

## Chapter One

“Oh, Larry, we have to help her.” Lucy, slight of stature, wrinkled her brow in distress. She stood on tiptoe to peer through the sidelights of the front door to Sunset Manor.

“Why?” asked Larry. His large form filled most of the window. “She’ll be coming over soon enough. In any case, she did this to herself.” The last light from the setting sun shone through the transparencies of both their forms.

“I know that,” said Lucy, “but she was my best friend.” She pushed aside a fold of Larry’s serge cape and looked through the window again. “For all her faults, she was a good friend. She used to be so feisty and now I can hardly recognize her, she’s so diminished.” Lucy’s voice filled with tears.

Larry hitched himself away from the window and smoothed the large red feather in his Gainsborough hat. “Alright, Lucy, alright, just don’t cry on me.” He stomped soundlessly across the verandah floor.

Lucy sniffed and wiped her eyes on a lace handkerchief then took one last look through the glass.

Inside the manor, near the front door, Molly MacIntosh sat napping and drooling in her wheelchair. Her thin body was bent almost double with age and osteoporosis. Her pink skin showed through the white hair that remained on her scalp. The front of her gown and the middle of her lap robe recorded her meals for the day. Her arm and hand, paralysed by the stroke, lay in her lap, the useless fingers bent almost flat against themselves. “It’s taking me a long time to die,” she grumbled to herself. “Living like this is not much fun.” She began rocking to and fro in her wheelchair.

I could always see the other side. I wish I could go there, she thought. I want to see Lucy again. We had such fun when she was alive.

Molly sighed, then sniffed the air. The odour of urine and pine cleaner overrode the smell of boiled cabbage. She’s done it again, thought Molly. Can’t even hold her water any more. Dirty old woman! They couldn’t put down new tile the last time, the floor was so rotted underneath. Dirty old woman! The clatter of dishes from the kitchen interrupted her thoughts. Molly pushed herself away from the front door with her good arm and leg. She managed with much effort and by using the handrail to zigzag her way to the end of the hall where she sat staring at the tear in the linoleum by the storeroom door. The tear had been tacked down last year but the edges still curled and the colour had faded to a nondescript brown with age and scrubbing. Mr. Doyle tripped on that place before they tacked it, thought Molly. That’s what put him in the wheelchair.

Molly’s thoughts returned to Lucy. Lucy was so gentle. She was always my best friend. Not a lot of use as a psychic, but she understood. She loved to help me with my readings. She always wanted to be able to read the cards and see the other side like I could, but she just didn’t have the talent. Now she’s already there and I’m still here.

“Those were the days,” muttered Molly, still staring at the hole in the linoleum. A dust bunny, carried by a draft from the ill-fitting windows, drifted up the hall and snagged in the hole. Molly stopped rocking. “Some housekeeping around here.”

She watched the ball of dust waving in the air currents. If I had been that slack when I was keeping house, they would have fired me, she thought. I was always fussy about my work. She tilted her whiskered chin with pride.

“Molly, why don’t you slip out of your body and come with us today?” Larry materialized in front of the storeroom door, the dust bunny barely visible through his Cossack boots. “Lucy and I are going for a swim in Niagara Falls. I’m to meet her there in a few minutes.”

Molly startled at Larry’s sudden appearance. “Who’re you?” She squinted against the light from the window. “Some down and out project of Lucy’s, I suppose. She was always a sucker for lost causes. Anyway, how can I go travelling with you two?” she asked. “I haven’t moved out of this chair without help since last Christmas, and then I almost broke my hip.” She continued to peer at Larry. “Come closer. I can hardly see you.”

Larry stepped closer.

“And if you knew Lucy, you’d know that she’s dead.” Molly folded her lips in tight disapproval. “Are you some kind of scam artist?”

“It’s scam artist, Molly.”

“I thought as much. What d’you want from an old lady like me? And what’s wrong with you, anyway? You’re as pale as a ghost.”

Larry’s laugh rumbled out from somewhere deep in his chest. “That’s because I am one.”

Molly blinked and peered more closely at Larry. “But ghosts don’t wear hats with clown feathers in them and capes around their ankles and knee-high boots from a rummage sale.”

Larry’s face reddened. “At least I don’t sit around in my nightgown all day.” He tossed his head and the long red feather bounced. “I’m here to help you.”

“Help me?” Molly pushed her wheelchair with her good hand and only succeeded in getting lodged under the handrail. Cornered with Larry for the moment, she continued her tirade. “If you’re only a ghost, how can you help me? I suppose the next thing you’ll be telling me that’s how you know Lucy.” She paused to draw breath.

Larry saw his chance to get a word in and took it. “As a matter of fact, it is how I know Lucy and it’s because she’s so concerned about you that I agreed to make an appearance at all. Now, d’you want me to help you or not?”

Molly narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “Help me do what?”

“Get out of your body and travel in the astral plane with Lucy and me.”

Molly considered this for a moment. “I’ve heard of that. I’ve even tried it, but I could never understand how to do it.”

Larry drew himself to his full height and stuck out his chest. “I’m just the man who can help you.”

“Dunno,” said Molly. She smoothed her lap rug with her good hand. “Might be risky. What if I get stuck over there and can’t get back?”

“You won’t. It’s easy. You just turn inward and roll out.” Larry waved his hands to describe the movement. “A little pop and there you are.”

“D’you think I haven’t tried that before?” Molly cocked her chin belligerently. “All I did was work up a sweat.”

“So, keep trying. It should be getting easier now that you’re nearly one of us.” Larry threw back his navy cloak and adjusted his water wings. “Well, if you’re sure you won’t ..., Niagara calls, and it’s a heavenly day.” He faded from Molly’s view.

“You could at least hang around long enough to give a person a hand.” Molly stared hard at the storeroom door where Larry had been standing.

The elevator door creaked open, then rattled shut behind the night charge nurse.

“Talking to yourself again, Molly?” Nurse Gertrude stopped to push Molly back in her chair.

“What’s it to grapefruit?” Molly swiped at the drool on her chin. Damn this stroke! she thought. I know perfectly well what I want to say to that sour puss. She glowered at Gertrude.

“They’ll say you have money in the bank.” Gertrude walked away, her rumpled uniform and baggy sweater a testament to her state of mind and soul.

Molly stuck out her tongue behind Gertrude’s back. “If I had money in the bank I wouldn’t be in this place,” she called after Gertrude. “I wonder who died and put you in charge?” she muttered. She watched Gertrude until she turned into Mrs. Beaton’s room by the front door.

The front door opened to admit visitors and a chilly draft of spring air. The door slammed shut behind them and they hung their coats on the chipped wooden coat rack, then clattered up the linoleum-covered stairs.

“And I thought this was supposed to be a rest home.” Molly began to rock in her chair again. I wish they would put me back in bed, she thought. I’m so tired. She continued rocking. If only I could learn to come and go in this body when I want to.

Molly rocked and napped and drooled for most of the early evening. She mopped at the drool with the edge of her lap robe when she was able to feel the saliva trickle down the side of her chin that was not affected by the stroke. On the affected side of her face, her eyelid and cheek drooped and the slack corner of her mouth allowed saliva and food to escape unnoticed. By late evening the neck of her gown was soaked.

“Great day for a swim,” said Larry.

Molly startled out of her daydream at Larry’s sudden appearance.

Larry took off his cloak and shook the sand out of it. The sand from the other side sparkled into nothingness before it hit the physical floor. “We had a race and Lucy won. I don’t know how she does

it. She came back with me. We thought we might help you learn how to get in and out when you wanted to.”

He took off his water wings and released the air from them, then folded them and stuck them in the waistband of his swim trunks. “What took you so long, Lucy? I thought you were so speedy.”

Lucy materialized and hovered a few feet off the floor in front of Molly. She ignored Larry for the moment. “G’day Molly, I haven’t seen you in an age, so to speak. How are you, anyway?”

“You can see for yourself,” said Molly. “Where’ve you been all this time?” She tipped her head back and stared into the middle distance to get a better view of Lucy. It gave her the vacant look of senility.

“Here and there.” Lucy mopped at her dripping hair with her blue beach towel. “You’ve always been asleep when I’ve been here. I could only come in the evenings; I had too much else to do during the day.”

“Humph,” said Molly, “I thought you didn’t have to work over there.”

“Indeed, we do. There’s so much to learn. Vastly more than in the physical.” Lucy slung the towel around her shoulders to catch the remaining water from her hair. “Today I learned how to read the Akashic Records. The real story of Cleopatra is fascinating. It became public domain just a few months ago.”

“And now, I suppose, you’ve come to teach me how?” Molly tightened her lips into a straight line of disbelief.

“Only if you want to.” Lucy balanced herself on the splintery handrail. Her bottom disappeared into the wall. “What I really came to do was to help Larry teach you how to get in and out of your body when you want to. You do want to learn, don’t you?”

“You’re not afraid, are you?” asked Larry. He hitched himself onto the handrail beside Lucy.

“Darn right, I’m afraid. All this popping in and out as if it were some kind of game. I want to be able to do it, but I’m still afraid. I don’t want to find myself out and not be able to get back in, although I guess that wouldn’t matter much. They think I’m crazy enough around here as it is.” Molly slapped her knee in frustration.

“There’s no possibility of that happening. Your silver cord will keep you in contact with the physical,” said Larry. “It’s easy to do. Just relax your body, take a deep breath, and roll internally. You’ll hear a little pop or a buzz and you’ll be out.”

“Won’t I fall over?” Molly began to lean as if in illustration.

“Not if you’re lying down to start with,” said Lucy. She reached to halt Molly’s leaning to no avail.

“Fat chance of that around here.” Molly straightened up of her own accord and stared up the hall at the aide, Sally, who was stocking the linen cart in preparation for her next round of evening care.

“Why don’t you just ask them to put you to bed?” asked Larry.

“I did already, but that nasty nurse, Gertrude, refused to help me. She’s so lazy she’d make a u-turn rather than do any work.”

Molly watched Sally hurry from the linen room with a heavy load of folded sheets. The load wobbled and began to tip. Sally grabbed them with her free hand and dumped them in an untidy heap on top of the draw sheets and johnnies. She began to straighten them.

“She makes that nice little aide, Sally, do all the grubby work.” Molly drew her eyebrows down into a scowl.

“Now, Molly, Gertrude’s the only R.N. on duty and she has a lot of responsibility.” Lucy adjusted her balance on the handrail and began to swing her feet. “It makes her a little testy by times.”

“Humph,” said Molly, “she’s got the personality of a sour apple. She won’t help anyone do anything, and I can’t do it anymore.” Molly’s eyes filled with tears.

“Well, I certainly can’t help you, and I’m not going to hang around here all evening watching you cry over spilt milk,” said Larry. “I’ve got things to do. I may see you later.” He eased down from his place beside Lucy and faded from view, his big red feather, the last thing to disappear.

Molly made a face, her tears forgotten in an instant. “Kind of short in the grain isn’t he?”

“Oh, that’s just Larry.” Lucy waved her hand dismissively. “Any little hitch in his plans and he gets cranky. He was always like that, even when he was in the physical.” Lucy slid down from the rail. “He was a drill sergeant in the first world war, you know. He’s improved greatly since then, so you’re lucky. Now, why don’t you try again to get the nurse. Here comes Sally.” Lucy smoothed her hair. “I have to go. I’ll be back tonight with Larry.” She faded from Molly’s sight, too.

Sally put her happy face close to Molly’s, as she gave her a hug. Her brown hair swung forward to tickle Molly’s wizened cheek.

“Hi, there, Molly. It’s almost time for your bedtime snack.” Sally shook crumbs off the lap robe and tucked it more snugly around Molly’s bony knees, then checked the safety belt securing her in her seat.

“Don’t want cherries,” said Molly. Her aphasia manifested at the most awkward times.

“We’re not having cherries.” Sally pushed Molly down the hall toward the dining room.

“I mean, I don’t want breakfast.” Molly waved her skinny arms in the air in front of her.

“Honey, it’s not breakfast time.” Sally pushed the wheelchair to the table beside Mr. Doyle who stared vacantly in the direction of the television flashing silent pictures into the room. The dining room was quietly abuzz with the low mumble of the incoherent talk of the senile.

“I DON’T WANT A SNACK!”

Mr. Doyle jumped and turned his attention to Molly. She glowered at him.

There, I’ve finally said it. Much good it will do me, Molly thought. I wish I knew what was wrong with my tongue these days. Tears started to dribble down her wrinkled cheeks.

Sally gave her a hug and a tissue. “It’s hard, isn’t it, Molly?”

Molly sniffed deeply and dabbed at her nose with the corner of the tissue. “Hard doesn’t cover it,” she said and sniffed again.

“I’ll bring your snack in a minute. I still have to get Mrs. Beaton and Mr. MacPherson.” Sally hurried out of the dining room.

“And leave me here to starve,” muttered Molly. “I wonder what’s on the menu tonight. Everything smells like boiled cabbage.”

Mr. Doyle turned his head slowly to look at Molly. “Peas,” he said and reached out his hand and patted Molly’s right thigh.

“Keep your hands to yourself, you old lecher!” Molly gave his hand a sharp slap.

“Peas,” said Mr. Doyle. He withdrew his hand and turned back to the silent television screen.

Molly watched him out the corner of her eye. You used to be so handsome, she thought. Quite the lad about town once.

Her stomach rumbled and her thoughts re-turned to the impending snack. I wonder if we really are having peas for snack. Maybe it’ll be creamed peas on toast. She began to drool and dabbed at her chin with the crumpled tissue. At least I can still eat solid food, though I suppose with our luck, it’ll only be crackers and cheese. What I wouldn’t give for a good feed of salt herring and blue potatoes soaked in real butter.

At last Sally came to take Molly to her room.

Molly regarded the metal bed with its chipped coat of light green paint and its chrome side rails. The squat bedside table left over from when the building had been used as a hospital was too short to serve the older beds of World War I vintage. The oak dresser with its mirror gone black in places was her own. “Ugly old place,” said Molly.

“It’s home,” said Sally. She rummaged in the top drawer of the dresser for a clean nightgown.

“Home was never like this,” said Molly. She rubbed her face with her good hand and yawned.

“It’s better than sleeping in the park. You get three good meals a day and a place to lay your head at night. What more does a person really need?” Sally rinsed the facecloth in hot water and handed it to Molly.

“I wouldn’t call the meals good and the pillows are lumpy.” Molly scrubbed at her face with two fingers and the corner of the cloth. “Besides, there’s no one here who can talk sense.”

“You’re right about that.” Sally took the facecloth from Molly and finished the job. “You’re always talking to someone, though. Who’re you talking to, and what do you talk about all day?” She helped Molly into her nightgown.

“I have friends.” Molly tipped her head back and looked at Sally from under lowered eyelids.

“Friends?” Sally dressed Molly’s weakest arm first.

“Yes, friends in the other world. Tonight I’m going with them. Larry is coming for me later.”

Sally shivered. “Who’s Larry?”

Molly struggled into the other half of her night-gown. “I don’t know who he was when he was here.” She poked her head turtle-like out of the top of her gown. “In the other world he’s just Larry. He’s a section boss there, you know.” Molly’s dark eyes gleamed as she watched Sally’s reaction.

“Oh, Molly, you’ve got a strange imagination. It’s frightening.” She transferred Molly into her bed.

Molly yawned. “Nothing to be frightened of. I’ll be back before Christmas.” She paused a moment and thought about what she wanted to say. “You’re a nice pussy. No, no, I mean a nice flower. Oh!” She clucked her tongue.

“D’you mean that I’m a nice girl?” asked Sally.

“Yes,” said Molly, “a nice flower.”

Sally gave Molly’s hand a squeeze and a pat. “Thank you, Molly, I’ll treasure that. Good night, then. Call if you need anything.” She put the call bell within Molly’s reach and turned out the overhead light.

§

Larry and Lucy appeared almost instantly.

“Are you ready to try?” asked Larry. He hoisted himself onto the spare bed, not even disturbing the worn cotton spread.

“Yes. Anything is better than just lying here. What do I do first?”

“Take ten deep, slow breaths,” said Lucy. “That’ll relax you so that you can float inside your body better.” She waved her hands to describe the floating sensation.

“Who’s doing this, you or me?” asked Larry. The long red plume in his Gainsborough hat trembled.

“You are, of course.” Lucy dropped her hands and subsided into silence.

Molly banged on the bed rail with her good hand. “Will you two quit arguing and get on with it.”

Mr. MacPherson from the next room yelled: “Shut up, Molly. Go to sleep!”

“Mind your own business!” replied Molly at the top of her lungs.

“Ahem,” Larry cleared his throat. “If you’re ready, Molly.” He stared Molly into silence. “That’s better.” He began again. “Start with the ten deep breaths like Lucy told you. Then when you feel sufficiently relaxed, try to roll inside your skin.”

“What does it feel like so I’ll know when it’s happening?” She squinted her eyes to see better in the semidarkness of the night light.

“You may feel tingly and buzzy until you get used to doing it. I know I did.” Lucy settled herself on the edge of the dresser. The hairbrush and the bottle of lotion showed through her transparency. “It’s not entirely unpleasant.”

“Lucy, will you shut up? I’m doing this.” Larry jumped off the bed and turned his back to her.

“Cut it out, you two, it’s hard enough to learn a new skill without you guys shouting at one another.”

“Be quiet, Molly!” yelled Mr. MacPherson.

“Sorry,” said Molly and Lucy together. Lucy subsided into silence again.

“Before I start this program, I want to know a few things,” said Molly.

“You’re stalling,” said Larry. He folded his arms across his chest.

“Of course I’m stalling. Who wouldn’t?” Molly’s bright black eyes stared back at Larry. “Now, answer my questions.”

Larry rolled his eyes and sighed. “Like what?”

“Like, will I be able to see you when I get there? What will happen to my body while I’m out of it? Will people here be able to see me?”

Larry leaned against the over-bed table, his transparency mingling with the solidity of the table. The roll of toilet paper that Sally had left handy for the night teetered on the edge and Larry grabbed for it.

“You’ll recognize us, and don’t worry about your body, it’ll take care of itself. If anyone comes to do anything with you, you’ll pop back in. You’ll be able to see them, but they can’t see you.”

He pushed the paper closer to the centre of the table. It moved slightly before his hand went through it. He tried again. The roll moved only a little. He abandoned the effort.

Molly rolled onto her back. “How do I get back in?”

“Just think about it. Now start breathing.” Larry floated around the room looking at this and that.

Molly began the breathing routine. She relaxed all her muscles until they felt heavy and immobile. “Nothing’s happening,” she said.

“Don’t be so impatient,” said Larry. He tipped his head to one side to see if the institutional painting at the foot of the bed was improved from that angle. “It takes a few minutes, especially the first time. Now, shut up and try again.” Larry tipped his head the other way. The painting was irredeemable. He shook his head and turned to another one.

Molly began the routine again, and still nothing happened. She concentrated. She breathed deeply until she was dizzy. She grunted with the effort. She made so much noise trying that Sally came to check on her.

“Do you need anything, Molly?” she asked. “Do you need to go potty?”

Molly was startled out of her concentration. “No, I was just trying to start with my friends.” The aphasia manifested as usual. “Now go away and let me fly.”

“Please,” she added.

Sally felt Molly’s forehead with the back of her hand. “You’re a little warm. I hope you’re not catching anything.”

“I’ve been working hard. I’ve worked up a sweat.” Molly grabbed the bed rail with her good hand and pulled herself onto her side.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping. Now close your eyes and think happy thoughts.” Sally adjusted Molly’s covers and placed a pillow behind her back, then left the room.

Immediately Larry and Lucy were back. “Did you have to make so much noise about it?” asked Larry. “You sounded like a steam engine pulling a double load.”

“Easy for you to say.” Molly closed her eyes. “I’m tired. I’m going to sleep.” She opened her eyes. Larry and Lucy were still there. “Will you guys get out of here and let me get some rest.” They faded from her sight.

Molly began to drift off. Suddenly, just as she was about to tumble over into sleep, she heard a distinct pop and felt a slight jolt, and she was floating above the bed looking down on a thin, wrinkled old lady.

So that’s what I look like. I used to be so pretty, she thought.

Suddenly she realized where she was. Why, I’ve managed to do it. And all by myself, too. I wonder where Larry and Lucy went to? It’ll be pleasant to see Lucy in the flesh again, so to speak. I haven’t talked to her face to face since she passed on.

The thought of having a chat with her friend sent Molly whirling off into blackness. Fear erupted inside her. “Oh, I wish I hadn’t done this. I want to go home,” she wailed. There was another rush of wind and a sickening thump and Molly found herself back in her body. “Oh, Larry, that wasn’t much fun. Where were you anyway?”

Larry spoke from somewhere in the region of her left ear. “That wasn’t very bright. You don’t just change your mind in mid-flight like that. Of course it wasn’t pleasant.” He materialized and leaned against the bed rail looking down at Molly. The shadow of his form oozed between the rails.

Molly held onto the bed rail with her good hand to regain her equilibrium. “Fine thing for you to say, you didn’t tell me how to travel.”

Larry rolled his eyes. “You didn’t ask.”

“Where was I, anyway?”

“Lucy and I were in Scotland, and you made it to Ireland before you changed your mind.” The fluffy red feather in Larry’s hat quivered with his indignation. “Why didn’t you take the polar route? You could’ve come across Greenland in a lot less time.”

Molly made a face at him. “You didn’t give directions. How else was I to get there?” Her grimace turned to worry lines. “Besides it just happened, I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Will you two quit your bickering.” Lucy drifted onto the foot of the bed. “Are you game to try again, Molly? If you did it once, you can do it again.”

“I don’t know if I can. I did it in my sleep that time. I don’t remember what I did.”

“Just relax and go to sleep, then.” Lucy perched on the foot board of Molly’s bed and tucked her feet under the afghan. “I’ll hang around and wait for you even if he won’t. Larry’s always in such a hurry.”

“What if it doesn’t work this time?”

“It’ll probably be easier now that you’ve done it once.”

“I’m still kind of nervous.” Molly let go of the bed rail, eased herself back onto the pillow, then tucked her arm under the covers.

“Don’t be nervous, Molly. I’ll be here waiting for you no matter how long it takes. I’ll be quiet now so you can drift off. Larry’s gone about his business so he won’t bother us.”

“You’re a good friend,” mumbled Molly as she began to slide into sleep.