

Midnight in Parker Cemetery

A SHORT COZY MYSTERY STORY

MINDY KILLGROVE

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This short story is dedicated to all the entertaining and engaging tour guides my family and I have met the past few years. Thank you for your enthusiasm. To the person who took us around Savannah in a golf cart and answered every single question I thought to ask, I appreciate your kindness. Thank you for sharing your knowledge, indulging my interests, and sparking the desire to write another story.

And, to the incomparable Heidi Hecker who narrates many of my books, including this one: Thank you for breathing life into my quirky characters. Here's another cast of mamas and daughters we get to share.

A bead of perspiration trickled down the side of my face, but I resolutely ignored it and focused on the task at hand. Every October, when the citizens of Savannah came calling, I found myself in a situation just like this one. With a miniature bucket of pale blue-green paint in one hand and a delicately bristled brush in the other, I stood atop the ladder, staring down the wood trim on an oculus, wondering just how long it'd take before I either finished the job or lost my balance on the top rung and tumbled to the earth down below.

The droplet of sweat stubbornly clung to the curve of my jaw, so I lifted my left shoulder ever-so-slightly and used the thin fabric of my gray T-shirt to wipe it away.

Last job of the day. Just gotta get this done and then...

“Mama! You okay up there?” Cricket’s voice drifted to me from what seemed like miles away.

“I’m fine,” I drawled while giving my chin another wipe. This time I expertly employed the use of the back of my hand, because the soft fabric of my shirt just didn’t cut it. “Why?”

“You stopped paintin’ so I figured...”

“I just need a couple more minutes.”

Slowly, I rocked forward so that I could rest the paint can on the shingles nearest my position. Then, I chanced a glance downward at my daughter. My Christine. My little Cricket.

People liked to say she was my carbon copy and that made sense because we Scott Girls had clearly been molded from the same clay. Cricket’s rich, auburn hair hung in a heavy braid over her right shoulder and as I watched, she blew a hot stream of air out of her pursed mouth that caused the tiny fringe of bangs on her forehead to ruffle. I couldn’t read her expression, or see her sparkling green eyes, from my vantage point, but judging by the way she had both hands on her hips and kept looking back and forth between me, the rungs on the ladder, and over her shoulder at our van, I knew she was thinking about telling me to climb down so she could scurry up and finish the job.

“Just hold your horses, kid,” I hollered. “I’ll be down in a jiffy.”

“You sure?” I could hear the skepticism in her voice.

I didn’t bother to answer. Cricket knew just as well as I did that as soon as I finished, we could knock off for the day. And while that fact obviously dictated her current antsy behavior, rushing this last task wouldn’t do us a bit of good.

“Gotta be just as thorough on the last swipe as we are on the first. Can’t leave a job lookin’ like a hot mess.”

Expertly, I picked up the paint brush, dipped it quickly, then lavished a liberal swipe around the arc in the circular attic window.

“You want me to go down the street and get us a couple of Co-Colas?”

“Sheesh,” I hissed through gritted teeth. Now that I was in the zone and doing the work, I wasn’t so keen on the chit chat. “Do whatever you think you’ve gotta do, Sis. Mama needs to...*concentrate*.” The last word just eked out as the ladder wobbled beneath me and I sucked in a short, gasping breath.

“Mama!”

The ladder shuddered a second time when Cricket clapped her hands on both sides to steady the shivering legs.

“It’s fine. I’m all right. And I didn’t even spill a drop of paint.” The joke was a weak one at best, but I knew if I showed even an ounce of the fear that I felt, I’d create more trouble than this whole house painting gig was worth.

The last thing I need in this world is for Cricket to get it into her head that she’s gotta be the one climbing up this here ladder. If she thinks I can’t do this job, she’ll be hauling herself skyward, and I’ll have to be the one stuck on the ground—watching her take all the risks.

And that was one thing I just couldn’t do.

I could call Cricket my business partner all I wanted, but at the end of the day, she was still my baby, and that meant that she covered the ground floors while I handled everything else.

“I don’t care about the paint, Mama!” Cricket’s voice was riddled with concern. “You’ve been out in the sun too long today. We couldn’t have prepared for this. We didn’t know it was gonna be hotter than blazes and...”

“Just let me finish,” I whispered as I lifted the paintbrush and daubed several splotches of blue on the wood trim. I worked carefully and with a steady hand, laboring meticulously over this final piece of my assignment.

Cricket was right and I knew it. We'd checked the weather forecast before heading out this morning. The report called for partly cloudy skies and a temperature in the mid 70s—which would've been right on point for this time of year. Instead, we'd wound up with zero cloud cover and high heat that, even at this point in the late afternoon, was probably hovering near 85. So, yeah, it was unseasonably warm. And, it was true that I probably needed to climb down so I could get a cool drink. But I wasn't about to leave this job looking all slapdash and haphazard as it did.

The overwhelming scent of fruity citrus that I associated with this particular brand of acrylic latex paint hit my nostrils and I inhaled deeply, mildly enjoying the tangy odor. "Almost done."

Less than a minute later, I bit down hard on the handle of the paintbrush, then descended the ladder gingerly, taking my time so as not to splash even a pinch of paint in any place it didn't belong.

"Phew!" Cricket blew out a dramatic sigh as she grabbed the handle of the can from my grasp and my tennis shoes touched the dry patch of grass near where she stood. "I thought that would never be over." She stepped back so I had a little breathing room and when I turned to glance at her, I saw a look of triumph on her face.

"We did it, Mama. That was the last one." Her thin lips quirked up at the corners.

"Was there ever any doubt?" I quipped as I pulled the handle of the paintbrush from my mouth and wiped it on the pockets of my denim shorts.

"Yeah," she grunted. "When you booked us solid these last few months, I was sure that we'd never be able to finish in time, but now..."

"Now—we celebrate."

She giggled softly and shook her head as if she were the parent who needed to do the scolding. "Mama, I know we've been working hard this fall, but we can't go burning through our savings. There won't be many people wanting their houses painted during the winter months and..."

"We'll be fine," I assured her as I plucked the paint can from her hand and gestured toward the hunter green van that was parked along the curb. The words Scott Family Painters adorned the passenger side of the vehicle in white and yellow script writing. Our contact information, including the URL for our newly redesigned website, was stenciled below the logo. "As soon as we pack up our gear, we're going out to dinner and..."

"You the painters?"

I paused and pivoted so I could give my attention to this newcomer. She had coal black hair that was tied back into a sensible, low ponytail and secured with a soft, sable ribbon. Her lips turned down as she gave us each a discerning look. And, the ebony pencil that she'd used to outline her eyes made them look downright enormous.

I lifted the paint can and brush so I could give a gentle shrug. "Looks that way."

"Mama," Cricket tsked. "She's just askin' a simple question." She nodded stoutly. "We're the Scott Family Painters. What can we do for ya?"

"You got any leftover paint?" The young woman, who couldn't have been a full year older than Cricket, volleyed back while leaning forward to take a peek inside the paint can. Her small nose snurled slightly. "That Haint Paint in there?"

I laughed lightly. "We call this here color Mellow Mist, but others around these parts might say it's Haint Paint."

The woman stared down into the half full can. "And are you planning on using it for any special reason?" Her eyes flicked quickly toward the house and the window where I'd just finished applying the final coat of paint.

At that, Cricket and I shared a long look. I'd been painting houses for more than twenty years. Sometimes, home owners wanted us to leave the unused paint behind. Other times, if contractors were involved, they asked us to order more so they could do touch-ups, if it was necessary, without needing to call us to come back around the place. But, when we didn't have to fork over what little paint we had left after doing a job, we usually took it back to our place and used it to freshen up anything that needed some tender lovin' care.

"Do *you* need this paint for any special reason?" Cricket echoed the young woman's words in a quiet tone, as if she were speaking to somebody or something she was afraid she might scare away by raising her voice.

"I..."

When she didn't answer right away, I asked, "You live around here?"

The woman shook her head. "I live just outside of town, in my mamaw and papaw's old place."

“All right.” I nodded gently toward the van. “You want to hop in? We can give you a ride home and drop a little of this paint off with ya.”

I made the offer because it was what I would’ve wanted someone to do for my Cricket. I didn’t know this gal from Adam, but she looked awfully...vexed.

I gazed at her long and hard and couldn’t come up with a better word to describe her. She wasn’t being skittish or standoffish. She wasn’t even mumbling or stumbling over her words. She struck me as maybe being a mite shy, but then again, she’d been confident enough to approach us, a couple of strangers, so I couldn’t very well call her timid, either. At any rate, this gal looked like she needed a lift, so that’s what I suggested.

“I’d appreciate that.” She shifted from one foot to the other then extended her hand, indicating she wanted to shake. “I’m Wilma Parker.”

“Hey there, Wilma. I’m Cricket.” The gals pumped each other’s hands twice politely.

I hastily looked around for something to do with the objects I continued carrying, but when nothing quickly came to mind, I stuffed the paintbrush back between my teeth and chomped down on the handle. This left my mouth full, but my hand free, so I held it out toward Wilma.

Cricket rolled her eyes in a long-suffering way. “That’s my mama—Emery Scott.”

“Pleased to meet ya,” I muttered around the thick handle of the paintbrush.

“Hello,” Wilma said hollowly, eyeing me like she was trying to figure out if I’d lost my marbles.

“Come on.” Cricket waved her hand, beckoning for Wilma and me to follow her to the van. She pulled a set of keys from her hip pocket, pointed the fob at the sliding door, then stood back so it could magically roll out of the way. “Where’d you say you live again, Wilma?”

“I live in my family’s home,” Wilma said as I gestured for her to hop into the passenger seat while I settled the paint supplies in the trunk. Quietly, I used a small rubber mallet to tap a metal lid on top of the open paint can. Once I was sure it was sealed tight, I hurried back to the house and collected the rest of our equipment, including the extension ladder. After stuffing it and the rest of our gear in the trunk, I leaned forward so I could better hear what Cricket and Wilma were saying to one another. I picked up on their conversation at the point where Wilma added, “We’re out on Johnson Tract Road.”

I let out a long, low whistle. “I ain’t thought of Johnson Tract Road in a dog’s age.”

“You know the place?” Wilma and Cricket chorused.

“Sure.” I tapped a button overhead and the trunk to the van automatically lowered. I hustled around the side of the vehicle and hopped into one of the captain’s chairs in the backseat. The cool leather interior felt nice on my backside so I wiggled a little bit before tugging on my seatbelt. “When I was in high school me and a group of my friends used to drive down Johnson Tract Road on some Saturday nights. There was an old cemetery out there and...Hey, do you happen to live near the graveyard?”

Wilma swiveled slightly in her seat and sat so that I could see the way the stark whites of her eyes contrasted heavily with the dark irises. “My family owns the cemetery.”

“Really?” I was a tad surprised. “I didn’t think that was possible.” Cricket started the van’s engine and as we got moving, I sat back in my chair and fiddled with a bit of paint that was caked on my thumb nail. “I guess back in the day, families and churches used to own plots of land that they used as burial grounds, but I thought the city took over the big cemeteries around here years ago.”

“We’re not in town,” Wilma reminded me. “And while we serve the community, we’re not really affiliated with any one city or the other.”

“Huh,” I grumbled. “Imagine that.”

“Did you grow up there?” Cricket asked. “Did you...I mean...live *near* the cemetery?”

I knew by the way Cricket worded those phrases that she was uncomfortable, but I also understood the level of fascination that prompted her to continue asking questions. A person couldn’t live in or around this part of Georgia and not be slightly intrigued by the supernatural. We’d both grown up in Savannah, hearing the spooky stories, and even though sometimes the tall tales verged on the spectacular or fraudulent, I could honestly admit that Wilma Parker had my curiosity piqued, too. I’d never met someone who lived right next door to a graveyard.

“Yes,” Wilma replied simply. “I’ve lived in the same house my whole life.”

“With your grandparents?” I urged when she failed to divulge more readily.

“My mama left right after I was born,” Wilma said quietly. “She told Mamaw that she hated living in that house. Back then, teenagers came by the cemetery every night of the week. Some of ‘em

slept out under the stars on picnic blankets. Others tried to drive their cars near the gravestones. And some even crept right up on the porch of our house and banged on the front door.”

Cricket caught my eye in the rearview mirror and I held up my hands in protest. “That wasn’t me. I swear it. Me and my friends never would’ve thought to...”

“I’m not blamin’ you for my mama leavin’, Miss Emery,” Wilma interrupted. “I’m just telling my story here.”

“Well, I’m sorry that happened to you,” I whispered, infusing my words with all the sincerity I could muster. “Me and Cricket, we...”

“My daddy left when I was just a wee thing too,” Cricket inserted. “So, me and Mama, now we just kind of stick together.”

“Must be nice to have *somebody*.” Wilma tossed a quick look over her shoulder at me and I gave her a sympathetic smile.

“I’m glad me and Cricket can...”

I only got those few words out before Wilma motioned for Cricket to take a left and the van careened sharply around the bend in the road. Because I hadn’t been watching where we were going, my concentration was thrown a little. Just taking that small breath gave Cricket enough time to resume the conversation with Wilma.

“Mama likes to say she, and everybody else we knew, called me Cricket since the day I came home from the hospital. I was a teeny tiny baby with long limbs that were thin as reeds. And, according to Mama, I made these sweet chirping sounds that were as soothing as the steady hum of crickets on warm summer evenings. When I got older, people kept calling me Cricket because...well...” She shrugged indifferently. “There wasn’t any reason to stop.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. It had been a long day. I was sweaty, stinky, and tired, and the last thing I wanted to do was dig up a part of my past that was better left buried.

The truth was, when I’d held my baby those first few days after she’d been born, it had never occurred to me that twenty-two years later, she’d be my business partner. Oh, I knew well enough that she’d grow up to look just like me with wavy auburn hair and startling green eyes, but when she was just a child, and her daddy walked out that door and declared he weren’t ever comin’ back, I didn’t have the foggiest clue what would become of her future—or mine. Back then, I’d been little more than a

young'un myself and the only talent I possessed showed itself when I put paint on a canvas. But I understood, dreamer that I was, how my love of art would never pay the bills. I knew that I had to find a way to support the two of us. And that's when I started painting houses.

While I got lost in my memories for a bit, Cricket and Wilma kept right on talking like two ladies who'd known each other for eons. I didn't interject again, but I told myself that once we saw Wilma home safely, Cricket and I would have a long talk about sharing our personal tragedies with relative strangers.

I was just surmising the best way to approach my impending conversation with my grown daughter when the van turned another corner and the sound of gravel crunching under the tires drew me from my reverie.

"You'll need to go slowly through here," Wilma cautioned, a bit belatedly. "Construction crews don't come out this way, even when there are potholes because..."

"Because of the cemetery?" Cricket ventured.

"Something like that," Wilma muttered.

I leaned forward in my seat so that I could be closer to the girls. "Why would anybody around these parts be afraid of the graveyard? One of the best tourist spots in town is over at Bonaventure and..."

"Our spot isn't quite like that one," Wilma said as the van bounced over a dip in the road she'd warned Cricket about avoiding. "Things happen in our cemetery and..."

"What kinds of things?" Cricket's question hung heavily in the air because Wilma failed to answer right away. Instead, she sucked in a deep breath and held it.

"What're you doing?" I asked, even though I could see plainly that Wilma was holding her breath.

Her eyes bulged a little as she nodded toward a row of Spanish moss trees that lined the roadway. I followed her gaze and spotted the craggy outline of aged tombstones. My senses were stirred by the eeriness of the burial grounds, so I leaned far to my left and stared out the opposite window.

From what I could see, there was no rhyme or reason to the layout of the graveyard. Short, squat brown stones were lined up right next to tall, elegant obelisks. One massive mausoleum was fixed

at the top of a small mound of grass. It looked stately with its grayish-white stone columns when compared to the unassuming circle of rocks that were fitted just outside its doors.

The cemetery stretched much further down the road than I remembered, but that wasn't a thought that bothered me much. People passed away every day and it made sense that this place was more crowded than it had been twenty-five years prior.

As we reached the edge of the kirkyard, Wilma bobbed her head enthusiastically while continuing to hold her breath.

"What's wrong?" Cricket asked as her hands slid shiftily across the steering wheel. "Do you want me to pull over?"

"That's the house—up there." I lifted my finger and pointed at the massive mansion that loomed ahead of us. Much like the opulent homes of the fabulously wealthy folks in town who lived near Forsyth Park in the Victorian District of Savannah, this place was immense. Its hulking form blocked out the harsh glare of the sun in the late afternoon sky and the asymmetrical design of the steeply pitched roofline made my palms sweat.

Thank heavens I wasn't up there painting earlier today.

I tipped my head sideways so I could get a good look at the round turret with the conical cap that featured prominently toward the far side of the house. An elaborate porch wrapped around the entire thing, encasing it in wrought iron that, at one time, must've cost a fortune to install and have crafted into such a delightful display. Even from a short distance, I could see the way an artist had handmade vines and roses from iron, then melded them together to create this showcase. I marveled at the house openly and nearly forgot that it was situated directly next to a cemetery until Wilma took a gasping breath and whispered, "As of late, we've had some disturbances around here."

She opened the passenger door and promptly hopped out of the van. All it took was for Cricket to give me a quick glance in the rearview mirror before we both got out too and trailed after her.

"What kind of disturbances?" Cricket asked as Wilma strode to the backside of the van and tapped the trunk, as if she expected it to automatically lift just because that was what she wanted.

"The bells..." When Cricket unlocked the trunk, the tailgate beeped twice before lifting, causing Wilma to pause.

“What bells?” I asked, casting a glance over my shoulder at the graveyard. From this perspective, the cemetery looked a little like a garden. Hundreds of Black-Eyed Susans had sprung up in clusters. The cheery yellow-gold and black flowers gave an air of jubilation to their surroundings. I also spotted a clump of the distinctive red petals of the Cardinal Flowers. The lemon scent of Evening Primrose tickled my nose and because I found the whole scene so inviting and picturesque, I stepped toward the wrought iron gate that served to separate the Parker family’s yard from the sacred grounds.

“The grave bells,” Wilma said while pulling the small can of Mellow Mist paint from the trunk of the van. She snatched a trio of paintbrushes too and twisted the handles between her fingers.

“What grave bells?” I stood on my tiptoes so that I could get a better glimpse of the ground inside the cemetery. “I don’t see any.”

“What’re grave bells?” Cricket asked.

I turned toward her then to see a confused look on her face. “You remember,” I tutted. “I took ya to Bonaventure years ago and pointed out the little gold bell that was placed right by that old oil tycoon’s tomb.”

Cricket shook her head slowly. “I don’t remember that.”

“Sure ya do,” I sighed. “I...”

“The grave bell that remains fully intact inside the Bonaventure Cemetery is made of *bronze* and it sits outside the tomb of *Charles F. Mills*.”

“Uh-huh,” I agreed. “That’s what I said.”

“He was extremely wealthy and owned dozens of *steamships*, so...”

“Did the bell have something to do with one of his ships?” Cricket asked.

“No,” Wilma replied. “Many people who lived during the same time as Mr. Mills had small bells placed right outside their graves.”

“Why?” Cricket leaned back against the closed trunk of the van and crossed her arms over her chest making it clear that she wasn’t going to budge until she heard the whole of this story.

“In the 1860s and 70s, yellow fever, as well as various other maladies, raced through these parts with lightning speed,” Wilma explained. “Doctors, back then, didn’t have high-tech equipment and so they did the best they could with what they had.”

Cricket’s brows furrowed, telegraphing her lack of understanding. “So?” she urged.

“So–” I picked up the thread of the tale. “Because doctors thought their patients had expired, but no one wanted to take a chance on getting buried alive, somebody somewhere came up with the idea of digging a hole in the ground next to a grave, fitting a pipe in there–so folks could still get air if they were alive– then tying a string to the recently deceased person’s finger or toe and snaking that same string up through the pipe.”

Cricket winced. “So, if the doctor’s made a mistake, and someone who was sick, but alive got buried, they could just yank on the string and ring a bell?”

“Yep,” Wilma agreed. “Then, the local caretakers, like my ancestors, would come running.”

Cricket pushed off the backside of the van. Her eyes flicked back and forth between Wilma, the graveyard, and the house. “You mean that you and your family members live so close to the burial ground because...”

“We’re part of the night watch,” Wilma confirmed. “At least one member of the Parker Family has been on duty for more than a hundred and fifty years. And now it’s my turn. If I hear a bell ring, I’ve got to save the day.”

I was kind of transfixed as I watched all the color leech from Cricket’s face. She’d gotten kissed by the sun earlier in the day while we’d been painting that house back in town, but now, after listening to Wilma’s story about the dead bell ringers, her cheeks lost all their rosiness. Cricket opened her mouth and stammered a few incoherent words, so I decided to slightly change the subject.

I nodded to the paint can in Wilma’s hands. “So, if you’re a member of the night watch around here, why do you need that paint so badly that you tracked us down in town to get some?”

Wilma gulped noisily, then she twisted her neck slightly and met my gaze. “I have to do something, Miss Emery. The bells...they keep ringing and...”

“The bells have been ringing?” Cricket’s eyes were wide as pie plates when she parroted those words.

“I don’t know what’s causing them to go off,” Wilma continued.

“Hmmm...” I murmured. “Start over. Don’t focus on the cause, but tell us what you know for certain.”

She adjusted her grip on the paintcan and set of brushes before answering. “I first heard the bells ringing a couple of nights ago.”

“So—on Thursday?” I guessed.

Wilma’s forehead creased as her gaze unlocked from mine and she stared at a spot in the distance. “I think it was Wednesday night, actually. Yeah. I heard the first chime on Wednesday because I’d spent the day weeding out some of the wildflowers that were closest to the stones.” She jutted her chin toward the cemetery. “Sometimes, I just let the grass and flowers grow, but because I knew it was so close to Halloween, and I figured lots of folks would be coming out here, I decided to tidy up a bit.”

“When you pulled some of the flowers out of the ground, did you notice anything odd about the bells then?” I asked.

“Odd?” Wilma’s eyes snapped back to mine. “Like what?”

I shrugged. “Did you maybe kick one with the heel of your boot and set it to ringing?”

“I bump into the bells all the time, Miss Emery and I...” She paused and bit her lip. “What I mean is that I *try* to be careful around all the gravesites, especially the ones with the bells, but I can’t help tripping over stones, rocks, and everything else from time-to-time.”

“Okay.” I nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I think that explains it then. The other day, you must’ve stumbled into one of the bells, jarred it loose or something, and...”

“But I only go into the cemetery during the daylight hours—if I can help it,” Wilma interceded. “I’m not one of those people who tempt fate, Miss Emery. I know better than to mess around with things I don’t understand. So, when the sun goes down, I stay locked up inside—unless there’s a reason to venture out.”

“Uh...” Cricket cast a long look around the yard. Her eyes lingered on the shadowy spaces near the corner of the house as well as the spots in the cemetery where the boughs of the trees swung low. “What reason might there be for you to leave your house in the middle of the night besides hearing the bells ring?”

Wilma tore her eyes away from mine and sent a piercing look over at Cricket. “There’s no reason. None at all. I know what mayhem people cause around here, especially when Halloween gets close. And I’m not here to bust up anybody’s fun. So, I lock the doors and huddle under my covers and...”

“Really?” I gave Wilma an incredulous stare. “You’ve lived in this place your whole life and you’re still afraid of what might be happening out in that cemetery?”

There was a long pause as Wilma stared at me. “I have a healthy respect for what happens in that cemetery when mortals aren’t messing around there. Imagine how I feel when people do get caught up in the mix.”

I tilted my head to the side and scrutinized Wilma’s expression. Her brows were lowered. Her lips were pressed together tightly and there was a small v-shaped worry line creased into her forehead.

Whatever she thinks goes on during the witching hour of night, it’s clear I can’t convince her otherwise.

“So.” I patted my hands down my pockets. “Where does this leave us? Why are we here?”

“I need this paint.” Wilma lifted the can.

“Because you think there’s a ghost lurking in your cemetery?” Cricket voiced the same concern that was rolling around in my noggin.

“There are hundreds of ghosts in that cemetery,” Wilma replied without an ounce of sarcasm lacing her tone. “But I think one in particular is ringing those bells.” She inhaled deeply. “I think there’s a mighty unhappy spectre haunting these grounds right now and I don’t need the trouble—especially with Halloween happening tonight.”

“Halloween’s tonight?” Cricket’s voice had gone up nearly a whole octave. The tension she felt was apparent in her tone.

“Did you forget?” I reflexively added a dose of joviality to my own words, hoping that in doing so, I could alleviate some of my daughter’s and Wilma’s fears. But then, before I could say anything else, and maybe even try to tease the girls, I heard a hissing sound, and Cricket jumped a country mile.

Her hands flew up to cover her head as she stumbled backward and bumped up against the tail end of the van. “What was that?”

I'd been startled by the noise, but not nearly as frightened as Cricket, so I had my bearings about me enough to scan the area.

"Well, look at that," I muttered as I glared at a black cat that stood less than a foot from Cricket's right leg. "This a friend of yours, Wilma?"

Wilma grumbled an annoyed sigh. "That's Lucy Steele. She's always popping up and causing problems when I least expect it."

I snorted a dry laugh. "Lucy Steele, like the character from..."

"Jane Austen's *Sense & Sensibility*," Wilma finished the thought for me. "My Mamaw loved reading almost as much as she doted on that cat."

I guffawed loudly. "If she loved that cat, why'd she name it after Miss Lucy Steele?"

Wilma shrugged heavily. "She thought Lucy got a bad rap. She couldn't help her nature, just like our cat there can't help showing up at inopportune times." She sighed and gave Cricket an apologetic look. "I'm sorry that she got your heart racing."

Cricket moved her hands so that they rested on her chest, then she took a deep breath. "I'm all right. Or, at least I will be. Between your stories and that feline popping up from out of nowhere, I..."

"Come on," I said, nodding to the paint can. "Let's get that Haint Paint slapped on those doors and shutters, then we can have ourselves some dinner."

"You wanna stick around for dinner...*here*?" Wilma blinked twice, showcasing her disbelief.

"If you ain't got anything we can cook up, we'll just order in." I plucked one of the paintbrushes from Wilma's hand and twirled it between my fingers.

"You mean you want to stay here with me, even though I already told you that something strange was going on with the bells and..."

"You shouldn't be alone tonight." I laid my free hand heavily on Wilma's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Regardless of what happens out in that cemetery this evening, you've got yourself good and spooked. And Cricket and I won't be able to sleep if we're thinking about you, out here, by yourself, handling some rowdy ghost who won't leave ya alone."

"Thank you," Wilma whispered. "Thank you for helping me. Believing me and..."

“We’re burning daylight here, Sis.” I interrupted once more before the moment could become too emotionally charged. Pulling my hand off Wilma’s shoulder, I thumped it on the side of the van and nodded at Cricket. “Open this thing back up. We gotta get the ladder and another couple of paint brushes. Sooner we get this job done, sooner we can call it a day.”

I hadn’t been working on the doorway leading to the second floor balcony long when I heard a commotion below. The blazing sun had disappeared from the sky hours ago so while I wasn’t as hot as I’d been earlier in the day, my muscles now ached something awful and my ability to handle distractions had completely dissolved because I was basically doing my work blind.

“What’s goin’ on down there, kids?” I yelled as I leaned as far left as I could manage without causing the ladder to wobble.

Neither Cricket or Wilma answered right away and that right there made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up and salute. I didn’t put much stock in ghost stories or worry about the chiming of those little bronze bells, but if my daughter was having some struggles, my senses were thrown into overdrive.

“Girls!” I hollered as I placed the paint can on a nearby windowsill. “Y’all okay?”

I waited just a heartbeat to hear a response, then left that little paint can right where it was and hustled down the ladder. When I got to the lawn, I saw that the reason Cricket and Wilma had ignored me was because they were already deep in conversation with another woman.

“Who’s this?” I asked without caring one iota about the fact that I was interceding. The girls had scared me by not answering before, and I meant to find out what was so important that I deserved to be ignored.

“Miss Emery Scott,” Wilma said quietly, “this is Mrs. Ivy Alden. She and her family...”

“Own this property,” Mrs. Alden snapped. I quickly did a double-take, looking back and forth between Wilma and Mrs. Alden, trying to see any family resemblance. Whereas Wilma had dark features and a willowy look about her, Mrs. Alden was a stout, robust woman, with heavy legs, curvy hips, and an ample bosom. Her hair was a confection of spun golden ringlets and her light eyes were bright with discontentment. If somebody had told me to twirl around in a circle, then pick the person who was related to Wilma Parker out of a lineup, my finger never would’ve pointed at Mrs. Ivy Alden.

“You...” Wilma said in a dry, tart manner, “decidedly do not own this property.”

“But I...” Mrs. Alden spluttered. “I...My husband’s family has had a plot here for over a hundred years.”

“That may be true, Mrs. Alden.” Wilma nodded respectfully. “But purchasing a plot does not qualify as full ownership.” She lifted her hand and gestured to the cemetery that was at Mrs. Alden’s back. “There’s a sign, right there, right above the entryway to the burial grounds. Do you see whose name is on it?”

Mrs. Alden huffed. She tugged on her carnation pink cardigan, pulling the garment closer to her chin. “I didn’t mean to imply that you and your family were trespassing, Miss Parker.” She eyed Wilma coolly. “I only stopped by because...”

“Because you wanted to report some thievery.” Wilma nodded staunchly. “I heard ya when you made the claim the first time.”

“Then why aren’t you doing anything about it, young lady?” Mrs. Alden’s nostrils flared. “My husband’s very expensive gold watch was lifted right off his gravestone and...”

It was Cricket who interrupted this time. Bless her. She took the thought right out of my head and brought it to life. “If your husband’s watch was so expensive, why on earth did you leave it on his tombstone?”

Mrs. Alden sniffed subtly. “He...he loved that watch. And I...I probably should’ve buried it with him but when he passed, I wanted to hang onto something...something special and...” A soft sob warbled out of her lips, rendering Mrs. Alden incapable of continuing.

During that brief moment of silence, I shot a quick glance at Cricket and Wilma. It was obvious that my daughter didn’t have the foggiest clue of what to say next and Wilma seemed almost as helpless. After Mrs. Alden dried up a bit, I said gently, “I’m sorry for your loss, Ma’am. We all feel real bad that you have to come out here to visit your husband, but I’m not sure what you want Miss Wilma here to do about your husband’s missing watch.”

“She ought to replace it.” Mrs. Alden lifted her chin slightly so that she could meet Wilma’s gaze.

“Replace it?” Wilma was evidently and justifiably baffled. “Why would I do that?”

“It was stolen here—on your property. That makes you responsible for it.”

“Mmmm...” I couldn’t help myself from chiming in on that one. “I don’t think you’ve got the right end of the stick there, ma’am. There might be such a thing as cemetery insurance...” I paused and peeked a quick look in Wilma’s direction. She shook her head vehemently, so I proceeded, “But that’s not something the Parker Family specializes in ‘round here. They’ve got enough on their plates, keeping track of the plots, and beautifying the area and all and...”

“Well, what am I gonna do about Isaac’s watch?” Mrs. Alden stomped her foot, making it quite apparent that she was frustrated.

“It’s not like you could bring back the one that was special to him—even if you were given a whole pile of money,” Cricket mused. “So, why don’t you just think of this as a learning experience?” A consoling smile slid onto her face. “You lost something valuable, but you’ll never make that mistake again. And, in the meantime...”

“In the meantime, I’ll...” Mrs. Alden’s face had suddenly gone bright red and I figured she was ramping up to deliver quite the speech. But, our little trio was rescued from her hysterics by the hissing of one Miss Lucy Steele. “Ahk!” Mrs. Alden leapt away from the black cat and clutched the pearl choker that lay daintily around her neck. “Why in the world would anybody let a black cat lurk around a cemetery on Halloween?”

“She lives here,” Wilma said in a tone that smacked of practicality. “I can’t very well turn my cat away on Halloween because she makes the place even creepier than it already is.”

Mrs. Alden’s lips pursed together in a sour expression. “So, you just let that cat wander through the cemetery, too?”

“Uh...yeah...” Wilma shot me and Cricket a confused look. “Is that a problem, ma’am?”

“What if your cat had something to do with my husband’s missing watch?” Mrs. Alden slung the accusation, along with a dirty look, directly at Lucy Steele.

“Ha!” I laughed boisterously. “Just when I thought I’d heard everything...”

“I don’t appreciate you laughing at my situation,” Mrs. Alden huffed prissily.

“And I don’t appreciate you coming around here while honest people are trying to finish up a long day’s work.” I waved my hand over my shoulder indicating the ladder I’d just descended a few

minutes before. “We’d like to get this paint on those doorways and shutters before midnight. And, unless you’re willing to roll up your sleeves and help us, I can’t think of a single good reason why you need to take up any more of our precious time.”

As if Lucy Steele were agreeing wholeheartedly with every word I said, she hissed loudly.

Mrs. Alden took several steps backward, then turned her displeased pout on all four of us. “I can’t just let this go, ya know, Miss Parker. Isaac’s watch was the best piece of jewelry I owned and I won’t let it disappear. He’d be so upset if he knew it was gone.”

Wilma spread her hands wide and gestured toward the cemetery at Mrs. Alden’s back. “You’re welcome to comb the grounds and look for it. It’s most likely that someone picked it up and claimed it as their own. But, there’s also a slight chance that it somehow rolled onto one of the other plots.”

A finely sculpted eyebrow arched high on Mrs. Alden’s forehead. “I suppose it is possible that somebody or something...” She sent another malevolent scowl at Lucy Steele. “...carried my husband’s watch from one plot to the other. So, I will just spend a little time looking for it.”

“Sure.” Wilma nodded, then tipped her chin upward and looked at the inky sky. “But don’t take too long though, ma’am. It’s not safe to be roaming around the cemetery after midnight, especially on Halloween...” Her words broke off there. She lowered her head to gaze directly at Mrs. Alden. “Well, let’s just say that I don’t relish the thought of traipsing into the cemetery tonight. So, it’d be best for *me* if you completed your search in the next half hour or so.”

For a second, it looked as if Mrs. Alden wanted to argue. I could practically see the gears grinding in her head as she concocted several fervent retorts, but then, Lucy Steele lunged at a spot of thin air and hissed, startling a scream right out of Mrs. Alden’s pursed lips. As her terror faded, she spun on her heel and stalked toward the graveyard.

“You think that’s the last we’ve seen of her tonight?” Cricket asked as Mrs. Alden disappeared behind some tree branches that were heavily laden with spongy patches of moss.

“I hope so,” Wilma murmured. “Because what I said was true. I’ve got no intention of going out into that cemetery tonight.”

As the words left her lips, a ripple of delicious breeze coasted across my skin. If that had happened a full hour ago, I might have rejoiced in the reprieve from the day’s heat. But now, with night closing in all around us while I was still holding a paintbrush coated in Haint Paint, my sense of delight

was stolen right out from under me and I, like Wilma, wanted nothing more than to duck inside the safety of the Parker House.

Wilma had told Mrs. Alden to be in and out of the cemetery in less than half an hour and that was exactly the same amount of time it took me, Cricket, and Wilma to finish the job we'd started earlier. I knew that there had been moments when I'd slopped the paint just about everywhere, but in my haste to get indoors, I didn't mention my carelessness to the girls. Once we crossed the threshold of the house, I suddenly felt a blessed sense of calm flood through my whole body.

"You all right, Mama?" Cricket backed away from the kitchen sink, holding up hands that had been scrubbed clean of paint. Wilma tossed her a red and white gingham checked dish towel and while Cricket used it to dry her fingertips, she kept one eye on me.

"I'm good. Honest. Feelin' better than I have all day." I wove my way around Cricket and plunged my hands into the warm water that cascaded continuously out of the faucet.

"You just remembered that we were supposed to be celebrating?" Cricket's eyes twinkled in the warm glow of the kitchen lights.

"We can celebrate now that I know we've helped out this young lady." I smiled fondly at Wilma who had taken to bustling around the kitchen, pulling pots and pans from cupboards, and slapping a head of lettuce onto a wooden cutting board.

"Thank you," Wilma said. She swerved over to the pantry and removed a box of spaghetti as well as a mason jar of homemade marinara sauce. "While we were working, Cricket told me how the two of you haven't taken a day off in two months and well...I wish I wouldn't have bothered you today like I did."

"You weren't bothering us at all," I assured her. "If anything, bringing us out here tonight kept us out of trouble."

Wilma snorted. "You two don't look like much trouble to me."

"Oh, you've got no idea," I joked, which made both girls laugh. "Trouble used to be my middle name."

“Mama,” Cricket groaned. “Even Wilma, who just met you a couple of hours ago, knows you don’t have any wild stories to tell. And, even if we had gone out to dinner tonight, we wouldn’t have gotten up to no good.” She rolled her wrist over and checked her watch. “I reckon that we’d already have been back home by now and sound asleep.”

“Did I keep you up too late?” Wilma dumped the box of pasta into a pot of water on the stove, then gave Cricket and me an apprehensive look.

“We’ll be fine,” I returned easily as I turned off the tap water and shook my hands dry. Just a speck of pale blue-green paint clung to my fingernails, so I immediately started trying to scrape it off. “You know, even though we make boat loads of cash during September and October by refreshing houses with Haint Paint, I never gave much thought to the act.”

“You know why people do it, right?” Wilma looked at me as she emptied a jar of blood red tomato sauce into a medium-sized pan.

“I get the gist.” I shrugged nonchalantly. “There’s a local superstition about keeping spirits at bay. I can’t remember the name of the group that first believed in the idea...”

“The Gullah Geechee people,” Wilma inserted.

“That’s it.” I flicked a bit of paint off my nail. “I never say it right, but the Gullah Geechee people thought that ghosts couldn’t cross water. So, it made sense to paint the underside of a porch covering with pretty bluish-green paint. After a while, when the trend caught on, people took to covering doorways and window frames with the stuff too, signifying that ghosts couldn’t get in the door if they couldn’t cross that fictional bit of water.”

“And I once read that when people started using the Haint Paint, it had some kind of property that kept insects away, too. Indigo...” Cricket murmured. “I know indigo was used to create the color, but I think maybe lye was in the mix too and that’s what kept the bugs back.”

Wilma stirred the noodles in the pot slowly. They hadn’t broken down yet, so the brittle stalks simply swirled. Then, she turned to look at me and Cricket. “I guess I figured, based on the way you two acted when I first met you, that you didn’t believe much in the local superstitions.”

“We don’t put a whole lot of stock in ‘em,” I admitted, “but I can appreciate that there are plenty of things in this universe that I don’t understand. I can’t tell ya why the sky is blue or why water out of the tap runs clear but...” Both Wilma and Cricket opened their mouths and I was sure they meant to explain all the scientific nonsense I didn’t know, so I hushed them both with a dismissive

wave of my hand. “My point is that I never saw sense in knocking down an idea that gave other folks comfort just because I didn’t understand it.” I zeroed in on Wilma and said in my most maternal voice, “If you feel better knowing that you’ve got a bit of Haint Paint protecting you and your property tonight, then who am I to steal your sense of peace?”

“Well said, Mama.” Cricket smiled chippily, then tossed her braid over her shoulder. “Now, put us to work, Wilma. If we’re gonna get this supper on the table any time soon, you’ve gotta let me and Mama help.”

Wilma took to ordering us about her kitchen like she’d been doing it for years. She talked as we worked and Cricket and I chimed in occasionally so we could ask her questions. By the time we sat down to eat salad and spaghetti, I felt as if we’d known Miss Wilma Parker forever and was sure that this meal wouldn’t be the last one the three of us shared.

Once the meal was over and the dishes were scrubbed clean, Wilma led us into the parlor and gestured to a pair of comfortable looking armchairs.

“You sure you want us to sit there?” Cricket glanced down at her khaki shorts. “I’ve been painting all day in these clothes and if I sit on that antique fabric and ruin it, I’ll feel plumb awful.”

“The paint was quick-drying,” Wilma said as she turned slightly to the side and rubbed her palm over a splatter of paint that coated the back pocket of her black jeans. “I tested this spot before I sat down in the kitchen, so I know that my family heirlooms are perfectly safe.”

Cricket yawned broadly. “Yeah, well, still...”

I picked up on her intentions then.

The kid’s tired. She’s ready to head home.

Hurriedly, I jumped into the conversation. “Thanks for the hospitality, Wilma, but I’m beat. I think it’d be best if Cricket and I got outta your hair and...”

“You want to leave? So soon?” She darted a look at the ornate clock that sat on the mantelpiece. “I...I guess it is late, but I was hoping...”

My heart went out to the poor girl. She was all alone in this world and it was obvious that she wasn’t ready to say goodbye, but Cricket and I had also been on our feet for a very long time. “You’ll be fine...right here.” I planted the ball of my foot on the rug and twisted it. “Now that you’ve got the

paint protecting you, there ain't nothing or nobody coming in here uninvited. And as for what's going to happen out in that cemetery tonight? Well, you said it before. If you just stay indoors, you don't have a single thing to fear."

"Uh-huh," Wilma mumbled as her eyes slid once more to check the time. "There's only a few minutes left 'til midnight, so maybe if I go upstairs now and try to go to sleep, I can just wish away all my worries."

"Sure," Cricket murmured, "that'll work just fine or..."

Knock! Knock!

I'd been certain that my daughter was about to crack and volunteer to stay a little bit longer with Wilma Parker, but then, a loud knock on the door resounded through the whole house, cutting off her speech right in mid-sentence.

"Who do you think is here at this hour?" Cricket glanced first at me, then at Wilma as she spoke.

Wilma shook her head slowly. "I thought about inviting a friend to come over, but that's before I found the two of you downtown. So..."

Knock! Knock!

"Keep your shirt on," I grumbled. Then, I looked directly at Wilma. "What do you want to do? It's your house. On Halloween. So, you know that if you open that door, you might just find a couple of kids who are playing a game of Knock, Knock, Zoom, Zoom."

Wilma's upper lip curled in disdain. "I really hate when they do that."

When the knocking on the door echoed through the hall a third time, Wilma threw up her hands in defeat. "Coming!" she called.

Simply because I was curious, I turned and followed Wilma from the room. Cricket trailed behind me and placed her hand on my shoulder blade.

"You think it's just some silly kid?" she whispered.

I snorted. "Well, it ain't a ghost, my dear. If a spirit wanted to come inside this house, it wouldn't bother with knocking."

“Mama,” Cricket groaned. “You can’t say things like that. You know I’m already scared out of my wits and...”

“You’re scared?” I stopped right in my tracks and pivoted so I could get an eyeful of my daughter. What I’d thought was fatigue before now showed itself plainly. Cricket was teetering on the edge of terror.

Somehow, she’d held it together this long, but now, her lower lip quivered and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She looked as if she was about to open her mouth and scream for help. So, I did the only thing I could think to do. I grabbed hold of my daughter’s hand and squeezed it tight. It wasn’t lost on me that while my fingertips were burning with an excited fever, Cricket’s were frigid.

“You listen to me now, Christine Scott.” She nodded dutifully. “There ain’t nothing going to happen here tonight that I don’t sanction. No ghosts are sailing through that door. And, if I have my way, no hoodlums are gonna run amok in Miss Wilma’s cemetery, either. I’m gonna protect you and her and...”

Before I could make any more promises, Wilma swung the front door open and Cricket’s eyes widened incrementally. Because I didn’t want to miss what was happening, I quickly spun back to face the outside world and pulled my daughter along at my side.

“Uh...can I help you?” Wilma stood in the doorway looking at another young woman who wore a flustered expression on her face. The young lady was maybe a couple of years younger than Cricket and Wilma meaning she could’ve still been in high school or possibly entering her first years as a new adult. Her blonde hair was arranged in a slipshod bun at the nape of her neck and she wore a pair of lime green athletic shorts along with a bright white T-shirt. The girl looked like she’d gotten lost while out for a late night jog and had stopped off at the nearest house to ask for directions.

“Have you seen my mama?” the girl asked, craning her neck so she could include me and Cricket in the conversation.

Because I can sometimes be what other people like to call nosey, I stepped forward and replied with the obvious question, “Who’s your mama?”

“Ivy Alden...Mrs. Ivy Alden.” The girl shuffled her feet, scrapping the toe of her well-worn left sneaker nervously on the lip of the doorframe. “I’m Carly Alden. My...my dad was buried out there six months ago and my mama, she...”

“We saw Mrs. Alden a little while ago,” Wilma said smoothly. “She was searching high and low for something that once belonged to your father.”

Young Miss Alden hadn't looked exactly ecstatic before, but when Wilma said those words, Carly's face crumbled. “Was she...” She glowered at the floorboards on the porch. “When she was here before, did she happen to say what she was hoping to find?”

Slowly, Wilma crossed her arms over her chest in a defensive manner. “She mentioned something about Mr. Alden's gold watch.”

Carly heaved a beleaguered sigh. “I was afraid of that.”

Cricket let go of my hand then and took a step forward. “What do you mean?”

“I...” Carly looked around at the three of us, then licked her lips nervously. “The last few days, my mama has been telling anyone who would listen that Daddy's watch was stolen out here at the cemetery, but I know that's not true.”

“It's not?” I asked, not because I meant to contradict the statement, but because I wanted to hear Carly's side of the story.

“Mama sold Daddy's watch three years ago.”

My jaw dropped and I knew that Cricket and Wilma were stunned by this new information too because their reactions mirrored mine.

“If your mama sold the watch that long ago...even before your daddy died, why would she come here and try to make me pay for a replacement?” Wilma asked.

“Mama's struggling,” Carly confessed. “When Daddy was still with us, he had himself a mistress. So, one day, Mama took his watch and sold it, mostly because she wanted to take something he loved away from him. But then, when he passed away, she spent days tearing the house apart looking for the blasted thing. She kept telling me and my brother that she never would've pawned something so precious. She swore up and down that she still had it, that it was somewhere, and if we looked hard enough, we could find it.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, trying to puzzle through Mrs. Alden's actions. “While I guess I can follow all that, I still don't get why she'd come here and tell Wilma that it was taken off her husband's grave.”

“I don’t know what Mama did or said when she was here earlier, but these last few days, she’s become obsessed with...”

Ding! Ding! Ding!

Simultaneously, Cricket, Wilma, and I sucked in a collective gasp.

“What was that?” Carly lifted her sports watch and glanced at it. “That’s not me. Does one of you have an alarm set to go off at midnight?”

Wilma backed up so that her shoulders were pressed against the wall opposite the door. With her standing that way, I could see the rise and fall of her chest as she inhaled and expelled air rapidly.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

A bell, somewhere on the property, chimed again, and Wilma sank to the floor while Cricket screamed.

“What is going on here?” Carly asked. Her eyes sought mine, probably because I was the only person who looked capable of answering her.

“You hear that?” I whispered. Carly nodded. “Those bells chime for the dead.”

“Oh.” She breathed a sigh of relief. “You mean someone set up some church bells so that at midnight on Halloween, they would...”

“No,” I hissed quietly, keeping my voice low so we could hear it if the bells sounded once more. “Those aren’t church bells, dear. Those are...”

“Grave bells,” Wilma said in a tone that was so quiet, it verged on being inaudible.

“That can’t be right.” Carly stood up straighter and craned her neck from side to side, surveying the area.

“I’m telling you,” Wilma said slowly. “There aren’t any other bells in this area. The last three nights, right around midnight, I’ve been hearing the chimes go off and...”

Ding! Ding! Ding!

“Make them stop!” Cricket yelled. She looked at me with pleading eyes. “Mama, I can’t listen to them anymore. I can’t think about what’s out there in the dark and...” Her words stopped completely as a strangled cry erupted from her lips.

“Well.” I breathed in deeply through my nose and squared my shoulders. “We need those bells to stop ringing, so I guess that means there’s something I’ve gotta do.”

“Mama, no!” Cricket gripped my hand and yanked hard. “You can’t go out there.”

“How else do you expect the bells to stop ringing if we don’t go see what’s causing the malfunction?”

“It’s not a malfunction, Mama,” Cricket whined. She’d never been one to moan or groan much when she was a young’un so I was surprised to see her accomplish the feat like a seasoned pro now. “You heard Wilma before. There’s something out there. But think...think of what you told her just a few minutes ago. If we stay in the house, we’ll be fine. We’ll be safe. We’ll be...”

Ding! Ding! Ding!

I shook loose of Cricket’s hold and took a step forward.

“Mama, don’t go out there!” Cricket begged. “You can’t leave now. There’s something terrible out there and you ain’t got a dog to hunt with.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I managed to laugh dryly. “That ain’t the expression your grandmama used to say, Cricket, and you know it.”

“I don’t care,” she retorted. “You know what I mean. You don’t have a plan and you don’t have a...”

“I might not have a dog or a plan, but I do have a cat.” I swiveled on the spot and searched for Lucy Steele. “Where is that feline?”

Ding! Ding! Ding!

“I’ll go with you,” Carly said as she stepped back and motioned for me to exit the house. “I don’t know what’s really making those bells ring, but I’d like to find out, and I won’t stand around here all night debating the matter.”

“Right you are.” I slipped by Carly and bounded down the porch steps.

“Wait!” Cricket cried as she stumbled out right behind me.

“You stay here with Wilma,” I ordered.

“We can’t.” Cricket wiped her hand across her face as if clearing away a layer of cobwebs.

Wilma spoke up then. “This is my house. My family’s property. If someone or something is lurking out there, I ought to confront them.”

Carly and I shared a momentarily befuddled look, then we both shrugged. “Suit yourself,” Carly muttered, “but we’d better get moving before we all lose our nerve.”

As we stepped away from the safety of the house, I suddenly realized that we weren’t prepared at all. No one had thought to bring a flashlight and as for weapons, well, I didn’t believe that Carly had something concealed underneath her workout attire that could be of any use. Just as that thought crossed my mind, Carly pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket.

“That won’t work here,” Wilma whispered. “There’s no cell service. Never has been. Mamaw had a landline installed years ago and I’ve never even tried to upgrade.”

Carly didn’t respond or argue. She just punched a few numbers on the keypad, held the phone up to her ear, then dropped it a second later. “Well...” She harrumphed. “I guess if we can’t use the phones to call for help, at least they can be our light sources.”

“Good thinking,” Cricket murmured as both she and I produced our cell phones, tapped the flashlight buttons, and shone them on the ground in front of us.

“That’s better,” Carly sighed, then she paused and looked at Wilma. “The bells. That’s what we’re looking for, right?”

“I guess.” Wilma darted a cautious glance from left to right, making her feathery ponytail swish lightly.

“Then, why don’t we start by heading toward the gravesites where you know there are bells? We could...”

Ding! Ding!

“That way!” Carly swung the beam of her cell phone light wide, illuminating a small patch of grass directly in front of us, then she took off at high speed.

“Follow her,” I whispered brusquely as Cricket and Wilma tripped forward and I fell into step behind them.

Carly wove her way through the cemetery for what seemed like an eternity. Because I was so unfamiliar with the landscape, I realized, after a few minutes, that it was possible we were looping in one gigantic circle, but I didn't slow our company's progress by saying as much aloud. Instead, I trooped after the girls, holding my light aloft and listening keenly for any sound. A rustling of a tree branch had me turning my head. The snapping of a twig made goosebumps pop out on my forearms. By the time Carly pulled to a halt and sagged so she could catch her breath, my nerves were fried.

“I don't think there's anybody out here...”

The words had only just left my lips when that maniacal bell chimed again.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

I heaved an aggravated groan then took off, chasing the girls, as they sprinted flat out.

Thump...Thump...Thump...

I moved so fast that it became difficult to tell the beating of my heart from the sound my tennis shoes made as I bounded through the tall grass.

Thump...Thump...Thump...

Ding! Ding! Ding!

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead and I gasped when a soft breeze ruffled the ends of my hair.

“Stop!” I panted as we reached the mausoleum that I had been able to see from the road when we'd approached the property hours ago.

“What?” Carly squawked.

“Why?” Wilma asked.

It was only Cricket who didn't seem perturbed by my interruption. “Mama. What is it?” she said softly.

“We can’t keep chasing a ghost,” I replied between heavy breaths. “If that’s what’s out here ringing all those bells, then it’s best we just head back inside and let the spirit have the cemetery for the night. There’s nothing we can do to stop the ringing and...”

Ding! Ding! Ding!

I screamed loudly. “Enough! I can’t take it anymore!”

But then, as if my temper tantrum had woken every corpse in the graveyard, a symphony of grave bells chimed.

Ding!

Ding!

Ding! Ding! Ding!

“That way!” Carly shouted and before I knew it, we were off and running again.

“I hear something,” Wilma said over top of the incessant ringing. “Something besides the bells.”

“What is it?” Cricket asked as Wilma spread her arms wide and motioned for us all to stop.

“Listen.” Wilma cocked her head to the right. “Do you hear that?”

“It sounds like...” Cricket started to say something but then, at the same moment, Carly shone her flashlight beam on a pair of glowing green eyes.

Carly uttered a horrified curse, Cricket screeched loudly, and Wilma dropped to her knees. But, I just stood there, looking at...Lucy Steele.

“Where were you twenty minutes ago when we needed you most?” I crouched and held my hands out toward the cat, letting her know that it was okay to approach. She arched her back and hissed, then I watched her tail flick and collide with something solid.

Ding!

“What?” I’m not sure which one of us said that first.

Ding! Ding!

Lucy Steele swished her silky tail back and forth several times. With each flick of her whip-like appendage, she set the bronze bell next to her chiming.

“Lucy,” Wilma groaned. “How could you scare us like that?” She scooted forward then as well and reached out to scoop the cat into her arms, but Lucy Steele hissed loudly and her green eyes flashed.

“Woah,” Cricket murmured. “Maybe you ought not try to pick her up just now.”

“Yeah.” Wilma rocked back on her heels. “Maybe it’d be better if I just left her alone.” She lifted her hands instead and scrubbed them down her cheeks, then emitted a small laugh, one that showed plainly just how relieved she was to figure out what had been going on in her family’s graveyard. “It was Lucy Steele. All that worrying...tracking you down...painting the house...I did it all because Lucy Steele figured out how to make the bells ring by...”

Ding!

As one, the girls and I inhaled sharply.

“Mama,” Cricket whispered. “You heard that, right?”

My eyes drifted toward the spot where Lucy Steele stood ready to pounce. The bell that just sounded wasn’t the one next to her back paw. The sound had come from at least five or ten feet away. So, even though we now knew that the cat was responsible for *some* of the chaos, she wasn’t the only person or thing toying with us.

I dragged my gaze off Lucy and sought the source of the most recent commotion.

“It came from that way,” Carly said as she flashed her light to our left.

And there, before I even had time to get used to running through the graveyard again, sat our perpetrator. A person was hunched over a grave, patting the grass around the headstone with her fingers, muttering something incomprehensible to herself.

“Mama?” Carly lifted her light higher as she took several steps closer.

“Carly Zella Alden!” Mrs. Alden rounded on her daughter faster than I’d ever seen a mama move before. “What are you doing in this graveyard at this time of night?”

“Me?” Carly turned to give us all an incredulous look, then sent her mother an identical expression. “Mama, what are *you* doing here?”

Mrs. Alden blinked wildly as Cricket and I both pinned her to the spot with the glare of our phone lights.

“Mama,” Carly barked as she walked forward and crouched in front of her mother. “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking...” Mrs. Alden’s eyes flitted back and forth, reminding me all the world of somebody who felt confused by the thought of completing a daunting task.

“Looking for Daddy’s watch?” Carly ventured.

Mrs. Alden nodded. “It’s here somewhere. I know it is. It can’t...it can’t be gone for good. It...”

“It’s not here, Mama,” Carly said gently. “You sold that watch three years ago.”

“No,” Mrs. Alden moaned. “No, I didn’t.” She rocked to the side and as she did, the heel of her shoe connected with a bronze bell, sending the little chime tinkling.

Ding!

Cricket groaned. “Come on, Mrs. Alden. I can’t listen to those bells anymore and it’s time you called off the search. You aren’t gonna find your husband’s watch tonight and...”

“But it’s here! I know it!” Mrs. Alden argued. “I’ve got to find it. For Isaac. For...for me...for...”

“Mrs. Alden.” I reached out and grabbed ahold of her hand. “I promise you, as soon as the sun comes up tomorrow morning, I’ll come right back here and help you look for that watch.”

“But...” Wilma, Carly, and Cricket all started to interject, but I held up my hand to stop them.

“I’ll help ya, I swear to it. You and me—we won’t quit until we find that watch.”

Mrs. Alden nodded slowly, then allowed me and Carly to pull her to her feet. It took a long time for our little group to weave our way out of the cemetery and back to the Parker Family’s house, but with Lucy Steele in the lead, we managed not to get lost...and, we didn’t hear another single bell ring.

After assisting Mrs. Alden into her daughter's car and arranging to meet her back in that same spot the next morning at eight a.m., I stood on the front porch with Wilma and Cricket, watching Carly and her mother drive away from the cemetery.

"So..." Cricket said slowly. "Are you really coming back here tomorrow morning?"

"You don't think I'd make a plan then cancel on that poor woman at the last minute, do you?" I returned.

Cricket tipped her head slowly like the pendulum of a clock, indicating she was giving the idea some consideration. "You know the watch isn't here, Mama. Carly told you Mrs. Alden sold it ages ago, so why would you go through all the trouble of helping her look for it?"

"Sometimes, we need to lose ourselves in the search," I replied.

"Really?" Cricket eyed me quizzically. "I didn't expect to hear you say that."

"Everybody grieves differently." I ran my hands through the ends of my hair, then sighed deeply. "If it helps Mrs. Alden even the tiniest bit to look for something she knows right well she doesn't have a hope in the world of finding, I won't be the one to take that small comfort away from her."

"But when I was little and Daddy left us, you didn't go running after him. You..."

"Who said?" I interrupted.

Cricket stared at me as if she'd never properly looked at me before. "What? You mean you..."

"I searched high and low for that man, and that's when I learned the same lesson that I'll reckon Mrs. Alden has waiting for her. You can't find something if it don't want to be found. Just like that watch, I'd lost your daddy long before he left us. And so..." I swung my arms wide and pulled Cricket into a massive hug. "I decided that I could make our lives work without him. He didn't leave because of you, baby. He didn't leave because of me, either. He just...got good and lost." I squeezed her tighter. "You're my family, Cricket. We've got each other. And that's a pretty good deal, if you ask me."

Cricket wriggled away. "Yeah. I'm all right with us too—just how we are."

Lucy Steele meowed loudly then and I turned to see her scratching her back on the door frame. She slunk away from Wilma and that's when I looked up and met her hopeful eyes. "I hope you don't mind that we're coming back tomorrow."

“It’s no problem whatsoever,” Wilma murmured.

“And maybe, once we’re done searching, we could hang around and have some lunch together.”

“Really?” Wilma perked up instantly.

“Seems like me and Cricket aren’t the only gals in town who could use a few more members in their family. So, what do you say, Miss Wilma? You up for spending some time with us?”

Wilma nodded enthusiastically.

From the depths of the graveyard, the sound of a bell chiming stung my ears. I couldn’t be sure if Wilma or Cricket heard it too, but if they did, we all silently agreed to pay it no mind.

We’d had enough of running down our fears for one night, but tomorrow, in the light of day, we’d find out what caused the bells to misfire. Or—we wouldn’t.

If those ghosts in the Parker Cemetery were calling out to one another, searching for someone or something they’d lost, who was I to tell them they couldn’t keep right on looking?

THE END



Mindy Killgrove is a cozy mystery, historical fiction, and romance novelist. She is the creator of the Riley Roundtree Social Story Learning Adventure Series for children. Killgrove has penned more than fifty full-length novels, forty short stories, and dozens of children's books. She lives in Orlando, Florida with her supportive husband and three rambunctious, but beautiful children. When she's not writing or reading, she explores local theme parks, lounges on the beach, or aims to bake the very best chocolate chip cookies in the world.

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