

The Ice Bridge

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

For the loving memories I have of and for the beauty of Mackinac Island.

Prologue

January 2008

The evening sun was setting and the Straits of Mackinac, blanketed in a rapid moving winter fog and frozen over since the first day of January, was a path of glittering cold ice—six feet thick above the frigid waters. The amethyst shadows, a snow twilight that was not quite night but no longer day, had drifted in and the whiteness of snow and frozen water wreathed in mist created an eerie landscape that seemed like no place on earth.

Mackinac Island sat to the right of the straits between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. The island's lights were flickering on as the day faded. People were closing their shops, locking the doors and going home for the night. The tiny houses lit up the snow.

Looming behind the island like a monstrous sentinel, Mackinac Bridge, a five-mile structure of metal and concrete, connected the lower and upper peninsulas of Michigan. The Canadian winds caused the bridge to sway fifteen feet in opposite directions. It was decked out like a carnival with strings of gleaming ruby, emerald and white lights.

Though the inhabitants of Michigan appreciated the bridge and its convenience, many travelers were wary because it moved so much. Some refused to drive across it. Even macho truckers sometimes gave up the wheel to a bridge attendant, a braver soul, and let him drive the rig across for them. On the other side, the truckers would reclaim their truck and go on their way, never telling anyone they'd been too frightened to do it themselves.

In the late winter when the ice of the straits froze solid, not everyone used steel bridges to get from one piece of land to another. Some used another kind of bridge—a bridge of frozen water.

That night in the dusk, a solitary figure on a snowmobile was chugging across the ice, from Mackinac Island towards the mainland of St. Ignace, and staying in close to the curve of cast-off Christmas trees that had been stabbed into the frozen surface. The ice bridge, as the islanders called it, was a narrow path stretching three-and-a-half miles across the straits that separated Mackinac Island from the St. Ignace mainland. To the locals the ice bridge meant freedom to come and go for up to two months a year without paying ferryboat or airplane fees. It meant freedom to go day or night, on no one's schedule, to the mainland to seek entertainment, visit friends, and bring back the supplies they needed. Or it meant freedom to go for a late rendezvous.

The snowmobile was building speed, zipping across the ice, sure of the course in the misty light. A quarter of the way across, the driver noticed a slushy area and swerved off the path to the right. A soft snow had begun to fall from the night skies and the lone traveler, from a distance a larger pale blur among the smaller ones, became more difficult to see.

Someone who fidgeted in the woods impatiently watched from the trees on the north side of the island with a pair of binoculars and saw everything the rider did. The man, bundled in second-hand clothes and a shabby coat, observed the snowmobile's progress with cold calculating eyes. He dropped his smoldering cigarette from a shaking hand, and stamped his feet to stay warm as his breath puffed out in pale wisps between the trees. He noted the exact moment when the snowmobile veered off the trail.

Then with a vindictive smile the man knelt down, pushed a button on a box by his feet, and eagerly observed, as far out on the path the ice cracked and gave way beneath the snowmobile's treads.

That'll teach you, he thought smugly. You've always had it so easy. Not anymore. I warned you, didn't I? But you wouldn't listen. You wouldn't give me what's mine, so now I'll just take it. There. He chuckled spitefully. *Rest in peace. You got what you deserved.*

The heavy machine sank swiftly into the frigid waters, pulling its rider and one of the evergreens into the hole with it.

There was only time for one scream to drift up from the tear in the ice, but with a ghostly echo, it haunted the night for a brief time and then, like the snowmobile and rider, it was gone. The darkening dusk was silent again. The ice that covered the water—water nearly two hundred feet deep at that spot—folded over the fissure and began to refreeze into a tomb of ice.

The shadow person in the woods laughed gleefully and picked up the box, tucked it beneath his arm and went in search of warmth and food. He was tickled that he'd accomplished what he'd set out to do. Proud that, for once in his wretched life, he'd been brave and clever enough to do what he'd had to do. *Mother, you old witch, wouldn't you be proud of me? It's a shame you're not alive to see it—a real shame.* This time his laugh was softer and full of some strange satisfaction only he understood.

The man left the woods and began the hike back across the straits. He knew it would be a long walk and he'd be frozen by the time he climbed into his junky car and headed home. He didn't care. He smiled the whole way through the snow and hummed an old song his mother used to sing to him when she wasn't too drunk or out of it. He hummed and plotted his next step and it kept him warm.

A few evenings later, the missing tree and the frozen-over hole where the straits had swallowed the snowmobile were discovered by two other islanders on their way back from St. Ignace in the middle of a snowstorm.

They reported the anomaly and the next morning at dawn island police were called in to investigate. The storm was nearly a blizzard by then, but one of the policemen was insistent that they examine the ice immediately. He believed someone might have fallen through, but if so, past experience pointed to an accident. People had gone into the water before while crossing the ice bridge and it was tragic but not unheard of. It happened and sometimes, as awful as it was, it was the cost they paid for using the bridge. Often the ones who fell in managed to get out or were yanked out; were rescued, but not always. One time fourteen years earlier a man had gone through the ice, and by the time they'd dragged him out he was dead from the frigid water. It'd been a long time ago, but accidents did happen.

That January morning the police chopped into the ice, dredged the water below but couldn't locate a body or a snowmobile. They knew they might not find either until the spring thaws, if they ever found anything. They discovered a mitten, though, embedded in the ice, and someone recognized it as belonging to one of the full-time residents of the island—a woman. They noticed the slushy spot nearby that had already refrozen and speculated as to what might have happened. In the end, the chief of police had to write it off as an accident because, as he put it, who'd want to harm the victim? No one any of them could think of.

"The ice bridge has only been in use a few days and the victim's only been missing, that we know of, for about the same time," the chief spoke aside to his lieutenant. "It's easy to see how there might have been a weak spot in the ice this early. She went off the path to avoid what she thought was an unsafe stretch and, instead, hit a real bad patch. It broke beneath her and sucked her in.

"Poor thing. At least she died quickly. Drowning in freezing water isn't the worst way to go, Lieutenant. I don't need to tell you that."

"I know," the other officer replied. "You lose consciousness and fall asleep about the time you run out of air."

"It's pretty quick." The chief snapped his chubby fingers in the air. "Terrible thing. But

nothing we can do for her now except keep looking for the snowmobile, her body, and fill out the forms. We'll speak to people and investigate further, but I'd wager a week's pay it was accidental."

His lieutenant didn't think so. He had nagging questions and was determined to get them answered. There were things at the scene that hadn't looked right to him. He'd never convince his superior of that. Chief Bill Matthews was a pragmatic kind of guy. If it looked like an accident, then it was—simple as that.

Yet at his lieutenant's insistence the chief let the other officers circle the site in yellow crime tape, so people would avoid it, and afterwards, the ice bridge was reopened. Everyone who used it swerved to the left and went nowhere near the scene of the accident. Many made the sign of the cross over their chests as they passed the spot where the woman might have disappeared, or they said a swift prayer so the ghost of the dead woman wouldn't appear to them.

People on the island were superstitious that way.

Chapter One

October 23, 2007...two-and-a-half months earlier

It'd been a long time since Charlotte had been to Mackinac Island. Nearly fifteen years if she wanted to count them.

Her Aunt Elizabeth, whom everyone called Bess, lived there and owned a modest house on Lake Shore Road, down past the Mission Point Resort. It contrasted sharply with the rich people's huge cottages that were sprawled across the island. Charlotte used to spend summers with her aunt when she was younger. They'd been happier times she needed to revisit.

Now, as she stood on the top level of the Star Line's ferryboat and shivered in her jacket, her eyes fell on the island as it came towards her across the choppy water of the Straits of Mackinac. She remembered how much she'd once loved the place, how she'd ride her blue one-speed bicycle with the dented basket all over the island, and how she'd chase the seagulls or stare at the boats droning in and out of the harbor for hours.

She remembered how she'd adored the horse-drawn carriages, equine taxis, that transported people along the miniature asphalt roadways to Fort Mackinac or up West Bluff Road towards the Grand Hotel for lunch or high tea.

She remembered how the beauty of Lake Huron's waters contrasted against the milky sky with thick swirling clouds and how the Round Island Lighthouse and the Round Passage Light beamed their lights off shore. Memories brought back the awesome magnificence of the Mackinac Bridge as it spanned the waters between St. Ignace and Mackinac City. At night, it reminded her of Christmas with its long expanse covered in multicolored twinkling lights.

Most importantly, she remembered how she'd loved the island because it was where she first realized she wanted to be an artist or a writer. But how could she not have become an artist of some sort—on an island with Mackinac's natural beauty of rocks, shore and water, and the picturesque boats and woods full of wildlife around her? Then there'd been the vivid skies above the island and the straits where the waters were beautiful with swirling shades of green and blue. It made her smile just to look at it again.

Oh, Mackinac, I'm so happy to be back...why did I stay away so long?

The island was a little piece of land eight miles in circumference that didn't allow motorized vehicles, except snowmobiles in the winter. They'd outlawed cars in 1901 saying the island was too small to accommodate them and that they made too much noise and fouled up the air. Mackinac was a throwback to a simpler world of Victorian cottages, horses and interlacing bicycle trails-1,800 wooded acres dotted with historic national landmarks and most of it under federal protection. It was a place where police officers patrolled on ten-speeds and people walked through a quaint village filled with fudge shops, souvenirs and artsy crafts. It was the home of the Grand Hotel, a sprawling structure famous long before the movie *Somewhere in Time*, starring Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour (featuring Mackinac and the hotel) came out.

Her Aunt Bess had worked at the Grand for over thirty years, waiting on tourists who came to the Grand Buffet. Though she was tired of the job, she loved the hotel. She said it was like being in another world filled with antique opulence and old ghosts.

Her aunt loved the island, too, and would never leave it as her sister, Charlotte's mother, had done so many years before. Charlotte's mother had been looking for a different, better life on some mainland far away. She'd found it and never returned.

But Charlotte, her eyes puffy and red from crying, had returned, older and wiser and with a damaged heart. She should have been on her honeymoon out in the Caribbean somewhere sipping strawberry daiquiris and spending passionate nights with her new husband, Lucas

Sanders. But she wasn't.

Instead, she was running away from a world in which her fiancé had waited until a day before their expensive wedding to send her an e-mail—one of those pesky ones that made you accept them right away so the sender knew you'd received it—saying he wasn't going to marry her. He was already married and on the dream honeymoon that should have been hers...with her now ex-best friend Rachel.

Shock wasn't a strong enough word to describe what she'd felt when she'd read that e-mail. After all, she'd been engaged to Lucas for five years. And to break up with her in an e-mail? The least he could have done was telephone her and tell her in his own voice. Well, it was over.

She fought back tears as her thoughts touched on her doomed wedding. Her eyes hurt and her hands clenched on the rail until her knuckles were white. She shook her head, mumbling in a low voice. He'd taken a chunk of her life, a lot for a man to steal from a young woman. *Oh, she hated him. Hanging would be too good for him. Electrocutation would be too good. She wished she could....*

"Miss, are you all right?"

She turned her head and met the eyes of a tall man standing behind her on the boat. The angry tears in her eyes kept her from seeing him clearly. Young, she registered, and though not excitingly handsome, his face was kind.

She glanced around. She'd been so preoccupied with her sorrow and dreams of revenge that she'd been leaning over the railing. Her cheeks were wet with tears she didn't recall shedding. He probably thought she was going to jump or something.

No man was worth that. Not even Lucas.

But she would have liked to throw her ex-fiancé over the railing into the chilly waters below, him and Rachel. She almost smiled at the thought of the two thrashing around in Lake Huron like abandoned baby dodos, the ferryboat chugging away as she waved goodbye to both of them.

She'd teach them to hurt other people—to hurt her. "I'm fine," she sighed, composing herself, as she turned to face the stranger. No doubt she'd had that murderous look on her face before, the one her mother warned her would scare off Santa Claus. "I just had some unpleasant thoughts on my mind, that's all."

She wiped her eyes and looked at the man again. He was around her age, somewhere past thirty, had brown hair that the lake spray had ruffled into unruliness and brilliant sky blue eyes that smiled when his lips did, as they were doing now. He wasn't as handsome as Lucas, but attractive in a healthy puppyish kind of way. He looked sure of himself and casual in his lemon-yellow shirt and faded jeans.

Lucas, on the other hand, had been short, dark-haired and lean with cold gray eyes. Eyes that only smiled when he knew he had something other people wanted or when he was thinking about money. She wondered if those shark eyes were smiling now and the thought that they probably were made her sad.

Ooh, what did any of it matter now? Lucas had betrayed her. Lucas was gone and she had to move on. *Move on.* That was the healthy thing to do.

It'd be a long time before she trusted a man again.

"Miss?" The stranger was staring at her, his hands lifted as if he was ready to catch her should she try to jump.

"I'm okay, really," she replied softly. "Don't worry about me." She felt the tears coming on again and swung away from him.

The ferry was pulling into the dock and the boat was bucking beneath her feet. She

checked her wristwatch. Eighteen minutes. That's how long the ferry ride had taken.

Now she had to face a new life and she was ready because she'd given the old one away. She'd sold everything she owned back in Chicago, quit her job, and had agreed to spend the next six months with her aunt, who was lonely and needed her.

At least someone needed her.

"Are you sure you're okay?" The man was still behind her. She'd almost forgotten him. His hand gently touched her arm, but she shook it off.

"Please, just leave me alone," she whispered, trying not to cry. She must look awful, and she felt worse. Was there a sign on her back saying: *Loser. Fiancé just dumped. Needs help. Sign up here?*

"Sorry if I bothered you. It's only that, well, you remind me of someone and at first I thought I knew you. You looked like you needed someone to talk to, that's all." His voice was so sympathetic she nearly spun around and apologized for her bad manners. Not a good idea.

She didn't want him to see the misery in her eyes and didn't want to talk to anyone at that moment, especially a man. Not when another man was the cause of her unhappiness.

A little time was what she needed. That's all.

Without another word, she brushed past him and pushed through the crowd off the boat like the rest of the lemmings. She was anxious to get where she was going and away from the stranger's unwanted attentions.

Gathering her bags from the cart, she collected the blue one-speed Murray bike she'd brought along to ride on the island. After years forgotten in her mother's garage, she'd been surprised to find its wheels still went round and round. She'd rescued it and put a larger basket on the front, knowing she'd need it to carry things, and because the old basket had rusted off. Bikes were gold on the island. A person either walked, rode a bike or a horse. She favored the bike because it ate less, didn't pee in the street and never had to see a vet. And she loved feeling the wind in her hair and on her face.

A messy pile of what was left of her previous life, her bike, the clothes in her suitcases and bags, surrounded her. She had no idea how she was going to carry everything. She'd left her car on St. Ignace, as some of the islanders did, in a guarded parking lot. She'd use it for shopping and errands when she returned to the mainland every week or so.

Standing there trying to decide how she was going to get the luggage and the bike to her aunt's house she spotted her kind stranger again. He had an overnight bag slung across his shoulders and was headed straight for her.

Oh, no.

"Looks like you need some help, Miss. What hotel or bed and breakfast are you staying at?" He acted as if she hadn't brushed him off a few minutes ago. He was smiling and helpful and it gave her another twinge of guilt because she was going to have to turn him down again.

"I don't need help, especially from someone I don't know." Charlotte shoved her long chestnut hair behind her ears and stuck her chin up like a petulant child.

He put out a large hand for her to shake. "Well, I'll introduce myself and then we'll know each other. I'm Lieutenant Maclean Berman of the Mackinac Police Force. You can call me Mac."

Oh, darn, he was being so nice. How could she stay mad at half the population when she couldn't usually stay mad at even one person for more than a minute? She couldn't.

"You're a cop?" She blurted out, her hand leaving his. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why you're so nosy. Wanting to know about me and wanting to help and all." She tried

not to smile, but one slipped out anyway. So he was a man, but she didn't have to be rude. "My name's Charlotte Graham. And no, I'm not going to a hotel or a bed and breakfast; my aunt, Elizabeth Conners, lives down Lake Shore Road. I'll make it there fine by myself."

She wanted him to go away.

"That's at least two miles." The cop was grinning. "Now I know why you looked familiar to me. I know Elizabeth Conners. She works at the Grand Hotel. About fifty, a tiny woman with blue eyes and hair the same shade as yours. Independent and spunky, like you? You two could be sisters you look so much alike."

She disregarded the independent and spunky remark. He was trying to make friends and she wasn't biting. "Sisters? I'm nowhere near fifty." She was trying to load as many bags from her shoulders and into her bike's basket as she could cram in. Hopeless. She still had three sitting on the dock. It'd been easier getting them on the ferry from her car when she'd had a porter to help her unload them.

"Well, you're definitely the much younger sister." Without asking, Mac easily grabbed the three bags up from the ground and took one off her shoulders. He seemed to handle the burden with no problem.

"Well, I'm going to help you whether you like it or not, Miss Spunky Independence. Elizabeth would never forgive me if I didn't. In a way, related to an islander as you are, you're an honorary islander yourself. We don't treat other islanders like strangers. We help each other out because we're a close-knit bunch. You'll see."

Realizing she had no choice Charlotte accepted his help and they aimed themselves towards the street. "Lieutenant Berman, are you a year-round resident here?"

"Yep. I'm one of the crazy ones. Winter, too. I work all year long for the police department and live with a friend in an apartment above the Mustang Lounge."

A friend? It was most likely a woman because he was too good-looking and eligible to be alone.

"You know where that's at?"

"In town," she answered. "I used to spend summers here as a kid. The Mustang's one of the places that stays open all year round for the locals, right? I know not many people remain on the island through the winter because my aunt swears it turns into Alaska here after November."

"That it does. Only about five hundred islanders actually stay through the winter months, not just because of the cold but because it's too expensive to get supplies to the island when the waters freeze and the ferries stop running. Prices in the winter, as if they aren't high enough, skyrocket."

"So my aunt tells me." It was practically November and she'd never been on the island this late in the season. She'd never spent a winter on Mackinac, merely summers. If she stayed this year, it would be her first one.

"Yeah, it gets cold enough to freeze a dinosaur around here. It feels like the winds are made of ice at times. But I like the island in the snow and through the holidays with the decorations strung from light post to light post. Like the huge Christmas tree in the center of town. I enjoy riding around on a snowmobile and skimming across the ice bridge to the mainland, bundled up in two coats and three pairs of gloves. I like not having much to do. You know, winter's the only time we get the island back to ourselves."

"After the boatloads of tourists leave, hey?"

"Yeah, after the *fudgies* leave." He smiled at her as she sidestepped a pile of horse manure in the middle of the road.

A horse and carriage rattled by, bikes whizzed around them and it was as if she'd never

left. She was twelve years old again running wild around a place that'd been magic to her. Her tension was already easing away.

She looked up and took in the stately Victorian homes that lined Lake Shore Road with their skillfully painted exteriors and their elaborate flower gardens that were now beginning to wilt. She'd always dreamed of owning and living in one. Now? Fat chance. Only princesses and millionaires could afford one of them. Oh, well. Perhaps someday.

She lowered her head and watched where she put her feet. A puddle of what appeared to be water but wasn't, cascaded down the gutters behind a horse taxi with a covered roof and four speckled white Clydesdale horses pulling it. The beasts whinnied and clomped their hairy hooves, looking around as if they were bored. It would take her a while to get used to the pungent horse odors again, she mused, but, eventually, she would, as she had when she was a kid.

"*Fudgies*," she said, as she pushed her bike, "they still call the tourists that?"

"Still do. As long as they come, buy and eat so much fudge, I guess we'll always call them that. They're our bread and butter, though, so we can't complain. The islanders wouldn't have jobs; I wouldn't have a job, if not for the tourists. Their money pays the bills."

Charlotte nodded, knowing he was right.

They passed by the village shops: Professor Harry's Old Time Photos, Dockside Inn, Island Bicycle Livery and further up the road, Ryba's Fudge Shop and the Mercantile. They continued walking past Marquette Park, where the horse and buggies for rent were lined up waiting for customers, and past Mission Point Resort with its lavish gardens and white wooden chairs snuggled up to the water's edge. The Mission Point had a whole complex of shops that included one of the best bakeries on the island. Charlotte recalled the Cheese Danish were heavenly.

Charlotte wished she were riding her bike instead of pushing it. Yet it was a lovely fall day, cool and sunny with a strong breeze and it was nice to be leisurely strolling, kind of a nostalgic journey, through the quaint town she'd left behind so many years before.

Not much had changed. Some of the houses were fixed up and the crowds in town, though it was the last week of the summer season, seemed larger. The tourist business apparently was thriving. All in all, the island itself felt smaller but everything else seemed the same.

For a while she was a child again, hopeful and full of awe for the future. Free. As if anything were possible. It'd been a long time since she'd felt that way and it felt good.

She caught Mac watching her and there was a friendly interest in his eyes. She hoped he wasn't getting any romantic ideas. Just the thought of it, made her fall silent.

There wasn't any more conversation between them before they arrived at her aunt's house. If he started to say something, she'd walk ahead faster, pretending she hadn't heard. She knew she was being unfair, but she couldn't help herself. Underneath it all, she was unexplainably drawn to him and it was unnerving, so behaving distantly was better than breaking down and dumping her sorrows on the man. That'd scare him off quick enough all right.

He seemed to accept she wasn't in a talkative mood and didn't push it. When they got to her aunt's door, though, he did ask, "If I'm not being too bold, what were you mad about on the ferry anyway?" The smile he gave encouraged her to confide in him. He would have made a good priest.

He'd been kind to her and he was a friend of her aunt's. Since she wanted the subject closed once and for all, she told him in as few words and as dispassionately as she could about her aborted wedding and absconded bridegroom and her traitorous best friend. She made it brief and when she was done, she could see the usual pity welling up in his face and

was instantly sorry she'd said anything at all. That'd teach her.

"Charlotte, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to pry. How could anyone do such an awful thing to you? All I can say is that he wasn't much of a man or a human being to end it that way. You deserve better than that. I want to apologize for all my gender." There was compassion in his words. "No wonder you're upset."

"Yeah, well, I imagine he had his reasons for what he did and the way he did it." She waved her hand in the air in an I-don't-care-gesture, her face emotionless. "The way I look at it, at least he didn't marry me first and then run off with my friend. So, looking at it that way, he did me a favor."

Lt. Berman studied her for a moment with perceptive eyes. She had the feeling she wasn't fooling him one bit, and he said, "Well, things will get better for you here with your aunt on the island. Mackinac heals everything, even heartache, you'll see. I'll bet you in a few weeks you won't even remember that guy's name. Take care, now."

She didn't know how to respond. He actually believed that. The island would heal her.

Without saying another word, she turned and knocked on her aunt's door. She'd had enough of people's sympathy. He was right about one thing, she did want to forget Lucas and go on with her life.

For now she wanted to be left alone.

"Thanks for helping me, Lieutenant Berman," she murmured before the door flew open and Aunt Bess, looking older and wearier than she'd last seen her, welcomed her inside.

When Charlotte stole a look over her shoulder, her bags were sitting on the steps behind her and the friendly cop was gone. Walking down the street towards town, he swung around and waved to her and her aunt, leaving them alone to get reacquainted. Not for the first time since she'd met him, she thought he was considerate as well as kind. Or perhaps he was just being a good public servant.

She wiggled her fingers back at him.

"Well, child, it's good to see ya," her Aunt Bess declared, hugging her so hard she thought ribs were going to crack. Bess claimed a couple of suitcases and pulled her niece into the house. "Leave your bike out on the porch, no one will take it."

Ah Mackinac, innocent island where everyone trusted everyone else.

Once inside, Charlotte dropped her luggage and purse. "It's good to see you, too, Auntie. You're looking—"

"Tired and older, I know," her aunt finished for her. "I've turned into that middle-aged frumpy fat woman I swore I'd never be.

"But," she added quickly, "I'm going to begin exercising again. I'm going on a diet. Now that you're here, I'll get into shape in no time. You'll see. You love to walk and I'll walk with you. That'll do it."

Charlotte was going to protest her aunt's self-description but the other woman didn't give her a chance. Truth was, Bess did look haggard. Her blue eyes, so like Charlotte's except for the hint of gray, were lackluster, and her aunt's brunette hair was gray-streaked. Her face was lined, especially around the mouth as if she'd been frowning too much. She'd put on more than a couple of pounds.

Charlotte hadn't seen her aunt in years and in those first moments realized that it'd been longer than she'd thought. It was amazing how fast people aged when a person didn't see them for a long time. It didn't help that her aunt was wearing a frayed and baggy sweatpants outfit. Something like an old woman would wear. Her aunt had once taken such good care of herself, had dressed in the latest fashions and had been so pretty. What had happened?

Bess had been married young at age sixteen to her beloved Charlie. After fourteen years

she'd lost him and had now been a widow for the last two decades. Charlie's dying had been hard on her, but she'd overcome it. She'd overcome everything in her life that had been put in her path. Or she used to. Charlotte had always thought of her aunt as a strong woman.

Now Charlotte's mother, Isabel, Bess's younger sister, was a different story. Though the two sisters were close in age, Charlotte had to admit her mother looked fifteen years younger. Her mother dyed her hair to cover the gray, worked out at a gym four days a week and had a husband of twenty-five years who adored, babied and cherished her. Her mother dressed in chic clothes and bright colors, spent money on herself and would never be caught in faded torn sweatpants.

Apparently, Aunt Bess had no one to pretty herself up for.

"But you, Charlotte, you're looking good, under the circumstances. You remind me of your mother at your age. Prettier. Don't ever tell her I said that, though. Is she still as vain as she always was?"

Charlotte laughed at that. Her mother was forever saying that Aunt Bess was the vain one. If her mother could see her older sibling now she wouldn't say that, but the two sisters didn't see each other very often. They lived in different worlds. Once they'd been close, when both had been young and had lived on the island, but that had been before Isabel had moved so far away. Now they exchanged birthday cards and Christmas presents and little else.

"Just as bad, perhaps worse. Mother can't stand that she's on the downhill slide to fifty and tells everyone she's barely forty."

Aunt Bess chuckled. "Ha, I guess I'll just keep on getting older while she gets younger. Eventually I'll die of old age and she'll be a baby again." Another good-natured chuckle left her lips.

"Come on let's get you settled into your room, Charlotte. I'm giving you the upstairs loft for as long as you're here. You always liked it for the privacy and the view so I fixed it up as cute as I could in appreciation for you coming to stay with me."

Her aunt was right. The loft had the best overlook of the Lake. Sunrises were breathtaking and when the windows were open, there was usually a cool breeze coming in off the water that found its way into the room.

Bess led her niece through the hallway to the steps and up to the room Charlotte remembered so well. Once the walls had been a sick yellow but now they had a fresh coat of mauve paint. Crisp white curtains with lilacs sprinkled across them hung at the windows with a matching quilt on the full-sized bed positioned beneath the window. It didn't look like the same room. It was lovely.

Bess dropped the bags on the bed. "I see you already met one of our most desirable bachelors."

Relieving herself of what she'd been carrying, Charlotte looked at her aunt, confused, and then got it. "Oh, you mean Lieutenant Berman? He was only helping me get my stuff here. I had more than I could handle and he was being nice. I met him coming over on the ferry."

"Lucky you. He's a sweet guy and a real catch. Did he know you were my niece?"

"Not at first. Then after we introduced ourselves, I mentioned who I was going to meet and he said I looked like you."

"So he offered to help you before he knew who you were?"

Why all the questions? "So?"

"So, he doesn't normally push himself at a woman. Any woman. Not since his girlfriend died a few year ago. He's basically shy."

"His girlfriend died?" Charlotte had the feeling she didn't want to know more but that she was going to hear it anyway.

“It’s a sad story...even sadder than yours, Charlotte. Mac Berman was born and raised on the island and had a childhood sweetheart here. Melissa Wittiker. She taught second grade at the island grade school. Mac and Melissa had been saving and planning for their wedding for years, it was going to be a big affair at the Grand Hotel. But two weeks before the wedding Melissa was out sailing with some friends and fell overboard.

“She drowned or so they thought. They never found her body. Mac went into a long depression. He almost gave up his job on the police force and left the island, but in the end, he didn’t. Good for us. He’s an excellent cop and a better human being.

“Rumor was, he almost attempted suicide at one point. He loved Melissa so much. He’s never been the same and he’s never dated since. I know him pretty well and I can say he’s the best the male world has to offer. He’s caring, smart and honest. If I were twenty-five years younger, I’d go after him myself. I wonder why he didn’t say hi to me and come in? We talk all the time in town or up at the Grand if he comes in for something. We go way back.”

“I have no idea.” But she did. Inside she was cringing, recalling the way she’d treated him and the way she’d whined about her own tragedy. Being left at the altar was nothing compared to what he’d gone through. She hadn’t loved Lucas near enough to want to kill herself.

Oh, well, what was done, was done. She’d probably see little of Lieutenant Mac Berman unless someone perpetrated a crime against her aunt or her. On Mackinac Island, there wasn’t much chance of that. Crime on the island, according to her aunt, was as rare as unicorns.

“You look tired, sweetie.” Aunt Bess’s eyes were on her. “You should rest for a bit. I’ll rouse you for supper and you can give me the whole sordid story about what that creep Lucas did to you. I never liked that man. From what you’ve told me he only cared about fattening his financial portfolio and what other people thought of him. If he had ever loved you he wouldn’t have run off with your best friend. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.” She shook her head. “There’s no excuse for what he did. None whatsoever.”

Charlotte smiled weakly at her aunt. “A nap might be just the thing, Aunt Bess. The last couple of days I haven’t slept much. Been too busy.” Been too upset. Leaving her job, putting stuff in storage and packing. Running away. “Perhaps now, here, I can.”

Outside the window the water was a flat endless crystal of turquoise, and the wispy clouds were gray and cherry tinged. The chilly air rushing in made her peacefully drowsy. How many nights as a girl had she lain in this bed, head in the window, gazing out at the lake and sky, or sleeping in the soothing breezes? More than she could count. It’d always calmed her.

Suddenly she was so exhausted she could barely stand. There was time enough later to explore the island. Time enough to get out into the world and crash back into a life without Lucas, Rachel or her job. Right now sleep was what she needed. She’d sleep away the old life before she began her new one.

“Then you take a nice rest, sweetie,” her aunt said, “and I’ll wake you for supper. I’m making homemade stew and biscuits.”

“Sounds delicious.” Charlotte yawned as her aunt closed the door and left her alone with her thoughts and her gloom. Nevertheless, Charlotte found herself happy to be there with her aunt and free of the sadness that her Chicago life had become.

She was never going to return to Chicago. She was never going back to the corporate world of crowded skyscrapers and the breakneck pace of making big money. She didn’t need money anyway. Not her. Not much. She could live on air. Ha. Whom was she fooling? She was broke.

Perhaps she’d stay on the island in this house with her mother’s sister the rest of her life. She’d never get married, simply work in one of the tourist’s shops selling fudge to the *fudgies*

and riding her bike around the island—hiding.

She could be happy, couldn't she?

After she unpacked, she stretched out on the bed and drowsily watched the boats trolling the lake. She watched the seagulls flying over the shoreline. Eventually their swooping and soft crying lulled her to sleep and she rested better than she had in weeks. A deep comforting sleep that helped to wipe away the past and nudge her into the future. She had no nightmares of Lucas rejecting her or of Rachel laughing at her because she'd run off with her almost husband. No nightmares of slaving away in a cardboard cubicle with deadlines she could never seem to meet. Or of crowded narrow streets full of angry cars, towering metal buildings that blocked out the sun and hot summer pavements. She had no dreams of her old life. There was only welcoming blackness because she was finally home.

Charlotte awoke to the aromas of meat and freshly baked biscuits. By the absence of light in the room, she guessed it was around seven or eight. It was so chilly she shivered. Late October on Mackinac was already a lot colder than Chicago.

Outside the sky would remain illuminated by the sun's reflection until after eight-thirty even this late in the year. She checked the clock on the nightstand. It was eleven minutes after seven. She'd slept six hours and felt better for it yet there was still over an hour remaining before darkness fell.

Enjoying the outside view, she breathed in the sweet air, then got up and went downstairs to the kitchen. She'd put on a heavy sweater and jeans. It would get downright cold on the island after dark. After supper, either they'd take a long walk along Lake Shore Road into town or they'd sit on the porch that ran the length of the front of the house. Catch up on each other's lives. So she'd be dressed warm and ready. Her mother said she was a freezy-bug, but she just liked to be warm.

"You look much better now that you've had some sleep, kiddo. It agreed with you." Aunt Bess put out a second plate of warm stew on the table and sat down across from her. There was a basket of fluffy biscuits in the middle and a crystal dish full of butter.

"I've been feeling better ever since I got here." Charlotte gestured at the scenery showing through the windows. "It already seems as if Chicago was another life. That it was only a dream that ended badly."

"Oh, that other world existed, all right. But for a while you can forget about it and take a vacation. Have some fun. Be good to yourself. The world will always be out there waiting for you when you're ready to go back.

"Now," her aunt let out her breath, as she took a bite of stew, "tell me exactly what happened with you and Lucas. I mean if you want to. I won't force you into talking about it before you're ready."

"You're not. I'll tell you everything and then we won't speak of it or him again. Ever. You agree?"

Her aunt nodded her head. "If that's the way you want it."

"That's the way I want it."

Charlotte told her everything and Bess listened. When she was done, her aunt said, "You're better off, believe me. I always knew he wasn't the man for you. Things happen for a reason and I'm sure you weren't meant to marry Lucas. Your true love is out there waiting to be found. Now you can start looking for him."

"Not for a while. I need to concentrate on myself right now. I have no idea what I want anymore."

"That's okay, too. You'll figure it out. You're a smart girl."

Charlotte finally smiled. "I want to thank you for inviting me, Aunt Bess." She didn't say a thing about staying there forever. It was too soon for that and she hadn't decided yet. For now, Bess only believed she was there for a rest and a change of scenery. She'd leave it at that.

"Ah, it's purely selfish on my part." Her aunt patted Charlotte's hand. "I've missed you." She hesitated and finished, "Truth is, I've been lonely and your being here is an answer to a prayer."

"For me, too." Charlotte had been looking around as they ate. The kitchen hadn't changed much since she'd visited last. It was cramped but cheery; had wooden floors that had been scrubbed and polished so often they were worn down to the bare wood. The room's windows were old so they stuck halfway up or halfway down when it was warm outside and dropped like guillotines when it was cold. In the summertime, her aunt propped them up with wooden sticks.

Over her head, there was an ornate but dusty ceiling fan. On her right along the wall were oak cabinets that had been there since her childhood and were filled with familiar plates and mementoes. Her aunt was a collector. Among the curios were sparkly rocks, wind-smoothed pebbles, delicate feathers she'd found on the beach, and tiny figurines in glass, shell or quartz she'd found at yard sales or on end-of-the-season clearance at the shops in town.

On the walls there were original paintings of Mackinac by local artists bought for pennies before the artists had become famous...of seagulls, lake scenes and horses pulling carriages in front of the Iroquois Hotel on the waterfront.

The kitchen walls were covered in lilac-themed wallpaper and the curtains were lace panels. Bunches of dried lilacs, the official Mackinac flower, were everywhere. They were big business on the island and in June, the Lilac Festival brought people from all over the world. Charlotte never saw or smelled lilacs that she wasn't reminded of Mackinac.

After they finished supper, her aunt suggested a walk.

Charlotte patted her tummy. "Sure. I need the exercise after that meal you made me." She was surprised, but relieved, that her appetite had returned. Though she could afford to lose a couple pounds, starving herself, as she'd been doing, wasn't the way she wanted to lose them. "Can I take along a couple of these biscuits?"

"For the seagulls, huh?"

"Yeah. It's been a long time since I've fed a seagull."

Bess sent her a sideways grin. "You haven't changed much, have you?"

"Not really." Charlotte's expression was wistful as they went out the door and headed towards the village. They'd taken their jackets along. After dark it would really get cold.

They strolled through town, talking about their lives as Charlotte peeked into the closing shop windows and marveled at how little the town had changed since she'd been there last.

Some of the shops she remembered were no longer there but others, full of expensive or tacky souvenirs, homemade crafts, candies and pastries, had taken their place. Restaurants. Bars. An old-fashioned grocery mercantile. Entertainment establishments geared towards the tourists.

"In a week, after Halloween, most of these stores will close." Bess stopped in front of Ryba's Fudge Shop. "The season will end and the summer tourists will be gone until next spring. Hallelujah. My tired feet are applauding. And we'll get some peace and quiet."

"And freezing temperatures and a ton of snow."

"You got it. So enjoy the crowds, shops and fair weather now because in a few weeks they'll be gone."

The women stood on the ferry dock as Charlotte had so many times as a child. The

shadows of the coming dusk hovered, and Charlotte tossed out pieces of biscuits. Hanging in the air before her eyes, the birds fearlessly fought for the crumbs she offered. They screeched and called to their other bird friends to come and join them as they snatched the snippets out of her fingers.

Some islanders didn't like the seagulls. They considered them a noisy, messy nuisance. She loved them. To her, they were graceful and lovely as they flew about her head like huge feathery butterflies. Some were bashful, some aggressive, and some hung back, eyeing her with suspicion; while others nearly knocked her over to get at the food.

She and her aunt resumed their meandering.

It was dark by the time they'd turned around by the tree where Christopher Reeve's character had first met Jean Seymour's in *Somewhere in Time*.

They'd just passed the Haunted Theatre when they ran into Lt. Berman. He was perched on a crimson ten-speed Schwinn and was dressed in his police officer's gray-blue uniform, dark pants and jacket. He rode past them and doubled back.

"Darn, he's seen us," Charlotte muttered under her breath.

Bess stopped and spoke to him first. "Hi Mac. On patrol tonight?"

"Uniform gave me away, huh?"

"Yep."

"Night shift." The police officer tipped his cap at Charlotte. She nodded, and glanced away embarrassed to meet his eyes, as she reflected on the things she'd told him earlier and what she now knew about him.

"I see you're reacquainting yourself with our little village." He was talking to her.

"I am." She met his gaze. The dark had fallen as if someone had dropped a night curtain over everything. In the glow of the quaint Victorian streetlights, Lt. Berman's face was softened and shadowed. She thought he was smiling at her. "It's been awhile."

"How long?"

She told him.

"That's a long time." Mac slid off the bike, his hands on the handlebars. "How come you haven't been back in so long?"

"Been busy." She couldn't look him in the face.

"I didn't say anything when I met you this morning, didn't get a chance. But I knew more about you than I was letting on since your aunt brags on you a lot. She talks about how well you are doing as an artist in the big city. She's so proud of you."

His kind words touched her and she smiled at him for the first time in the lamplight. "I want to apologize, Lt. Berman, for my rudeness to you earlier today. This hasn't been the best of weeks for me. Can you forgive me?"

"Apology accepted. I knew you weren't angry with me this morning. I know what being left behind feels like. I didn't hold it against you. Oh, and call me Mac, remember, everyone else does."

She put out her hand for him to shake and he took it. "Well then, let's start over, Mac. Hi, I'm Charlotte Graham. Call me Charlotte. I'm here to visit my aunt for a bit, enjoy the peacefulness of the island and—" she didn't know why she said it but she did and her words surprised her "—maybe do what I've wanted to do for years...try to write a book."

"A writer, too? Your aunt never told me you write as well as being an artist." Mac exchanged a look with Bess who shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't. It's a daydream of mine, that's all. Computer art was my job in the city but writing is my secret passion. One I've thought of doing for years, but never had the time. With the tranquility of the island and the isolation of my aunt's loft, I thought I'd give it a go.

The worst I can do is fail.”

Her aunt had moved on ahead, pretending to be interested in what was in the shops’ windows, but Charlotte knew what she was up to. Leaving her alone with Mac. Playing matchmaker. She shouldn’t have bothered.

The shops were closing their doors and the people in the streets had thinned out. The village was usually a ghost town by ten o’clock except for the taverns and restaurants. The last ferries of the day had left for St. Ignace or Mackinaw City and the overnight tourists were heading to their B&Bs or their fancy hotels for the night.

Only a few stragglers remained, mostly shop workers, who came from around the globe to work there. They were going home on their bikes through the dark wooded streets to houses and apartments in the center of the island. Tiny bats flew around them searching for night bugs or for places to roost beneath the shop rafters. Some of the human stragglers were heading for Patrick Sinclair’s Irish Pub, Horns or the Dockside Inn to party and listen to the Irish, pop or blues bands. The locals would patronize the Mustang Lounge or The Pink Pony.

Mac’s eyes were roving the roads and storefronts as they chatted, alert for trouble, or as much trouble as a nearly deserted small tourist town could dish out. “What kind of book do you want to write?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m still thinking about it. Fiction. I’ve always thought I might write what I like to read.”

“And that is?”

“Anything mysterious or spooky.”

She was talking too much, revealing too much about herself that she’d wanted to keep to herself. Her gaze took in Mac’s uniform with the holster and gun. Remembering from her younger days that the island was a peaceful place, she changed the subject. “Does the island have much crime?”

“Sure, can you imagine a mugger jumping on his horse or bike to escape after he’s accosted some old lady tourist? He wouldn’t get far. The island’s small and there’s no way off except by boats or airplanes.”

“So you’re saying there isn’t much crime?”

“Oh, there’s crime, just not the real serious kind. Sometimes tourists come up with missing items, not much of that, though, for the thousands of *fudgies* who stream through here every day. There are domestic squabbles, especially in the winter, when people are trapped in their houses together for long periods. Or the summer kids get into mischief, get too drunk or rowdy after working hours. We give tickets to drunk drivers here, too, you know, even if they are on a bicycle. The biggest problem we have is bike borrowing.” He chuckled, but she knew what he meant. “And really lately there hasn’t even been much of that. The island is a fairly tranquil place.

“Except,” and here he paused for effect, “we’re always taking reports of weird occurrences and ghostly sightings.”

She thought he was mocking her after what she’d told him about the kind of book she wanted to write, but he wasn’t smiling.

“Ghostly sightings...you’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not. You wouldn’t believe it but we have a lot of strange happenings, particularly in the winter when the island’s practically empty. It’s not spoken of much because it’d scare the tourists something awful to know things sometimes simply dematerialize on the island or someone’s seen a civil war apparition at twilight up by the fort. Let me tell you, people have seen them.”

The fort was Fort Mackinac that sat strategically high above them at one hundred and fifty

feet on top of a hill in the middle of the island. The fort was used to guard the straits during the War of 1812 and later in the Civil War. Live soldiers had long ago abandoned it and since the 1900s it'd become a rustic historical site, a museum and a huge tourist draw.

"Ghostly sightings, huh?" she repeated softly. She'd had an unnatural interest in supernatural happenings her entire life. Call it morbid fascination or love of things that couldn't be explained but whatever it was, she loved a good ghost story.

She believed in ghosts. Sort of.

When she'd been twelve years old she'd seen something strange on the island one summer in Ste. Anne's Church on Huron Street. She'd been riding her bicycle and appreciating the sunset. It'd been the most unusual shade of orange streaked with indigo and half the skies had been this odd overlapping cloud pattern. The design was so symmetrical it had looked unreal, but breathtaking. It had been around dusk and the old church had been empty.

She'd stopped and wandered into the building that had given her eerie vibes whenever she'd been there for Sunday mass with her aunt. She'd often heard whispery voices behind the priest's pulpit when there wasn't anyone there. Bibles would be at their side one moment and in the pew behind them in the next. Once someone tapped her on the shoulder and she'd twisted her head but no one had been there. Weird things like that. Nothing so unnerving that she'd been afraid. Not then anyway.

That evening she'd gone into the church and at first she'd been alone. The last of the sun's rays shone in through the stain glassed Jesus and Mary windows. The whole place had been bathed in muted colors. It was a lovely old church. If only its stone walls could speak, what a story they might tell.

Getting ready to leave, she'd spied the woman in the front pew crying among the dancing shadows, cloaked in a translucent pearl white mist, and it'd been hard to see her until Charlotte moved closer. Startled, she noticed the woman was dressed in a billowy Victorian gown of chocolate brown with lace trim, gloves and a bonnet. She clutched a Bible to her chest. Her head was down and she was weeping. Charlotte could hear her sobs, low and heart wrenching. Echoes slowly subsided into the air and drifted away; they were the saddest sounds she'd ever heard.

The woman had stared up at her with a tear stained face and pleading eyes. Eyes with the same look in them as Great Aunt Janet had had after her two sons had died in that car accident the year Charlotte had turned eleven.

Soul sadness.

Then the woman had vanished. Just like that, she'd been gone. Frightened, Charlotte had gotten out of there as fast as her tennis shoes could take her. She'd never told anyone, they would have thought she'd made it up. Later she convinced herself she'd imagined it. She was a daydreamer.

She'd shoved the experience out of her mind and hadn't thought of it in years until that moment. Being back on the island and the mention of ghosts had dislodged it.

Had it really happened? She still wasn't sure, but it'd make a good story.

Mac was rattling on. "Oh, in my time I've heard plenty of ghost stories from people hereabouts. I've never seen a spook myself, though. But there could be something to it if so many other people on the island claim to have seen things. I can't tell you all the spirits that are supposed to haunt this patch of land surrounded by water."

He paused, an earnest look on his face. "Now that would be an intriguing topic for a book—ghost sightings on Mackinac Island. You could talk to the residents that have experienced unusual or weird incidents, and take down their stories. It'd make for interesting

reading, now wouldn't it?"

"It would." Her mind was churning the idea over.

Ghost stories of the Island. It was a great premise.

"Do you think there are enough stories to fill a book?"

"From what I've heard over the years, I'd say probably more than enough for two books."

Charlotte was thinking out loud, "And as you say, I could interview people and collect their true stories. People love talking about the supernatural. Reading about it. That sort of thing. Real experiences given by real people. Or I do anyway. I could lay the book out in chapters and have each chapter be an interview with the person relating their encounter. It'd be a way to get to know the town folks, too."

"It sounds like a plan. I know I'd buy and read such a book if someone wrote it. I like spooky stuff. You could compile the tales and being an artist...you might consider illustrating it. Draw the settings, and the ghosts, as you think they looked."

"That's another good idea. I'll think about it. The book and the drawings. Thanks for the suggestions." Charlotte smiled.

Her aunt had reappeared at her side. "Are you two done chatting?"

"I guess I should resume patrolling," Mac said. "This island is a lot bigger than this main street and the shops here. Right before I saw you both I had a report of someone jumping out of the woods and scaring the bejesus out of a young Russian hotel worker when she was riding home. I have to go and talk to her about it."

Before he got on his bicycle, he spontaneously reached out and squeezed Charlotte's hand. "Good night, Charlotte. I'll be seeing you. On an island this size we're sure to bump into each other again before long. Keep thinking about that book. Sounds like a winner to me."

He waved at Bess as he rode off and Bess blew him a kiss.

As he'd held her hand and smiled at her Charlotte had thought: *He's attracted to me. Too soon.* She wasn't ready to be hurt again.

Mac rode away into the darkness and she caught the amused glance her aunt gave her.

"Don't get any ideas," Charlotte told her firmly. "I'm sure he was only being sociable."

"Yeah, sociable. He's smitten with you, my girl. Admit it. Even I can see it."

Charlotte shrugged and started walking again. "It's late, it's gotten so cold, and my face is numb. You ready to go home?"

Her aunt caught up with her. "Ready. I keep forgetting you're not used to this cold yet. You think it's cold now, just wait until December and January. You haven't felt anything yet."

"I can wait. One summer I overheard a tourist asking a clerk at the Mercantile why she didn't live here year round and I can still see the flabbergasted look on the girl's face. It was so funny. She said, 'Do I look crazy to you?' in a shrill voice and launched into this hilarious story about a friend who'd stayed for a winter. He said he almost turned into a two-legged Popsicle one weekend. He ran out of propane and snowmobiled over to a friend's empty cabin but by the time he'd built a fire he thought his fingers and toes were gone for sure. He said the air was like dry ice and froze his breath in two seconds. The snow never stopped from November until April. He couldn't get off the island to get supplies and ran out of everything. That was one of those rare years that the ice bridge never solidified, so the price for everything went high as a kite. By the end of the winter, her friend ended up half-frozen, starved and broke and vowed he'd never do it again.

"The clerk said she'd listened and learned. She wasn't stupid and you wouldn't find her here when the flakes started flying because she was a sunbird herself. Give her warm days

and cool nights and none of that bundling up like an Eskimo. She went home in the winter to where it was habitable and the cold wasn't a death sentence. I remember it so well because of the comical expressions on her face, the thing about the frozen toes and her being a sunbird. I liked the way that sounded.

"So, Yeah, Aunt Bess, I can't wait until December when icicles are hanging from my nose. That's going to be fun," Charlotte said sarcastically. "You know how I dislike the cold. My blood must be water."

"Not all years are that bad. Usually we have the ice bridge, snowfall is tolerable and you get used to the cold."

"I doubt it. I'll have to get a heavier coat. One of those parka things with the furry hood and some of those big fat mittens that make your hands look like the Pillsbury Dough Boy's."

"Funny."

Charlotte grinned, though she could tease about it now, it wouldn't be so funny when the ice age came. Maybe she would get used to it. She hoped so.

It was almost November and the tourist season was a week away from being over. Most of the *fudgies* would be gone and the Grand Hotel would lock its doors, signifying the end of the season. It wouldn't reopen until the following May. With its closing, most of the B&Bs, hotels and businesses would also board up for the winter, except for a few that stayed open for the locals.

The lights in the shops were winking out. There were only a few people milling around. The storefronts were going dark like the woods around them. It was shadowy beyond the streets. The wind rustled secrets among the surrounding trees and hushed as they moved past. A radiant half-moon glowed down and bathed them in soft light. In the distance, the seagulls and loons called to each other and settled down on the water until morning. They were sounds Charlotte found she'd missed. She took in a deep breath of chilly air as they walked along the abandoned sidewalks.

"You know it's so nice being here again," she confided. "Coming back to the island's like coming home."

Her aunt hugged her close as they walked. "It's your home, Charlotte, as long as you want it to be. You know, you can stay with me as long as you'd like. Forever, if you want. I wouldn't mind the company."

Charlotte heard the loneliness behind the words and the guilt returned. Bess had been like a second mother to her. Ever since Christopher, her younger brother, had died when she was six. Her mother had fallen into a grief she hadn't climbed out of for years afterwards. But Aunt Bess had been there for Charlotte and given her the attention she'd needed. Her parents had loved Christopher so much and Aunt Bess had loved Charlotte. She and her aunt were alike, both artistic dreamers and both loved the island.

Bess had taken care of her that first awful summer and after that, Charlotte had spent most summers with her aunt until she was twelve. Then her family had moved again and they'd lived too far away for Charlotte to visit easily.

As a teenager, not spending summers on Mackinac had been a disappointment. But she was there now and she needed her aunt and her aunt needed her. Charlotte didn't know what was wrong in Bess's life or why she was unhappy, but she knew she had to stay and find out. In time Bess would tell her everything because neither one could keep a secret from each other.

They passed Mission Point.

Complete darkness had laid its hand on the island and the air was filled with old memories. She imagined yesterday's tourists strolling the same path and felt as if she were on

another world, one heavy with velvet mysteries and soft echoes of past times and people.

Her mind filled with ideas for her ghost book as she gazed into the night crowding in around them. There seemed to be things lurking in the gloom, murmuring and scurrying about out of eyesight beyond the trees. It was easy to conjure apparitions in a place so silent and deserted.

She'd forgotten how spooky the island could be at night. Yet Charlotte wasn't frightened. For her the island would always be safe.

Inside her aunt's kitchen they made cups of cocoa.

"Put that jacket of yours on again, Charlotte, and we'll sit on the porch and chat like we used to. I hear Mars is closer to earth than it has been in fifty thousand years. In an hour or two it'll be the brightest star in the heavens; amazing, you have to see it."

They lounged on the porch in their chairs, cradling cups of warm cocoa between cold hands. Charlotte could hear waves further out crashing against the rocks. The moon's glow lit up the scenery around them. Bess's face was faint but visible and the night shadows had washed away her cares.

"What do you plan to do now?" Aunt Bess shifted in her seat. Cold blooded, she wasn't wearing a jacket, only a bulky sweater.

"Go through some of the shops before they close next week. I have to buy some writing supplies, paper and extra printer cartridges. Long term? Take some time to regroup. Decide what I want to do with the rest of my life. Start preliminary research on that book I was telling you about. The one Mac gave me the idea for."

"That Mac, he's more than just an island cop, you know. He has hidden talents. A great guy. I bet you could get him to ask you out without trying hard at all."

"Not interested. It's too soon for me to think about dating anyone. Right now I just want to live my life and find out who I am. That's all. I have a lot of thinking to do."

Bess patted Charlotte's arm. "All right. No more about Mac or any other man. You're going to write about the island's ghosts. Wonderful topic. Intriguing. I say go for it."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Aunt Bess?"

Her aunt was quiet a moment, then replied in a guarded voice, "Funny you should ask that. Up until a couple years ago, I would have said no, I didn't believe. Now I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean?"

"It'll sound silly."

"I won't laugh." When her aunt hesitated further, Charlotte pressed, "Come on, please? I'll be collecting tales from people and I'm not going to have a book if everyone's like you and won't tell me their stories."

"Okay, I have seen something spooky. But if I tell, you have to promise not to laugh at me or think I'm bonkers."

"I won't laugh. Tell me." Charlotte experienced a twinge of excitement. It would be the first ghost story for her book. Second, if she wanted to include her weeping church lady.

"Some nights I go out there along the shore to walk." Bess pointed towards the water that shimmered under the moonlight. The waves were rippling beneath the murky sky and the stars were glittering tiny spiked lights. "And I see ships—far out on the water. Sometimes there are as many as five or six Yankee Clippers. I suspect they're smuggling vessels from another century, coming from the northern horizon. They're all masted ships with their rakish sails billowing. I can hear the muffled shouts of their sailors on the night air. They come closer to shore until I can almost see them, but they're misty—see through. Not real. When

they get to shore where the water is too shallow to support their size, right before my eyes, they begin to dematerialize. I swear to God. Their sails first, then their rigging and finally the lower parts of the ships. Soon they're nothing but smoke hanging all around me.

"First time I saw them I thought I was hallucinating. I do have a drink now and then. But I've seen them a couple times now. Usually in the dead of winter before the straits freeze."

"Ghost ships. Wow. Aunt Bess, that's some story. Can I put it in the book?"

"I don't know. If the book gets published and you use my name my neighbors will think I've gone round the bend into crazy land for sure."

"I could say it's from someone who wants to remain anonymous."

"Then you can use it."

"Great. Can you remember anything else about the sightings?"

Bess recalled a few more details and Charlotte listened. She couldn't wait to go upstairs and key it into her laptop. The book had taken firm root in her consciousness and she'd decided she was absolutely going to write it.

When her aunt stopped talking about the ships, they talked about other things. The wind had picked up and the cold had begun to gnaw into Charlotte's skin. She couldn't believe it was only October.

After a while, she said, "I want to pay my way while staying here, so I've been thinking about getting a job, something fun that won't tax my brain. The book won't take all my time and I need to get out and mingle with people; get my mind off my old life. A job would do that for me."

She'd seen the sparse groceries in her aunt's cabinets and refrigerator. She'd seen how run down the house was and seen the stack of unpaid bills on the table right inside the door.

"You don't have to do that," her aunt objected. "I don't need any money from you. I've got a good job at the Grand and--"

"By what I can tell since I've arrived, it doesn't pay enough."

"No, it doesn't. Not anymore. It's an hourly wage and the hotel doesn't allow tipping. What with the rising costs of everything on the island there's never enough money these days. As hard as I work I can't make enough. I get so tired. I guess my age is catching up to me. I make do, child. Always have, always will."

"I'm going to help."

"But there's no graphic art jobs here like you're used to, Charlotte. You'd have to go off the island to get an advertising job. Are you willing to go to the mainland every day?"

"No. For now, I don't want a graphic design job anyway. I'm not interested in making a lot of money. I can always return to the big city for that. I'm going to work on the island. If I'm going to get those ghost stories, I need to fit in and win the trust of the townies."

"What else can you do?"

"I can do anything I set my mind to. A cashier. Or I can be a waitress at one of the open-all-year restaurants. I want to contribute my share of the household expenses, that's all. Pay my way." Charlotte had already told her aunt that she had no savings left. She and Lucas had lived an expensive life style and the wedding that never happened had taken whatever she'd had left.

"You know," her aunt remarked thoughtfully, "I heard the other day that Letty, the owner of the Market Street Inn, is looking for someone for the front desk. The inn stays open year round. It's a mom and pop establishment, more of a bed and breakfast, with eight or so rooms.

"The hours are from eight in the morning to two in the afternoon every day but Tuesday and Wednesday. Letty's husband, Herbert, isn't in the best of health and she wants him to rest more. Most of the townies, after working all summer, don't want to work through the winter.

There won't be a long line for that job. Tell Letty I sent you. You'll get it."

"That'll do. I'll go speak to her tomorrow." Charlotte stopped rocking. A night bird was calling somewhere out over the water. "If the season ends in a week and the Grand closes does that mean you take off work for the winter?"

"I can't afford to. The last few years I've been working off-season as a bartender at the Mustang Lounge. It's night shift, though. I hope you don't mind. I'll be home most evenings until eight and we can have supper together before I go."

Charlotte was thinking ahead, she could work at the Inn during the day and, with the house all to herself nights, work on her book then.

A smile hovered around Bess's mouth. "Are you going to ask everyone who wants a room at the inn if they've seen a ghost?"

"Something like that. Maybe the inn is haunted. That would be great. I could ask Letty. Hmm."

"Just don't scare the fudgies away. We need their money."

They both smiled in the dark.

When they were getting ready to go in Charlotte finally asked, "Aunt Bess, do you want to talk about whatever's really bothering you? No, don't deny it. You're not your usual optimistic self. You don't seem happy." Charlotte could have mentioned the extra weight and sloppy clothes but she wouldn't hurt her aunt's feelings for anything. "What is it?"

"I don't want to lay my problems on you."

"Why not? I've dumped mine on you. Come on. I'm not leaving this porch until you tell me what's wrong and I'm freezing. I can't feel my nose. Have pity on me."

"It's a man."

"It isn't still Charlie after all these years?" Charlie had been her husband for a long time. When he'd passed away so young, of a heart attack, Bess had nearly grieved herself into the grave with him. They'd had a happy marriage, even without the children they'd wanted so badly. Charlie had lived for Bess and Bess had lived for Charlie. They'd had that rare kind of love that Charlotte had been trying to find her entire life and hadn't so far. She'd been young when her Uncle Charlie had died, but she remembered how much her aunt and uncle had cared for each other. She'd felt their love.

"No, it's not Charlie. Charlie's only a sweet memory now...a ghost." Charlotte could see her aunt looking towards the water, her eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "I'll always love him but he's no longer here. I needed a flesh and blood man." She paused.

"Remember I'm not leaving this chair until you tell me everything."

Her aunt's form was very still in her chair. She sighed. "All right, I need to talk to someone. I've kept it secret for so long. I'm tired of covering up and lying. Deception eats away at the soul."

"Go on."

"There's this man, Shawn Sheahan. I love him. He's worked with me at the Grand Hotel for the last twenty years. He's a carriage driver during the summer months. Irish with a brogue, he has wavy hair the color of night, and the most amazingly tender eyes that always seem to be laughing. I guess, in a swarthy way he's handsome. Tall. He's got a wicked sense of humor and a wicked smile. But he's also caring and gentle. So much like Charlie used to be." She stopped speaking and gasped softly as if talking about Shawn hurt her in some way.

"And?"

"He doesn't belong to me, Charlotte. He's married and has a wife and three kids back in Ireland. John, who is seventeen, Amy who is fifteen and Teddy, who is about twelve now, I think. Shawn goes home to them every November first. So I only have him for the tourist

season.

"Now I suppose you want to know if we've been lovers?"

"I wasn't going to ask."

"No, not in the physical sense anyway. I love him, have since the first time I met him; but he's taken and like me he's a good person, a Catholic. Adultery is a sin so our relationship has been purely platonic. We spend our free time together. He's my best friend."

"Oh." Suddenly everything about her Aunt Bess's solitary life made sense. There was a reason she'd never remarried, didn't date, and had never left the island. She'd stayed here, alone, in this house to be near the man she loved. A man who couldn't reciprocate her love the way she wanted. Charlotte was stunned. She'd never had a clue. No one had.

"Does he know how much you love him...and does he love you?"

"He does and he does," Bess answered without faltering.

"If he loves you why doesn't he get a divorce?"

The older woman tilted her head and rocked her chair. "Because, he's an honorable man. He loves his family, loves Katie, his wife, and refuses to run out on his responsibilities and commitments. I respect him for that. I'd never ask a man to leave a wife and family who need him as much as they do. It wouldn't be right. I'm no home wrecker."

Unlike Rachel.

"How did Shawn come to be working here if he's Irish?"

"He came to the island years ago when a friend told him that the Grand Hotel was hiring carriage drivers who knew how to train and take care of horses. His friend told him that the island was fantastic and so were the tips. Shawn came because there weren't any jobs as good where he lived and he needed a lot of money at the time. One of his children required special medical care, an operation or something. He loved the job and ended up returning every spring.

"I accepted from the beginning that he could never belong to me but I didn't care. I had him every summer. Does that make any sense and does it make you think less of me, Charlotte?"

"No." Though the confession surprised her. Her aunt had fallen in love with a married man she could never have. It was no wonder she was so sad. Poor Bess.

"I know what you're thinking.., a married man, how stupid of her. But I met him, became friends and we slowly fell in love. We couldn't help ourselves."

Charlotte reached over and laid her hands over her aunt's. "So, it's been twenty years and you've loved a man who can't be with you the way you'd like him to be. You've handled it so far, so why are you unhappy now?"

"This time he may go home and not come back. His wife is ill and no matter what, he loves her. He married her when she was sixteen. They've been together thirty years."

Her aunt slid her hand out from under Charlotte's and rocked faster.

Charlotte could feel her aunt's anguish. In some ways a person had to go through their heartaches alone, she knew that all too well. No one could suffer for you. "What are you going to do?"

There was an intake of breath and the rocking slowed as Mars, a night diamond, flashed up above them. "Nothing. Let him go. I'll stay here where my home and life are. But it'll finally be over. This last week will be hard.

"When Shawn told me, I pushed him away. I won't let him come over. I see him at work every day. It hurts, but I can't back down. Something happened when he told me he was going to return to Ireland permanently. The intensity of my reaction shook me. I wept like I wept when Charlie died. It feels like the same kind of loss. Like a death."

Her aunt looked at her. "So I'm glad you're here. Help me be strong and stay away from him so I don't make a fool of myself. Help me from going crazy. You're saving my life, Charlotte."

"We'll call it even then. I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't have come back here to you and the island. I was a mess, too."

"You would have been okay, girl, either way. We both would. We're strong women. But it's nice to have someone to be with and talk to at times like these."

Charlotte gently changed the subject. "Well, if everything's going to close down in the next week, I had better go see the Grand Hotel real quick. It's been so long since I was there. I wonder if it will look different now that I'm grown up. Has it changed much?"

"No. They've remodeled it but it's still an elegant hotel. Wealth doesn't look cheap. Come up tomorrow with me when I go into work. I have to serve at the twelve to two o'clock tourist buffet and do the high tea at three-thirty. I'll sneak you in so you don't have to pay the ten dollar entry fee and thirty-five dollars for the lunch."

"It never used to cost to get in and, wow, thirty-five for lunch now? That's steep. But you can sneak me in?"

"Sure. One of the few perks of working there. I have friends in the kitchen. They're always sending me home with leftovers. Saves on the grocery bill."

Charlotte didn't argue. If her memory served her right the Grand buffet was a bountiful feast for the rich and famous and the tourists. Free was good. Free she could afford.

"Maybe if Letty doesn't give me a job I could get one at the hotel?" Charlotte queried.

"You wouldn't want to work there. The people who stay at the Grand are snooty rich and sometimes they look down their noses at the hired help. I wouldn't want them to treat you that way."

"They treat you that way."

"I'm used to it. It's all I've ever known. I don't have a college degree and talents like you do, Charlotte. You're meant for better things."

"So it's better that I work at the Market Street Inn checking people into rooms?"

"Yeah. The regular tourists treat the workers in the village better. I see it all the time. Most of them don't mix with the high and mighty up on the Grand Hotel's main porch. It's the difference between vacation money and real money; between normal working people and the very wealthy."

"So only the very rich sleep at the Grand Hotel?"

"At six hundred to seven hundred a night, wouldn't you think so? I don't know of any working Joe or anyone down here on the lower part of the island who could afford that rate. I couldn't."

Charlotte couldn't either, not even when she had her job, and for some reason she thought of that depressed her. She'd never wanted to be rich or famous but not having any money at all hadn't been her dream either.

The rich and poor of the island made her think. "Is there that much of a money inequality here? Are the islanders that poor?"

"Some of them, yes, the ones that work in the shops and service the tourists. On the island, the biggest discrepancy is land and home ownership. Since eighty percent of the island is a state park owned by Michigan and Michigan won't sell any of it—sometimes lease, but not sell—land is at a premium. In the last thirty years people have discovered Mackinac and it's become a huge tourist draw. Land has turned into gold."

"The thing is, years ago the wealthy from across the state bought or built those fancy cottages you see on the East and West Bluff Avenues, but they only use them five or six

weeks a year for their summer homes. A lot of them won't sell. Some won't even rent them no matter how infrequently they visit. The cottages are usually handed down through the families. There isn't much new construction going on, no space, and most of the islanders' kids have to move off Mackinac if they want their own homes. Most people who want to live here can't afford it.

"So housing's become very cutthroat. Even my little shack here is probably worth a bundle. If I wanted to leave the island and sell out, that is. I have people all the time trying to get me to sell. I've been offered as high as three hundred thousand dollars."

"For this?" Charlotte let out a low whistle. The house was cozy, a great water view, but not worth that much. "That's a basket load of money. It would take care of you for life. You'd never have to work again if you invested it."

"I don't want to leave. This is my home and most everyone else who lives here and loves the island feels the same way. Mac, your new friend, could make more money being a cop somewhere else, but he loves the island, too. So he stays. So we all stay."

Mac. Charlotte studied the moonlit darkness as if just thinking of him would make him appear on his red Schwinn. Her eyes searched the yard but no Mac. It would be nice if he did show up. Bess could offer him some cocoa. Charlotte could ask him if he'd heard any more ghost stories since she'd last seen him.

"It's getting late, honey." Her aunt yawned. "I have a long day at the hotel tomorrow so I'm turning in."

Charlotte was still cold but Bess had given her some gloves and a wool cap and suddenly she didn't want to go inside. She wanted a few minutes to herself. "Go ahead. I'm staying out here for a little while to admire the night. I won't stay out long."

"Suit yourself. Lock the door before you go up to bed." Bess rose and gave her niece a hug.

"I will. And Aunt Bess? Everything's going to be fine, you'll see. You're not alone any more. I'm here and we're going to have a good time. Who needs men anyway?"

"Huh, we don't. We can do fine without them. See you in the morning, Charlotte. If you want to go with me to the Grand, I leave at eleven to help set up the buffet."

"It's a date. That'll give me time to go into town and get those writing supplies and see about that job at the inn before we go."

Her aunt went inside, her footsteps slow and heavy, trudging towards her downstairs bedroom as if she were carrying troubles on her back. Charlotte hoped her being there would bring a little happiness into her aunt's life because the woman needed it. She seemed lost.

Charlotte remained outside for another quarter hour, listening to the night noises and reminiscing about when she'd been a girl riding across the island in the dark. She could never get enough. If she hadn't been so tired she'd have gotten on her bike for a ride. Tomorrow.

A lightless house sat on her right. Charlotte hadn't asked her aunt about Hannah McCain yet. She wondered if the old woman still lived there. Hannah had seemed old when Charlotte had been a girl but Bess hadn't said anything about Hannah being dead so she must be alive.

Hannah had never married. The island, her home, friends and garden had been enough for her. Her house, a rambling yellow frame with a long porch along the front, was like something in a fancy house magazine. Hannah's place was larger and in better condition than Bess's. She'd kept it up. It was beautiful.

Charlotte would have to go over and reintroduce herself. She and Hannah had been good friends when Charlotte had spent the summers with Bess. The old lady, a sweet but colorfully unconventional woman, used to give her books on art to read. They'd talked for hours about

this and that, town gossip mainly, and had baked cookies together. Hannah had a real sweet tooth. Everyone on the island knew and loved Hannah McCain.

Charlotte couldn't wait to see her again.

She wandered down through the yard towards the shore. The moonlight guided her steps. She knew the way by heart and had no difficulty getting to the water.

Standing at the lake's edge, she looked for the ghost ships her aunt had spoken of. She never saw a one, just the empty water and the sounds it made rubbing against the rocks and shore. Perhaps if she came out there every night and kept vigil she'd see them. Wouldn't that be something?

Charlotte returned to the house and went up to bed. She fell asleep quickly and again didn't dream about Lucas, Rachel or her ill-fated wedding. Instead she dreamt about the island and Lt. Mac Berman.

He was in uniform and riding his bike through the woods up past the fort's cemeteries. There was a whole flock of Civil War phantoms following him. He wasn't scared. He smiled at her and waved, and all the ghosts waved, too. The whole bunch of them disappeared into the Grand Hotel.

She remembered thinking: *Boy, those rich hoity-toity people aren't going to like that. All those dirty ragtag ghosts traipsing through their fancy rooms making a mess and a ruckus. Tsk, tsk. Too bad, huh?*

Then she woke up and it was morning. Outside the seagulls were spreading their wings against a vivid blue sky. She could see the water lapping at the shore from her window. From downstairs came the smell of something good, maybe pancakes, and she got up smiling, threw on a robe and went downstairs.

She couldn't wait to begin the day. Get out on the island. It'd been so long and she wanted to see all of it. She wanted to see the Grand Hotel from grownup eyes to see if it looked any different.
