?” asked Molly.

“Now Molly, you know that would be meddling,” said Lucy.

“Meddling! Why’s everything that’s fun meddling?”

“Molly, you know the rule about interfering in the lives of mortals.”

“We interfered in Gertie’s life plenty,” said Molly. “I don’t see what the difference is.”

“Gertrude is one of us. A sensitive, and a very good one at that. Now, no more argument.”

Molly subsided into a black silence.

Gertrude could feel her trance slipping away. "I have to go now," she said. "We'll investigate and see you later." She became aware of her physical surroundings again. She sat up straight and stretched. "Well, that was interesting," she whispered to Jim and Don, careful not to disturb Mary Ann who was still in trance.

After a few minutes Mary Ann sat up too, and looked around. "Lucy's sure got her hands full with that Molly. She was still pestering to come with us when I left. How much do you want to bet she'll show up, with or without Lucy?"

"I guess there's not much we can do about that," said Gertrude.

Mary Ann shrugged. "We can always ignore her, I suppose. Just pretend she's not there."

"That'd be kind of rude, wouldn't it?"

"Not if we didn't go into trance." Mary Ann got up and stretched her sturdy frame. "How about some coffee, Jim? I'm chilled to the bone. This traipsing back and forth to the spirit world is like sitting on an iceberg sometimes."

"We should go soon," said Don. "It's getting quite late." He rose to get their sweaters.

"Let us know what you decide to do," said Gertrude. "I don't want to miss this for anything."

Jim walked them to the door. "I'll call Mrs. Poste tomorrow and set up an appointment. If I know her state of mind, she'll want us over there tomorrow evening. Will you be able to make it on such short notice?"

Gertrude's eyes were sparkling. "Of course we can, can't we, Don."

Don laughed. "I suppose I have to agree."