

Chapter One

Jane Martin stood looking at the old farmhouse and remembering all the happy summers she had spent there as a child. The old house looks the same as when Grandma and Grandpa lived here. I haven't been here since Grandma went into the home, thought Jane. I saw her as often as I could but she wasn't there very long. It was a sad day when she died. I felt awful about having to put her there, but after her last fall it just wasn't safe for her to live here by herself, and I couldn't be with her all the time.

Her thoughts rambled on. I've lost touch with all the children I used to play with. I mostly played with Ian when he could get out from under his father's thumb. He took an awful ribbing from the other boys for wanting to spend time with me. I wonder where he is now? I heard he went to the Agricultural College in Nova Scotia for awhile. I don't even know if he finished. Maybe he's married with six kids. I doubt that, he was awfully shy back then. I don't even know if I'd recognize him, it has been so long since I've seen him.

She thought back to her school year. It had been busy with thirty-five fourth graders under her care. I'm glad I have all summer off. This house needs a lot of work. If I do anything with it, I'll need an electrician to check the wiring. Grandpa had it put in shortly after the electricity came out here in the early fifties. I doubt anyone's looked at it since. The last time it was painted, he and Grandma had a row about the colour of the trim. He wanted navy blue and she wanted barn red so it would tie in with the out buildings. They couldn't agree, so Grandpa just went up the ladder one day she when she wasn't home and painted everything white. Jane chuckled at the memory. Grandma wasn't happy about that either, but white it stayed. I think that navy blue would have looked nice and crisp against the white shingles.

A slight movement caught her attention. She looked up at the spare bedroom window and blinked. That curtain is moving. There must be a draft. The curtain stirred itself and seemed to take on a human shape, then moved again and resolved itself into just an old lace curtain. Jane shook her head to clear it. I must be imagining things, she thought.

She took a walk around the front of the house. I'm glad the old sun porch is still there, she thought. I had such fun here with my dolls when I was tiny. When it was hot, Grandma used to let me sleep out here. It was kind of scary when the thunderstorms would roll in. I'm really looking forward to having Lydia here for the summer. She asked if she could bring her dog. Jane tied back her long dark hair with a covered band and continued her wander until supper time, revisiting all the places around the farm that she used to love as a child.

She thought back to a story her mother had told her about Grandma many years ago. It was a strange story, thought Jane. Something about Grandma being an opera singer. I wonder if that was before she met Grandpa? Probably, unless he'd changed an awful lot since before I came along. She thought about her grandfather and his stern Presbyterian ways. No songs except church songs, the Psalms especially. Church every Sunday no matter the weather, except for blizzards. Bible reading every morning before breakfast and again before bed. Hard work. He kept his business to himself. Grandma did too, for that

matter, she thought. I don't think she was from here. I don't know why I think that. Her thoughts rambled on. Grandma always smelled of cinnamon and lavender and Grandpa always smelled like the barn and cows. Sometimes he smelled of tobacco smoke but Grandma wouldn't let him smoke indoors. I wonder what they were like when they were young.

After supper Jane washed up and retired to Grandpa's old chair in the parlour with a book on gardening. The long rays of the setting sun faded into the density of a country night. Somewhere upstairs the sound of a door shutting caught her ear. She looked up from her book. The sound, familiar, but distant in memory, reminded her of something from long ago. She listened intently for a minute or two but the sound did not come again. She shook her head of dark brown curls as if to clear it. Grandma's house was always kind of creaky, she thought, especially when it was windy. She continued to listen a moment longer, then frowned. It's not a windy night, she thought. She listened for another few seconds. The country silence was profound. She shrugged and went back to her book. Another half hour of reading and she was ready for bed.

This was always a creepy old place, she thought. It has so many gables and nooks and crannies for the wind to whistle through. She climbed the stairs. It's a wonder Grandma stayed here after Grandpa died. She sniffed. The smell of Grandpa's wintergreen liniment is still in the air, she thought. She brushed her shiny curls to keep them from tangling too badly while she slept. She sniffed again. Grandma's perfume is still on the air, too. Of course, it's not really that long since they lived here; a couple of years for Grandpa and only a few months for Grandma. She set down her hair brush and climbed into bed. Her firm body, a little stocky like her ancestors, did not fit the hollow in the mattress where her grandmother had slept for all those years. A new box spring and mattress soon, she thought. Sleep came rapidly. I've worked hard today was her final coherent thought before drifting into the softness of sleep.

The sound, when it came again, blended with the creaking of the spruce tree branches just outside the window. The creaking became more urgent and resolved itself into a sound from the parlour where Jane had sat reading with her after supper cup of tea.

Jane came instantly awake and struggled to a sitting position, her eyes wide in the density of the country darkness. There was nothing to see, nothing she could see. I'm glad Lydia is coming to stay for the summer. She'll be here for lunch. The night chill forced her back under the musty smelling quilt. She lay still and listened hard for the next hour. The house seemed to settle itself more comfortably on its foundations.

Silly idea! she thought as fatigue and sleep overtook her again. I'll be glad when Lydia gets here. I hope she brings Charlie. Maybe I should get a dog too. She slept.

The sun, beaming through the space between the curtains, woke her early the next morning. Grandma's drapes never quite fit, she thought in her still sleep-muddled mind. She turned away from the morning brightness and drowsed for a few moments longer. Outside the old rooster crowed. She turned and opened one eye to peer at the clock. "Six o'clock! Be quiet bird, or I'll put you in soup," she

muttered. Her thoughts took on more coherency. Her mental list for the day took over and she threw back the covers and headed for the bathroom. I have so much to do today. She splashed water on her face and ran down the list again. Lydia will be here at noon to help, thank goodness.

Jane dressed hurriedly in navy shorts and pale blue T-shirt then ran downstairs. She glanced into the shadowy parlour where she had been sitting the night before. Where did my book go? I thought I left it face down on the side table. She entered the room and threw back the ceiling-high drapery. She stood staring at the now empty table trying to remember what she had actually done with the book. Perhaps I put it on the shelf. She moved over to the dusty book case and began scanning the shelves. It was not there. She frowned, then sneezed and tried to think. Maybe breakfast will help, she thought. Grandma was always losing things like that too. She blamed it on the gremlins. Another survey of the dark panelled room found nothing amiss. Jane glanced at the table one last time noticing for the first time that the dust had been disturbed where she had laid the book. "That's weird," she muttered and headed for the kitchen.

The sunshiny kitchen was cheerier than the parlour had been. The sunlight poured in over the tops of the faded flowered cafe curtains and splashed off the toaster and kettle. She lifted the lid on the kettle to check the water level then began to search the cupboards for something edible for breakfast. I'm glad I brought the toaster from my apartment. I'll have to see what Grandma actually has here.

A creak from the parlour startled her and she stood stalk still, listening hard for a moment. The sound had started almost inaudibly but had increased in intensity until it had caught her attention. She went to the hall door and stood listening for a moment. The creaking continued. She set the coffee mug she had been holding beside her place mat on the table and crept cautiously toward the parlour. She peered around the door jamb and listened. The creaking had stopped. Feeling braver, she stepped into the room and looked around. Nothing seems amiss, she thought, then noticed her book on the side table right where she had left it. Her reading glasses were balanced precariously across the spine. She frowned and went to pick them up and dropped them rapidly. They were too hot to handle. She hovered her hand over the book. It was very warm too. "I don't know what's going on here," she said aloud in her stern school teacher voice, "but if you're playing games, Grandma, I'd like you to stop. It's not funny." She picked up her glasses and stuck them in the neck of her shirt. They had cooled enough to handle.

I'll be glad when Lydia gets here, she thought.

She spent the morning taking inventory of her grandmother's kitchen. She avoided the parlour. There was no more creaking.

She opened a cupboard door. It was crammed with every sized plate for every occasion, some of which Jane had never seen before. Why in the world would she need so many place settings? Some of these are so worn the patterns are indistinguishable. I don't think there's a complete set of anything here. Her thoughts wandered on. She pulled stack after stack of old plates and cups and saucers out and set them on the table. Dust came with every stack. "It's been awhile, Grandma," she muttered. She climbed down off the chair she had been standing on to reach the top shelf and set the last stack in the last space on the counter top. She filled the dishpan with hot soapy water and began washing and thinking, then drying and thinking some more. I think I'll have to decide which set I'm going to keep

and take the rest to a resale shop or donate them. I wonder if they're worth anything? Probably not. They never had a lot of spare cash and Grandma was sort of a hoarder. I expect these were all things she picked up at estate sales over the years. There must be about twenty place settings here.

She was just tackling the insides of the cupboards with her wet soapy cloth when Lydia arrived. Jane did not hear her until she spoke.

"Knock, knock!" Lydia Ross called from the porch door, nearly scaring Jane off her precarious perch.

"Oh, you're here!" Jane jumped down off the chair. "I lost track of time."

Lydia pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'm a little early. I left with time to spare because I've never been here before and if I got lost ..." Her voice trailed away as she surveyed what seemed like acres of gleaming dishes. "Did your grandmother entertain a lot?"

Jane filled the kettle and set it on the hot plate, then went in search of the bag of cookies she had bought yesterday. "I didn't think so. Maybe when she was young, but we were never here except for a few weeks in the summertime so she could have had people over every evening. I was here more than Mom and Dad, but there was never any entertaining so I don't really know. I know she always had another place at the table for whoever happened by. Sometimes it would get quite crowded."

"Maybe it was when she was younger," said Lydia. She waved her hand dismissively. "It's lunchtime. I brought some take-out chicken. We should eat it while it's still hot."

Jane poured the boiling water on the teabags in the pot. It was her grandmother's old pot. A yellow one with red and blue flowers and green leaves around the top and across the lid. She glanced at the Grandmother clock on the mantel shelf over the lounge. It had been her grandmother's pride and joy and it groaned and clicked as it tried to chime the hours now. "It is getting late, and I'm getting hungry. I've been at cupboards all morning and there are still more to do."

Lydia jumped up and began setting out Styrofoam containers of the meal. "Will we use some of these plates you've just washed?"

"Sure," said Jane. "What's one more dip in the pan?" She pulled two of the prettier ones off the stacks and found cups and saucers to match. "Did you bring Charlie with you?"

"He's out in the shade watching the squirrels. I staked him. I need to bring him more water. It's kind of warm today." She rose and filled a pitcher with water. "I brought all his dishes and left him with some water when I staked him." She hastened outdoors while Jane pulled the spent teabags from the pot. Presently Lydia was back.

"Do you have someone staying here with you?" She sat and pulled her chair closer to the table.

Jane shook her head. Her dark curls bounced. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Charlie was focused on one of the upstairs windows so I looked too and it seemed as if there was a figure behind the curtains."

Jane frowned. "There's no one here but us chickens. At least as far as I know. We can look when I take you upstairs and show you your room. "

Lunch was long and companionable. Lydia was the grade three teacher at the same school as Jane. She was as blonde as Jane was dark. They had been friends for a long time. News of their mutual friends and colleagues was exchanged and a little gossip was indulged in.

"I'm glad you brought lunch," said Jane. "That was good."

"It's that new place on Great George Street. I'd heard it was good but I'd never tried it. So I took the chance." Lydia rose from her place. "Let's get these dishes done and then you can show me the rest of the place."

A few minutes later they climbed the front stairs together. At the landing Jane flung open the first door on the left. "This is your room. The drapes are 'Grandma specials' all through the house so they let a lot of light in through the cracks. This room will give you the longest lie-in on sunny days." She bent slightly to smooth the coverlet, then frowned and smoothed it again. I don't remember sitting on the bed, she thought, then mentally chased the thought out of her head "My room is across the hall. The door in the middle leads to the attic, but it's locked and I don't know where the key is."

Lydia set her black backpack on the stuffed ladies' chair in the corner then turned to look out the window. "Charlie seems to be enjoying the shade down there."

"D'you like having a dog?"

"They're great company. I talk to him all the time." She turned from the window and allowed the faded gold drapes to fall back into place releasing a shower of dust. She sneezed.

Jane laughed. "I guess I should run those through the air cycle."

"Today's a good day to hang them on the line and give them a beating."

"Bad drapes, eh?" Jane dragged the old wooden chair from the former kitchen set over to the windows and climbed up to begin unhooking the drapes.

Lydia caught them and sneezed again. "You were asking about Charlie."

"Oh, yes." Jane climbed down from the chair and dragged it over to the second window. "I was thinking I might get a dog. I don't know what kind yet, I haven't thought that far."

"Why not get one from the Humane Society?" Lydia stood ready to catch the next dusty drape. "You can get all shapes and sizes, and all ages too."

"M-m-m. I hadn't thought of that. I was thinking breeds, but maybe not. That's where you got Charlie, wasn't it?"

"He was just about to be put down for lack of a taker so I took him. He's the best dog. It's almost as if he knew what his fate was. He was already mostly grown and house broken."

"Don't you have to jump through pet adoption hoops or something?" She dropped the last drape down to Lydia and climbed down from her perch.

“That’s just to ensure you’ll be good to an animal. Besides, breeds have all kinds of problems and health issues. It’s too bad, but humans have done it to them.” Lydia gathered the bundle of drapes and headed downstairs. “Where are your clothes pins? I’ll put these on the lines. Come to that, where are your lines?”

Jane followed Lydia’s slender shape downstairs. “Out here. I’ll grab the clothes pins on the way.”

Together they wrestled the heavy drapes onto the outdoor lines at the back of the house. “There. A few hours in the breeze will freshen them up. I’m going back to washing cupboards. You can relax.”

“Nonsense,” said Lydia, “I came here to help, and help I shall. Where’s your dust rag and dry mop? I’ll start with the windows in my room.” She stopped for a moment and looked around herself. “This must have been a big and busy farm when your grandpa was in his prime.”

“It was mainly milk and pigs and chickens. The big barn is where he kept the cows at night and the pigs were in the little barn next to it. The loft in the pig barn was where they stored the straw after they threshed. I used to like to go up there and read in the afternoon. The sun used to pour in through the loft door and the straw was soft—well, soft enough.” Jane thought about how it was to sleep on. “I remember ‘helping’ Grandma fill the ticks with straw when I was really little. At least until they finally gave in and bought real mattresses. I think Grandma had to put her foot down over that one. I overheard my mother and father talking about it once. As frugal as Grandma was, Grandpa could outdo her almost every time.”

Together they walked around the rest of the farmyard. “The chicken coop was at the end of the little barn and the woodshed was next to that.”

“What are those odd looking boxes? Rabbit hutches?” asked Lydia.

“Grandpa kept foxes while they were in demand. They were beautiful, all silvery grey with a dark overlay of fur. I don’t know if you ever heard about the big fox industry that was going away back when?”

“I heard something about it once. But I didn’t really take it in. Dad was reading The Guardian and he was quite upset about the decline in the fur industry. He said something about a lot of people being ruined by it, and thank goodness he hadn’t put any money into it when his brother asked him to.”

“Well, Grandpa came out of that okay. He saw the market trend and the prices declining and he sold out early. He was pretty canny.”

“Sounds like he was,” said Lydia. She lost interest in the past as they reached the back door. “So where are the dusters and rags?” Jane handed Lydia the required items and she disappeared upstairs. Jane filled the dishpan with fresh soapy water and took up where she had left off when Lydia had arrived. After half an hour Lydia came downstairs. “Have you got some more cleaning rags? Those hall windows could use a good clean while I’m at it.”

“In the cupboard in the porch where I got the others. Just open the top drawer and you’ll find them.” Jane picked up the dishtowel and began drying the latest round of dishes.

Lydia returned with her hands full of rags. “Paper towel?”

Jane nodded in the direction of the towel holder. "Take that one. Just bring it back when you're finished."

Lydia pulled the paper roll out of its holder and stuck it under her left elbow, then disappeared upstairs again. She was back a short time later with all her cleaning supplies. "Shall I just dump this outdoors?"

"On the garden." Jane began stacking clean dishes into their clean spaces in the cupboard.

Lydia returned in a moment with her empty bucket. She sat in the rocker in the bay window to rest. "By the way, I dusted the library as I was passing. You really need to take all those books off the shelves and give that a good clean out too. Who was the old lady in there reading?"

"What old lady?" Jane swung around in alarm. The air seemed to thicken and a cold shiver ran down Jane's back. "There are no old ladies here that I know of." She frowned.

Lydia gave a tiny shrug. "I don't know. She looked up when I came in and said something to me that I didn't quite catch. Something about a coat. I turned to set down the bucket and move a few things off the table. When I turned back she was gone." Lydia shuddered. "It was really kind of spooky. She didn't make any noise, and she didn't go past me. I would have known if she had. The only sound was the creaky rocker."

"What did she look like?" Jane almost stared at Lydia.

"Kind of old-fashioned. Her hair was in finger waves like the old ladies wore when they were young. She wasn't grey though." Lydia furrowed her brow trying to bring the image of the woman back into focus. "Come to think of it, I couldn't really see her and she was very hard to hear."

"She doesn't sound like anyone from around here." Jane filled the kettle to boil. "She might have been a friend of Grandma's. She always had people coming and going. Sometimes they'd stay for the day, sometimes not. Some she didn't even know, I think they may have been friends of Grandpa's." She was silent for a moment. "But that doesn't make any sense. Why would she be here? How did she get in?" Jane thought back to the disappearing glasses and book from the night before.

"Wasn't that dangerous just to invite strangers in for a meal?" asked Lydia.

Jane pulled off the light blue sweatband that she had confined her curls with and shook her head. "Grandma didn't think so. Of course, once Grandpa died she didn't do it as much. With no man about the place and living away out here, it really wasn't safe." She sat down to rest for a moment. "I'm glad that job is done. It has never been my favourite thing to do." Presently the kettle began bubbling and she rose to set the tea. "So that's two and a half rooms completed. Want a cookie?" Jane reached for the bag of cookies. "By the way, I checked the other rooms when you went to get the bucket and there was no one there."

The next morning Jane rolled out of bed just as the sun came round the edge of the curtain. She even got ahead of the rooster. She groaned as her morning stretch revealed the sore spots from all her cleaning efforts yesterday. I guess I'm not in as good a shape as I thought. Her mind rambled on. What will I do today? she thought. More cleaning and I must see if there's anything in the garden. I don't

know if Grandma planted anything this spring or not. She was still pretty spry so she may have. Jane crept downstairs so as not to waken Lydia.

She quietly closed the kitchen door behind herself then turned to discover Lydia asleep in the rocker with Charlie at her feet. The down comforter from the bedroom behind the kitchen was wrapped snugly around her, and Charlie kept watch from the tail of it at her feet. He ‘wuffed’ at Jane’s entrance and wagged the tip of his tawny tail. Lydia stirred.

“What’s the matter, Charlie? Time to go out?” Lydia opened her eyes. “Oh, is it morning already? What time is it?”

“It’s six o’clock and what are you doing sleeping in the rocker? It wasn’t the mattress was it? I didn’t test it and Grandma was very saving, so it’s pretty old.”

Lydia untangled herself from the comforter. “No, it wasn’t the mattress, it was Charlie. He wouldn’t come upstairs with me last night. He didn’t want to go past the parlour door. And he didn’t want me to either. I don’t know what got into him. He braced himself and just would not go past, and he’s too big a dog for me to pick up and carry. He was very agitated and I was afraid if I forced the issue he might snap at me.”

“That’s odd.” Jane squatted down to ruffle Charlie’s floppy beige ears. “What’s up with that, Charlie?”

“I don’t know,” said Lydia, “but whatever it is, he’d better get over it.” She began folding the comforter. “He needs to go out. You’re dressed, will you take him?”

Jane picked up Charlie’s leash and clipped it onto his collar. “C’mon, Charlie, let’s go.” She opened the kitchen door into the porch and led Charlie outside. The screen door slapped and rattled behind her. It was a familiar sound. She stood for a moment absorbing the clear brightness of the summer morning and breathing in the fresh, salt-tangy air from the Strait. She let out the retractable leash so that Charlie could have a wander and some privacy for his ‘business.’ To her right was the garden with a good green growth over most of it. I hope those are plants and not weeds, she thought. The garden is huge. It’s a wonder that Grandma had the strength. Maybe one of the neighbour kids helped her. Presently Lydia joined her.

“We can tether Charlie to the chain under the tree when he comes back.” She took the leash from Jane. “That’ll keep him out from underfoot while we work this morning.”

“I wonder whatever got into him last night? I thought you came up right after me.”

Lydia dug her bare toes into the soft sand by the side of the lane. “I have no idea. When I went to leave the kitchen after I turned out the light, he came to the threshold and whined. I coaxed him to come and after awhile I managed to get him into the hall but after that he refused to budge. I tried to pull him by his collar but no luck, he just sat down on his haunches and refused to go any farther. He didn’t want me to leave him alone either. When I gave up and headed upstairs you should have heard him cry. It was if he was afraid. I’ve never known him to be like this. So I went and got the comforter from the bedroom behind the kitchen and wrapped up in that. It seemed to satisfy him and he quieted down.”

“We should see if he’ll go past the parlour in the daytime,” said Jane. “It’s kind of a shadowy place at night, maybe that’s what has him spooked.”

“Maybe. We can try him later. Right now, all I’m interested in is breakfast.” Lydia walked in the direction of the stretched leash. “C’mon, Charlie, let’s get you settled for the morning.”

After breakfast Jane hung the damp tea towel on the wooden drying arms behind the old wood stove. There was no need of a fire in the summer but it was closer and more convenient than the big clothes line outdoors. “Shall we try Charlie and the parlour in daylight now?”

Lydia jumped to her feet and set her empty mug on the counter beside the tea pot. “No time like the present.” She stuck her bare feet into sandals and picked up Charlie’s leash. “I’ll get him.” She headed outdoors to find Charlie huddled as far under the tree as he could get. He was staring at the upstairs window and whining. Lydia turned to look in the direction he was staring. To her perception, the curtains on her own bedroom window moved slightly in the morning breeze. There was a strange stillness to the air. Charlie’s golden hackles raised and a low, barely audible growl emanated from his throat. The air felt electric. He leaned against Lydia’s legs and whined.

“What are you looking at, you silly dog?”

“Wuff!” said Charlie and tried to bury his face in her sandals.

Lydia sat down on the grass beside him and began watching the window. The breeze disturbed the curtains again. Lydia thought she discerned a womanly form in their shadows. She stared harder and the shadows resolved themselves into curtains again. Lydia shook her head. “We’re both being silly, you and I.”

Charlie whined and leaned against Lydia’s side.

“C’mon you, it’s time to go and find out what this is.” Lydia rolled to her feet just as Jane joined her.

“What what is?” asked Jane.

Lydia made a slight face of exasperation. “Charlie’s spooked again. He was staring at the upstairs window so I thought I’d look too, but all I could see was the curtains moving in the breeze.” She bent to attach Charlie’s leash. “Although, I must say, they did create shadows as if someone were standing there.” She straightened and tugged at the leash then shivered slightly. “Let’s go and put an end to this nonsense, once and for all.”

Charlie hung his head and tucked his tail but followed Lydia into the house. He whined as they crossed the threshold and held back a little.

Jane got behind him and pushed his dark golden rump into the kitchen. A slight movement out the corner of her eye caught her attention but there was nothing there. She frowned. “That’s funny!” She peered at the tray of clean dishes. “The dishes are washed and they’re draining on the rack.”

“What’s funny about that?” asked Lydia.

“I didn’t do the dishes. I came right outside after I brushed my teeth and made my bed.” She picked one up to inspect for cleanliness. “It’s hot! It’s as if it has just been rinsed!” She turned, wide-eyed to Lydia.

“D’you have ghosts?”

“Not that I know of. Grandma used to keep some weird visitors from time to time but she never mentioned anything strange, like ghosts.”

Lydia shrugged. “We’ll keep an eye on the dishes tomorrow morning and see if they get done. In the meantime, we have our hands full with Charlie.”

She led the way toward the hallway with a nervous Charlie at her heel. He whined at the threshold and seemed about to balk but Jane was close behind him and he had to keep moving. He flattened himself against the wall opposite the parlour door and whined again. Jane glanced into the parlour and gasped.

“The chair is rocking all by itself!”

Lydia looked too. She stared and blinked. “That’s the old lady I saw upstairs this morning. She’s the same one I saw here yesterday too. What is going on in your house, Jane? Is that your grandmother?”

Jane stared hard at the independently rocking chair trying to discern a source for the movement but could not. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I intend to find out.” She let go of Charlie’s shivering rump and turned toward the parlour door. Charlie whined and retreated to the kitchen as close to the outside door as he could get. Jane took a stance in the parlour door with her hands on her hips. “Who are you? What do you want?” Her tone was forceful, almost angry. Although she still could see no one and nothing in the chair except a faint mistiness, it stopped rocking. She advanced a step into the room and demanded: “What’s going on here?” Her book, still lying on the side table from yesterday took on a life of its own and sailed straight at her head. She ducked as it whizzed past her right ear and bounced off the hall wall landing at Lydia’s feet. She fled to the kitchen dragging Lydia with her. A faint chuckle followed them.

“What was that?” Lydia collapsed into the rocking chair in the kitchen alcove. Charlie whined at the door and cast a look of doggie despair in her direction.

For want of anything better to do, Jane filled the kettle and set it to boil. She kept a close eye on what she could see of the parlour door. The creak of the living room rocker continued, perhaps even louder than before. For certain it was faster.

Jane cleared her throat. “I guess I really riled whoever that used to be.” She gave a weak giggle.

Charlie whined again.

“I’ll take him outdoors,” said Lydia. She rose and picked up Charlie’s leash.

“Not without me you won’t,” said Jane. She led the way outdoors into the sanity of sunshine and clear morning.

Lydia bent to clip Charlie's collar to the long lead she had tethered him to. "What are we going to do?"

"It's really not your problem, Lydia. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to go home and never come back. If you do, take Charlie with you. He's not much of a guard dog." Jane sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, at least not like that." She sighed again.

"You're right, he isn't," said Lydia. "But he's going to learn, because I'm not going to leave you here on your own. What do you think?"

"I'm not very brave either. I've never known this house to be so spooky, at least not while Grandma lived here. I don't know what's going on." Jane sat down on the grass and stared at the windows. She had left the windows upstairs open to air the bedrooms, and a fresh breeze straight off the Northumberland Strait ruffled the curtains. Jane shivered. "I can see why those curtains look like someone is standing there."

Lydia sat down on the grass beside Jane. Charlie, as big as he was, tried to sit in her lap. Lydia looked in the direction that Jane was gazing. "I see what you mean." She pushed Charlie off her lap and sat silently for a moment then said: "Let's set the cleaning aside for today and take a road trip. I'll drive. We'll take a picnic and go somewhere where Charlie can run off the leash for awhile. You'd like that wouldn't you, Charlie?"

Charlie wuffed and wagged the tip of his tail.

"We'll drive up to East Point and have our picnic and sit on the sand and puzzle things out."

"That'll take us most of the day up and back," said Jane. "Maybe things will settle themselves down by then."

"Maybe," said Lydia. "My cousin says she can see things and she says it all depends on what they want. If it's urgent enough they won't stop until they get it. They have even been known to start fires or hide things. They can definitely disrupt the household."

The picnic at East Point eased their nerves, and Charlie ran himself tired on the beach. He frolicked in and out of the water and up and down the beach until he collapsed, wet and exhausted, between Lydia and Jane and yawned. He dropped his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

"Phew, you stink, Charlie," said Jane. She leaned back on her elbows and rubbed his ears. "It's bath time for you before I let you into the house tonight." She stared off to the horizon misted by distance and sea air. "I wonder what Grandma thought she was doing, letting people stay with her? I don't think she even knew half of them."

"I dunno," said Lydia. She rolled onto her belly and began to watch an ant dragging a bit of seaweed across the sand. The sun was warm on her legs and back. "People were more hospitable then."

"Mm hm," said Jane. "More trusting too, I think." She continued to stare out to sea. "I know I wouldn't do it."

"Your grandfather was still living then, wasn't he?"

“Yeah, but he’d have been no help if anything had gone wrong.” Jane laughed. “He’d have probably met them at the gate and invited them in for a drink.”

“Was he fond of the booze, then?”

“It could be said,” replied Jane. “He liked a ceilidh, but for all that they never went without, and he was never a mean drunk.” She sat up and began to scoop sand through her fingers. The dryness of it sifted through her hands and was picked up by the slight breeze off the gulf. It dusted away down the beach. She thought of her grandfather in silence for a few minutes. “I don’t know where he got his money from. The relatives used to say he was suspected of rum running during Prohibition.” She went quiet for a moment. “I don’t know. It could have been just talk.”

“You’ve never come across old journals or anything like that have you?” asked Lydia.

Jane shook her head. “I have never been a rummager. I was taught a very strong sense of boundaries around possessions when I was a child. I wouldn’t have dared. Even now I don’t like going through Grandma’s things.” She stared off to the horizon remembering the one and only scolding Grandma had ever given her. The severity of it and the shame she felt was still with her. She mentally chased the memory out of her mind.

“Never bothered me,” said Lydia. “I thought nothing of snooping. How else was I supposed to find out? They never told us anything.”

“You sound kind of disgruntled still.”

“I hate secrecy.” Lydia rolled over and sat up. “Privacy is fine. I have no problem with that, but whispering in the corners and shutting up when anyone came within earshot is just plain wrong.”

“It’s usually just gossip anyway, isn’t it?” said Jane.

“The family was just like that when my aunt died. The cousins used to always play together, and then all of a sudden amidst all the whispering we weren’t allowed to play together anymore. It created a terrible rift and it has never been the same since, and I’m still not sure why.”

“Is that why the cousin you occasionally mention is never in the picture?”

“Mm,” said Lydia. “I guess so. We’re of the same age and we always had fun, but everything has changed now. We’re not the same people anymore. I don’t even know what to talk to her about.”

“That’s sad.” Jane stroked Charlie’s silky ears. His tawny fur had dried and he was soft and pleasant to the touch. The briny smell had dissipated somewhat too. “How is she different?”

“She’s into all kinds of spooky stuff now. Ghosts and spirits. She really believes it all. She claims she can read auras too. Whatever they are.”

Jane laughed. “You’re afraid she can read you too, huh?”

“You never know, and I don’t want to find out.”

They sat in silence for awhile until the breeze turned abruptly cooler and dark clouds started rolling in. Jane shivered. "I guess this is the end of our picnic." She rolled to her feet and began repacking the basket.

"Fun while it lasted," said Lydia. She began folding the blanket. Charlie whined and stretched front and back. She snapped the leash on him. "You're not going for another dip in the ocean. We don't let wet dogs ride with us." Charlie sat down on his haunches.

Together they hurried up the slope just as the first raindrops began to fall.

The house remained quiet for the rest of the week. Jane and Lydia avoided any cleaning in the parlour and tried to walk past the door without looking in. Together they managed to turn out closets and freshen drapery and wash bed covers upstairs. The musty old house smell dissipated except in the parlour. Jane tried not to think of the eerie events of the past week.

"You know, I have to be gone for next week," said Lydia. "I have relatives coming and I can't get out of it." She rose from her chair by the kitchen table and poured herself another cup of tea.

Jane's heart fell a little. "I wasn't thinking about that if I could help it. I know you'll be back after they've gone."

Lydia sat down and set her cup to cool slightly before trying it. "They're from Ontario and they'll need a place to stay and some entertaining. I think they're flying down, so they won't have their car. I'll have to be doing some taxiing around."

"Why don't you bring them out here?" Hope shone in Jane's eyes.

"I don't think that would work. They're not comfortable to have around. Auntie Maude can be a tyrant and Uncle George is an old fuss budget. They've always deserved each other to my way of thinking. Besides, with all the weird stuff going on here just now, you definitely don't want them around."

"When you come back here after, bring your spooky cousin – and Charlie?" Jane toyed with the handle of her cup.

Lydia smiled. She reached across the table and patted Jane's arm. "Charlie's not much help. But I'll come again next week and stay like we planned. If I can find Gertrude, I'll see what she's doing and bring her too. Will you be okay on your own?"

"I don't plan to spend a whole lot of time in the house. I need to attend to my apartment and bring some of my things out here if I'm going to live here. I haven't entirely made up my mind. I'll have to give my notice in at the housing office a month ahead so I'll have to have decided by the end of August."

"That's two months away so you have plenty of time to decide," said Lydia. "D'you think that things will settle down by then?"

Jane sighed. "I don't know. Whoever she is, she has been quiet all week, though I'm not looking forward to spending time here by myself next week." She sighed again. "I'll keep busy. Maybe that will keep things quiet."

A faint chuckle echoed from somewhere.