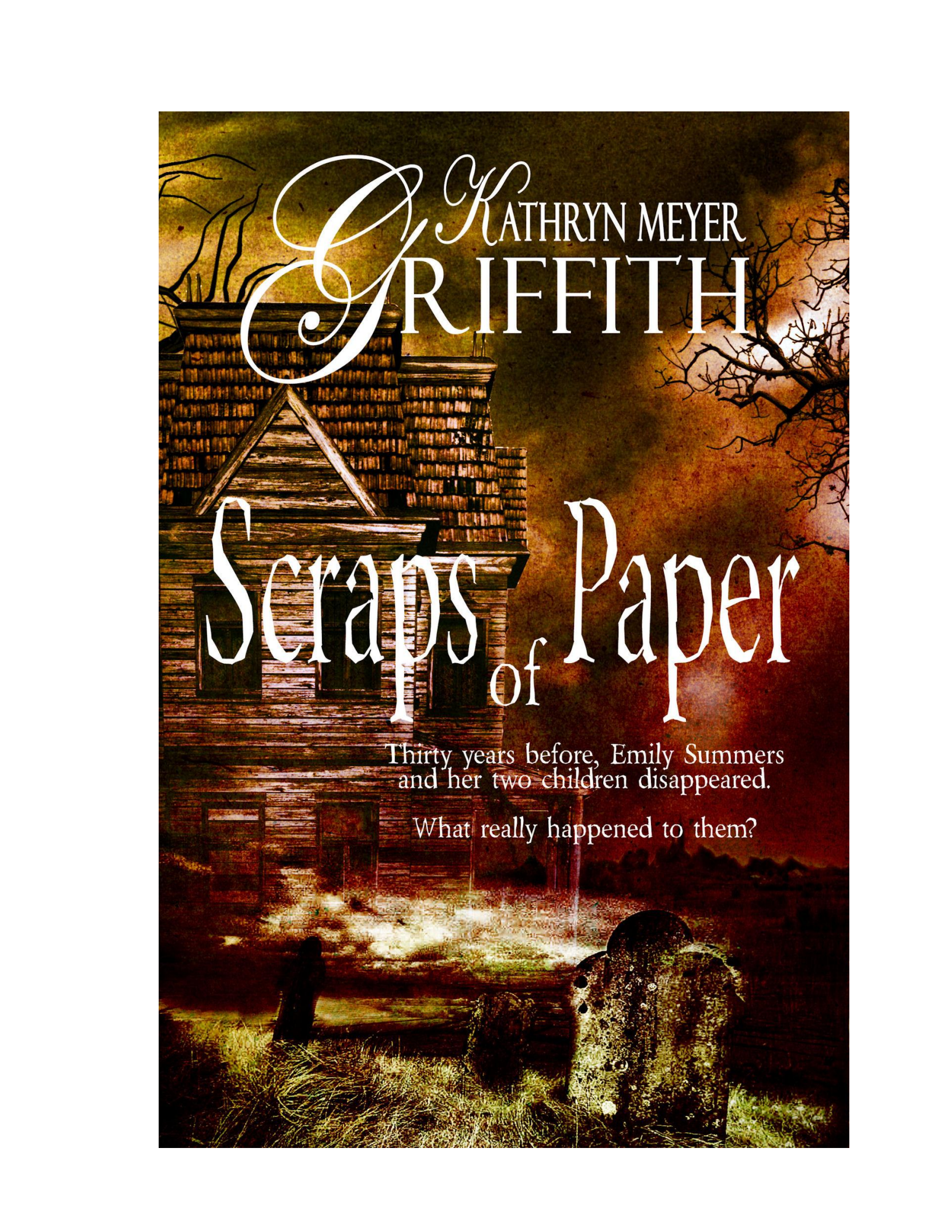




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GRIFFITH

Scraps of Paper

Thirty years before, Emily Summers
and her two children disappeared.

What really happened to them?

(Free Read of First Chapter)
Scraps of Paper-*Revised Author's Edition*
By Kathryn Meyer Griffith
Chapter 1
2003

Abigail Sutton began driving with no real destination in mind. It'd been years since she'd done anything as spontaneous, not since before her husband, Joel, had walked out of their apartment late one night for cigarettes and hadn't returned. She'd loved her husband more than anything in life, and he her. Joel hadn't merely run out on her, she knew that from the first. He wouldn't have done that, wasn't that sort of man. They'd been happily married for twenty years and were about to begin building their dream house. Had the land, it'd been cleared off and the building would have commenced the following week.

Then Joel had disappeared and for two and a half years he'd been missing. Until last month when the police had phoned one morning to inform her his car and his body had been found in the middle of a ravine deep in the woods outside of town. Joel was dead. Victim of an ill-fated mugging, the police said, left lifeless and robbed, in his stripped car in a remote place no one had found until now.

It was ironic. She'd remained alone, in the cramped apartment, for two years, waiting, believing he'd stroll back in one night just as he'd walked out. Believing she'd get a phone call from him, a message, anything. It hadn't happened. Her life had been frozen and sad. For so long. Too long.

She'd lost her graphic artist job at the local newspaper last month, which was partly her fault. She'd quit, sick of producing ads and inserts among a group of overworked and frantic people always fighting with the computers. Too many deadlines. Not enough employees. It'd been coming for a long time. Losing Joel had changed her. She wasn't easy to be around, she knew that. Angry or melancholy all the time. Obsessed with finding Joel she kind of went nuts. Her co-workers ended up ignoring her and it hurt. With all those people around, she'd never been so alone. It'd taken her a while to figure it out but there was more to life than some lousy job and an empty apartment. Joel's official death certificate sealed that belief. Now she was acting on what she'd learned.

The asphalt road before her car was shimmering in the summer's heat and the steering wheel under her hands felt good. She was in search of a new life because the past was unchangeable, but the future wasn't.

Traveling the main highway for over an hour, she veered onto an exit and a side road that wound into woods and ended up in a town the map called Spookie. She was searching for a sleepy hamlet; a certain feeling or magic remembered

from childhood, of summer innocence and safety, a picturesque and welcoming village where she could start over. Because for the first time in a long time she was free. Free to reach out to other people, open her heart and her life, live, reinvent herself. She wouldn't be moody and reclusive any longer. She was going to be happy.

With her savings she'd have enough to buy a fixer upper house, move in, and just live for a while until she got another job. If a job was what she had to do to pay the bills. She had this crazy idea of being a freelance artist, of selling paintings and drawings, and not ever again having to work locked up all day in an office. A crazy idea of living cheaply; of a simple life. But it'd been a long time since she'd drawn, illustrated, anything, because computers had replaced her creative skills, and she hoped she hadn't forgotten how.

How peaceful the country roads and the surrounding woods were. She stopped the car on the shoulder and tramped into the damp grass alongside an old wooden bridge where the light, pale shades of tawny gold and delicate vermilion, seemed softer.

She began climbing, using slim trees to help her upwards. At the top of the rise, she paused. The countryside, all hills and tree-dotted valleys, was laid out for miles around her and the sky above was a palette of pinks, blues and wispy whites. The breeze, lifting her brown hair gently about her face, seemed to sing to her. *Here you will find home.*

There was a miniature town nestled in the center of a clump of woods below, pretty as a picture postcard, and so cloaked in fog it was barely visible. She studied it, fascinated. From where she was it appeared full of tiny houses, tiny buildings and tiny roads. But real people lived in those houses and buildings and lived their lives out among the woods and the mist. The town was calling to her as if she belonged there. *Home is here.*

Back in the car, she found herself on the town's Main Street, which was lined in Victorian frame houses and shops. Each house well cared for and unique, some covered in climbing ivy, surrounded by towering trees and decorated in American flags for the coming holiday. There were people sitting and chatting quietly on shady porches or coming in and out of doorways, strolling through a park around the courthouse. A small lake surrounded the park. Businesses, a bookstore, a modest general and grocery store, a five & dime, a hardware store, a restaurant, an ice cream parlor, and what had to be a library, squatted side by side with homes. A perfect little town.

Welcome to Spookie, population 558 were the words on the sign on the side of the road. Big white letters on a bright red board.

Abigail couldn't help herself and laughed. It was a peculiar name for a town. But the drifting fog, the darkness huddled beneath the trees and sky partially hidden by leaves and branches created an eerie ambiance to the place. It

was a little spooky. She liked it though. It reminded her of an English village, tranquil and mysterious or a town right out of the 1950's. Much like the town she'd grown up in and had loved. Penny candy at the corner confectionary, books dragged home from a musty library, playing hide and seek at twilight and riding her bike through tree lined shady streets with her siblings were what she fondly remembered. In a sense she'd been looking for that town again all her life.

She parked her car in front of the courthouse. After the air conditioning of the auto, the outside heat was a slap of a hot hand. Even her thin blue jeans and red T-shirt seemed too warm on her skin. Grabbing her hair she tied it into a ponytail with a Scrunchie she kept in her purse and strolled the sidewalks peering into the store windows, nodding her head to the people lounging on the porches. They nodded or smiled back.

She caught wisps of conversation:

Myrtle broke the wheel on her wagon this morning. She got so mad. Saw her dragging it, grumbling the whole way, down the street. _Laughter.

Someone's got to do something about that sister of hers. I swear she's got a hundred critters living in her house. Looks like a zoo. I delivered a package there the other day....

...they say that house needs a lot of work. The old lady had been sick a long time before she passed and didn't keep the place up. Strange old reclusive woman. No, no relatives...not living that is. She had a younger sister once. What ever happened to her? She got up and just left, her and her kids. Off to greener pastures. A long, long time past, I recollect. No one ever saw them again.

It's so hot today, ice cream sounds good. Let's go get a banana split.

But Abigail felt at home...in a strange town in the middle of nowhere with people she'd never met before. This was where she belonged. She continued exploring the shops and the streets. In the air there was a tantalizing perfume, a combination of cotton candy, summer flowers and hot dogs. In the distance she could hear the purr of a lawn mower. Smell the aroma of cut grass. The sweet smells alone were enough to want to stay. Somewhere phantom children were frolicking and laughing. The usual summer noises. She expected to glance up any moment and see kids playing with their hula hoops or skating down the sidewalks on old-fashioned roller skates. The kind that used to have those tightening keys like the one she used to wear on a shoestring around her neck so she wouldn't lose it.

Stella's Diner was tucked in a tight corner a few stores down from Mason's General Store. The diner was as good a place as any, she figured, to get a bite to eat and ask where the local real estate office was. And she was hungry. Wandering around had given her an appetite.

The café was cozy and packed with individual booths and a bar with tall stools against one wall. Everything was old, worn, but clean. Homey in a thrift store way.

Frying sounds came from the rear of the diner and chicken smells filled the air. They made her mouth water.

Abigail claimed a stool at the bar and sat down. "What's the special today?" she asked the older woman behind the counter.

"Chicken and dumplings."

"That sounds good. Can I have a plate, please? Oh, and do you make malts?"

"The best in the county. The old-fashioned kind made in the metal tumblers. Thick and creamy. What flavor you want?"

"Chocolate, with extra syrup in it." Abigail smiled but the woman didn't return it.

"An order of chicken and D's for the lady out here," she said to a young man standing over a grill behind her. Then she began scooping globs of ice cream into a tall shiny container and adding the other ingredients. The woman had snow-colored hair in a short bad haircut, weary blue eyes, no makeup but bright crimson lipstick. Had to be seventy if she was a day. Her arms were skinny, her face a map of lines, and her back crooked from years of hard work. Abigail wondered how she could lift more than twenty pounds. But she had a feisty attitude and seemed to know what she was doing.

"Seems like a nice little town you have here," Abigail made casual conversation.

"Nice enough." The woman set the malt before her, then a plate of steaming dumplings and chicken. "If you like eccentric and nosy."

"I've been thinking of moving to a place like this." Abigail began eating, gazing around. There were two other customers in the restaurant, locals by the look of them, a middle-aged lady with large eyeglasses and an elderly gentleman with unruly gray hair. They were staring at her from behind their menus, pretending they weren't. Abigail raised her malt glass to them and grinned. They quickly averted their eyes and went back to whispering together as they had been doing before.

The waitress stopped and peered at her customer for the first time. "You want to move here?" There was a hint of a smile. Abigail couldn't tell if it was welcoming or sarcastic.

"I think so. I've been looking the town over and I like it. So quaint and peaceful."

The old woman snickered. "Appearances can be deceiving," was all she said.

"Reminds me of the town I grew up in."

That got her a raised eyebrow and a begrudging smile. "Does it now?"

"Any houses for sale around here?"

“Maybe a couple. But you need to talk to Martha Sikeston, our real estate expert. She handles all the property in the area. She’d know if there were any houses available. Office is the third building down on the other side of the street next to the local newspaper.”

“Thanks.”

The waitress took care of her other customers, leaving Abigail to eat and eavesdrop. The diner had no air conditioning, but there were stand up fans in the back going full blast. Made it comfortable enough. Lush trees, which would help keep the electricity bills down, shaded the diner as they did most of the town’s buildings. They kept the heat at bay.

The middle-aged lady, when she ordered lemon pie, called the waitress Stella. She had the sort of voice that carried, made a person want to cover their ears, and she was complaining about her brother to the man sitting beside her—who couldn’t get a word in edgewise—by what Abigail could glean from the conversation. Stella, having overheard what the two were discussing, had ambled over and was talking to them, hands on her bony hips.

Another customer walked in the door and Stella acknowledged him with a wave of her order book. “Be right with you,” she hollered softly. She was busy.

Abigail let her mind wander. In small towns everybody knew everyone and their business. Kind of nice. So different, Abigail thought, than the city. She turned her head and looked out the front window. People were walking by with packages, going here and there. A child in pigtails skipped in the front door, followed by an adult; the two found a booth and waved at Stella who went to take both their and the earlier arrival’s order.

Abigail finished and laid money on the counter before her by the time Stella returned.

“That was the best chicken and dumplings I’ve ever eaten,” she complimented as she paid the bill, leaving a generous tip.

The old woman’s attitude was friendlier and she smiled at Abigail for the first time. “Thank you. I can’t take all the credit for it, though.” She tossed her head in the direction of the kitchen. “The young man back there, my grandson, cooks nearly everything these days.”

“You must be proud of him then, he’s a good cook for as young as he is.”

From the kitchen a boy’s voice shouted, “I’m not that young!”

Stella rolled her eyes. “He’ll be sixteen next week. A good boy. Lives with me upstairs.” She pointed at the ceiling with her finger. “His folks died in an airplane crash two years ago.”

“Well, delicious food,” Abigail shouted back at the young man.

“Thanks. Come back sometime for breakfast. I make a mean pancake.”

“I might just do that,” Abigail replied loud enough for him to hear.

Stella continued, "I couldn't handle this place without his and my brother's help. The two of them take turns. Then I have a few friends that fill in for me and give me a day off once and a while. Running a restaurant, being a waitress, isn't as easy as people think."

"I know. I used to be a waitress in a burger joint when I was younger. I wasn't much good at it. I was always dropping things and hated being groped by the men."

"Well, I don't have to worry about being groped any more, thank goodness. Not unless a man likes to pinch a bony old woman." Stella fixed her eyes on Abigail. "You gonna go to the real estate office now?"

"I think so. Will somebody be there? Being late Friday afternoon and all."

"Should be. If not, check back here about six. Martha usually has supper before she heads home, unless she's taking care of business or has a date."

"I'll remember that, thanks." That was three hours away.

Abigail stood up and slung her purse over her shoulder. She'd absolutely made the decision to find a house to buy. The longer she was in Spookie, the more she liked it, even if the inhabitants were a little...quirky.

The afternoon was cooling off, and with a gentle wind racing down Main Street, it would be a lovely evening. She roamed through the mini park around the courthouse, observing any townspeople she encountered. A few ignored her or stared, but most waved or smiled and she conversed with the merchants in the shops she entered and asked questions about this and that. Once they realized she was interested in them and their town, they opened up and talked to her as if they'd known her for years.

The grocery store, or general store, as the owner, John Mason, called it, was a pleasant surprise. Old-fashioned and full of nostalgic stock and food stuff like there might have been in the last century, as well as hand-made crafts, artwork from local artists and rows of glass jars filled with the kind of penny candy Abigail remembered fondly from her childhood. He had the strips of colored dots on paper, candied watermelon slices and tiny marshmallow ice cream cones. Mary Janes, Necco Wafers and licorice whips. It was as if she'd stepped forty years back in time. The grocery had an excellent, modest but adequate, selection of meat and produce. She could do her basic shopping there. Prices were fair. John Mason, a nice looking older man, never took his eyes off her the whole time she was browsing; but said little unless she asked something directly. He watched her as she walked out into the sunlight. He must like younger women, she thought, amused.

Next to the grocery was a hardware store where they also sold paint and wallpaper.

There was an ice cream and candy parlor, Ice Cream & Sweets, that made its own candy and pastries. Abigail bought a vanilla ice cream cone, and a cherry tart for later, and continued her exploration of the town.

There was a bookstore that not only sold new books, but had a selection of discounted used paperbacks. On her limited budget, recycled books would be about all she could afford. That and a library card. She was into science fiction and mysteries these days.

Eventually she found herself at the real estate office and since there was no receptionist, she asked the only person there where she could find Martha Sikeston.

"You're looking at her," the woman retorted, coming over to meet her. A short brunette with brown glasses framing brown eyes, she seemed sure of herself. She was dressed in casual black slacks and a T-shirt that had an American flag across the front and she must have had ten rings on her fingers. Abigail had a hard time not staring at the woman's hands. Beautiful rings.

"And yes I'm a real estate agent. Here in Spookie we don't stand on ceremony much, don't dress in suits. Most of the time. I wear one when I'm showing a rich client something in a high price bracket. Otherwise, we're pretty informal. You aren't from around here, are you?"

"No. But I'm interested in looking at small fixer-upper houses for sale around town, because there's just me. Name is Abigail Sutton." Abigail put out her hand and shook Martha's.

"There's a few houses available." Martha directed her to a chair in front of a desk. The desk had a computer, papers, books and maps strewn all over it and at least three days' worth of empty meal bags and containers.

Abigail sat down, dropping her bakery sack and purse to the floor at her feet. "I don't have a lot of money, either."

Martha eyed her intently through her thick glasses as if she were thinking about something. "You sure you want to buy in this town that badly? Now, don't get me wrong, I've lived here all my life and it's a nice little place. Some people might say a bit strange. But we don't have many outsiders moving in. We're not big city."

"That isn't a problem, me being an outsider?" Abigail tried not to sound overly eager, but she wanted the woman to know she was serious. "Spookie reminds me so much of this little town I grew up in. I'm kind of starting my life over, you see. I quit my job in the city last month. I was a graphic artist, I mean, I am an artist. I live in this cramped overpriced apartment that I've been renting since my husband disappeared two years ago—they found him dead last month—and...I want to start over. Someplace entirely new with new people, new experiences, new surroundings." She never blabbed this much to people she'd just

met, but there was something empathetic about the real estate woman that lowered her defenses and made her want to confide secrets. She reminded Abigail of her older sister, who she hadn't seen for years. Last she heard her sis was living up in Washington State selling furniture. Working her butt off, no time off, and unable to get away for a visit. Abigail missed her.

Martha put her hand up and flashed her a smile. "It's okay. You don't have to explain to me why you want to move here. I can see you're sincere. And I wasn't trying to discourage you from buying a house. I merely wanted to make sure you understood that most of the people in town have lived here all their lives and are pretty set in their ways and habits. They're secretive, simple people. And, I have to warn you, gossip is a way of life here."

"Everyone I've met so far has been so helpful and kind."

Martha seemed pleased. "Have they?" She began paging through a notebook, every once and a while glancing up at Abigail, her expression one of restrained friendliness. "No, no...no," she muttered, turning pages and shaking her head. "Too big, probably too expensive. No, too...not you. This one has a horse barn and pastures."

"I don't have horses," Abigail informed her. "Don't have any animals. Now, anyway."

When the real estate lady found a house that was a possible, she'd show it to Abigail and they'd talk about it, when they weren't talking about the town.

After a half-hour, during which the two women found they had a lot in common, Martha had compiled a list of three potential residences. All empty and ready to move in and inside Abigail's budget.

"All three houses are practically within walking distance and if we use my car, it'll take no time at all," Martha said, as Abigail followed her to a Ford Taurus. Outside the evening shadows were descending, the hot day was waning. Abigail had stopped wearing her watch, but she guessed it was near six o'clock.

An hour later they were back. None of the three houses had appealed to Abigail. One had been in unlivable disrepair, the second was full of bugs and the third had a wet basement.

"Martha, aren't there any others I could look at?" Abigail was discouraged. "I really have this feeling about this town. I want to live here. But preferably not in a cardboard box."

"That's funny." Martha stared at her, and after her smirk faded a look of uncertainty crossed her face. "Well, there is one place left for sale hereabouts. I wouldn't normally mention it except you said you were handy with a hammer, wallpaper and paint, and really wanting to find something cheap. The house is isolated, yet close to town, but...I'm not going to lie to you. It needs work. Cosmetic, mostly. The old Summers' house about a mile down the road. Cute little yellow frame house with a hundred flowers around it and a lovely bay window in

the kitchen overlooking woods. Been empty for over a year, needs fixing up—paint and elbow grease mostly. Old lady Summers was too sick the last couple of years to take care of it.”

Abigail was grinning. “The house sounds perfect. What happened to the old lady?”

“The old lady, Edna Summers, died there. Right there in the living room. She had a reputation as being eccentric, to say the least. She had no friends and fewer visitors. Kept to herself. Everyone thought she had these terrible secrets.”

“No family to take the house?”

“None that we could find. Edna had a younger sister with two kids who drove away one day and never came back. That was thirty years ago. They’ve been living somewhere else, or so some have always believed. But they never returned, any of them, not even for Edna’s funeral or to claim the house and property. Edna was totally alone the rest of her life. And died alone. Some people say the house is haunted. Don’t know why, it just has that reputation. Sad story, huh?”

“Very.”

“That isn’t the strangest part. Towards the end of her life when she wasn’t in her right mind, Edna hinted to a few people that her younger sister and her two children hadn’t driven away all those years ago, but had *vanished*. No one believed her, but when Edna died and her sister never showed up for the funeral, then people began to remember what Edna had been saying. Remembered the other sister and her kids hadn’t been seen, not once, since that summer thirty years ago. Kind of a mystery, hey?”

“The world’s full of mysteries,” Abigail muttered, but her interest was tingling, her face flushed. Only someone who’d had a loved one disappear as Joel had disappeared on her would know how she felt. That house. She knew, even before she saw it, it would be the one. She just had a feeling. “Let’s go have a look. I don’t care who used to live or died there, who vanished from it. It isn’t the house’s fault. I want to see it.”

The moment Abigail walked up the sidewalk and onto the porch she knew it was going to be her home. Gigantic elms shaded it, yellow and ivory rose bushes nestled along the front and there was a wooden swing hanging from the porch roof. Lower level four rooms and one loft bedroom upstairs sparsely filled with left behind furniture Martha said she could pitch or keep. The loft bedroom had three tall windows and the view was soothing, trees and woods and a sky fading into a summer evening of wispy pastels. Abigail couldn’t believe how right it all felt.

“How much is it?” she asked Martha, unable to take her eyes off the house, after they’d locked the front door and were sitting in the car. She was thinking about Edna’s sister and her two children. Had they disappeared the same as Joel, into death, or were they growing old somewhere in another town. She shivered.

“Real cheap. Just back taxes due on it and bank fees. House belongs to no one. Been in probate because there was no will.” She wrote down a figure and showed it to Abigail.

Ridiculously cheaper than Abigail could have imagined. “You got a deal.”

“Well, then, welcome to the town. Maybe you’ll even fit in. Takes a crazy person to live around here and you strike me as crazy as they come. Artist and all.”

“Thank you, Martha.” Abigail chuckled. “By the way, what was the younger sister’s name? The one who may or may not have vanished all those years ago?”

“Her name was Emily Summers and her ten year old twins were Christopher and Jenny.” And Martha drove them back to town talking the whole way as Abigail daydreamed of her new house. How it would feel to own it and the colors she was going to paint the walls. How happy she’d be living there.