

Seeing Mary —

Author's Note: So...sometimes, when I'm trying to figure out if a story will work as a novel, I write a short version of it. This way, I can see the plot turns, get a chance to experiment with characters, and play around with description.

So it is with this story. I had an idea for a novel, but I wasn't sure if it would work. I've sketched out the plot, but even though it's done, I'm still thinking...I might change some of the characters. I'd like to up the creep factor, and maybe play around with certain parts of the plot. You'll see as you read that there are parts that need to be polished, deepened.

A special thank you to Stephanie for providing the title of this story.

Natasha

Chapter One

The moment I saw our new house, I knew bad things were coming. It sat on a hill and in the sunshine and blue sky, it resembled a lot of homes on our street: Victorian, with white paint, turrets and a wraparound porch. But there was something wrong about it.

Maybe it was the way the leaves of the overgrown trees threw the house into shadow. Or maybe it was the long pathway that led up the door. Made of stone and cement, it should have blended with the front lawn. But sometimes, when the sunlight hit it just right, it looked like it was made of human skull and bones. I shoved the packing boxes off my lap and climbed out of our beat up station wagon. The October wind whistled past, sharp and cold. My mom came to stand beside me

"What do you think, Claire? Isn't it something?" She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and squeezed.

"Yeah," I muttered, "it's something, all right."

Mom sighed. "I know it's not Toronto, but..."

I looked at her, pretended not to notice the dark circles under her eyes or the way her skin drooped. "It's fine, really. Weaver is going to be great. An adventure."

She forced a too-bright smile. "Yes, exactly. An adventure." Her cell phone rang and she pulled it out, grimacing as she looked at the caller-id. "Why don't you—" "Get started on unpacking?"

She gave me a relieved nod.

I went to the backseat and rescued Bandit, our four-year-old mutt from the stacks of clothes and boxes. "Come on, boy." I unhooked his safety restraint and attached the leash to his collar. "Let's look around."

My mother's voice followed us, high and strained as she said, "No, Frank, I'm not going to renegotiate the payments...I don't care how expensive the new boat is—" She paused. "Well, maybe you should have thought of before you—" Her voice trailed off as I increased my pace.

Bandit and I walked the alongside the house, then headed through the wooden fence and into the backyard. I gave a low whistle as it came into view. "You're going to be one happy puppy." The yard was huge, pie shaped. Poplars and elms were scattered around the property. I dropped the leash and he took off, scampering from one side to the other, as though he couldn't decide which tree to mark first.

The sound of mom's heels on the cement reached my ears. She came into the yard and gave me a tight smile. She'd been doing

that a lot: smiling without really meaning it. I guess she figured if she put on a brave face, I'd feel better. But I wished she'd just be honest about how she felt.

"Your dad wanted to talk to you—"

I kicked at the dirt by my feet, and left trails of dust along the white rubber of my sneakers.

"Honey." Her voice softened. "You'll have to talk to him, sometime."

"Sometime," I said. "Just not now. I'm busy."

"Oh, yeah? Doing what?"

"Unpacking." I turned and headed back to the car.

She didn't say anything, just gave me a sad smile. She'd also been doing that a lot.

I stopped at the top of the stairs. A row doors stood in a line. One of them belonged to the master suite. That would be Mom's space. That left four possibilities for my new bedroom. I opened the door on the very left, but it was too small and I didn't like the window. Same with the second one. And the third. "I don't like any of them," I called down.

"Pick something," mom yelled back. "You can't sleep it the kitchen."

Sighing, I opened the fourth door, but instead of a room,

it was a narrow set of stairs. This had possibilities. I climbed, and came into the attic. The ceiling came to a point in the middle of the room. A set of windows overlooked the front of the house. On the opposite wall stood another bank of windows. Leaves from the trees in the backyard scrapped against the panes and cast rippling shadows onto the scarred wood floor. I moved closer to the front windows, checked to see if they were painted shut. Behind me, the sound of scrapping came again, but this time, it wasn't the branches against glass.

This time, it was fingernails clawing at the wooden sills.

My skin prickled, my heart did a jump-dive from my chest to my stomach.

The sound came again, stronger, harder, like someone was trying to break into our house...or break out.

I turned, slow, my body tight, cold, and rigid.

No one was there.

The air left my lungs in a long, slow hiss. Of course no one was there. I was on the third floor. Who could reach me? I moved to the paned windows. With every breath, I told myself it had been the branches and I'd just let my imagination run away from me. The small voice inside of me disagreed. It said what I'd heard had been real.

I dropped on to the window seat and looked into the

backyard. The branches of the tree closest to me were too small to hold anyone's weight. "See?" I said to myself. "You're just being silly."

Then the wind moved the trees. The sun lit up the window pane and I saw it: finger marks from someone scratching on the outside of the window pane.

"Honey, are you sure you want to live in the attic?" My mom, her arms filled with two boxes of my stuff, huffed her way up the skinny steps.

"I do," I said grimly.

"But why? It'll be hot in the summer, freezing in the winter..."

I dumped my athletic bag by the banister. "I just think it's time I got over some of my stupid fears...I'm fifteen, I can't let my imagination always get the best of me." I frowned at my feet, then looked up. "I have to be braver..."

She smiled, a real, warm smile, and touched my chin. "At least you didn't think the yard was an ancient burial ground."

"That's exactly what I mean," I said. "When we moved into our last house, it took me six months before I stopped sleeping with a night light."

Mom brushed her fingers across my ears. "Honey, you were

only ten..."

"Doesn't matter. I'm tired of being a 'fraidy cat. This move isn't just a new beginning for you." I looked at her.

"This is a place for me to be a new person."

"I like the old Claire a lot," she said softly. "Fact is, I think I love her."

"Yeah, well," I muttered. "I want to actually date this year, and make friends, and not be called Cowardly Claire for the rest of my life."

"Sweetheart." She put her arms around my shoulder. "You just have a great imagination and you're sensitive. It's not a bad thing—"

I broke free of her hold. "Come here." I led her to the window. The afternoon light was starting to fade. The makes were faint, but still visible. "What are those?"

Mom squinted, knelt on the seat, and leaned forward. The bottom of her jogging jacket brushed against the faded blue cloth of the chair. "Fingerprints."

I started. "What?"

She stood. "Fingerprints."

"No, no they can't be—" Blood rushed in my ears, pounded in my head.

"Of course they are. It probably happened with the window

cleaner was here. They must have rested their hand against the pane."

Adrenaline and self-annoyance stirred their weird soup in my veins. "See? This is exactly what I mean. I heard the branches against the pane, saw the marks, and freaked out. I thought someone was scratching and trying to get in."

Mom chuckled, but not unkindly. "It's a new house, and there are all kinds of new noises we're going to have to get used to. Besides, the fingerprints are skinny—unless you knew we'd hired window cleaners, you would have thought it was a kid who made those marks."

"Don't do that," I said, irritated instead of happy at the love that prompted her words. "I'm over sensitive and I over react, and I don't want to be that person anymore."

She stared at me for a long moment, her brown eyes held my gaze. Then she nodded. "Okay. This is your new room, and I don't want to hear any complaints from you."

From the corner of my room, my cell began to ring.

"You should pick up."

I shook my head.

"Claire..."

"He made his choices." I looked at her. "I've made mine." I gestured around the room. "Besides, I have all this to do,

first."

She smiled. "Come on, Not-So-Cowardly-Claire, let's get your bed up here."

Chapter Two

Water mixed with toothpaste and ran down the bathroom sink drain. I rinsed my mouth one last time, turned off the taps, and lifted my head. In the reflection of the mirror, I saw a girl standing in the open doorway.

My heart lurched from one beat to another.

The girl and I stood, motionless, and stared at each other. I blinked. When I opened my eyes, she was gone. I gulped for air and slumped against the counter. One breath, two. Three, then four. Just my imagination. A trick of light. Not enough sleep.

I stumbled downstairs into the kitchen. Mom was by the stove, frying eggs. In the background, the oldies station had Frank Sinatra crooning about New York. The smell of bacon and coffee mixed with the sunlight streaming in from the window.

"Hi honey." With a flick of her wrist, she flipped the

egg onto the white plate. She stuck five, fat slices of cooked bacon beside it, and added two pieces of toast. Mom turned. "The cholesterol will probably kill us, but what's life without a little danger?"

I took the plate, my hands still trembling. "Right."

She frowned. "Honey, are you okay?"

"Yeah." I moved to the scarred kitchen table. The wooden legs of the chair scrapped against the linoleum. "Just slept weird."

She watched me for a minute. Then she said, "I thought we'd head to the shops. We've got a couple of weeks before school starts. You should get your supplies together, maybe check out what the kids in Weaver wear. I wouldn't mind stopping by a fabric store." She gestured to the sunflower patterned curtains, bright yellow flowers against an even brighter blue background. "That's a little too much for me."

I nodded and choked down a bite of toast. "Yeah...um, actually I was hoping I could go to the library."

Her brown eyebrows rose. "Don't tell me you don't want to be seen with me, already? We don't even know anyone."

I smiled because she was making a joke and I didn't want her to know how truly freaked I felt. "It's not that...I was just...um, thinking..."

"It's about the fingerprints and your vow to be a different person, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Kinda."

"So, what? You're going to go and get some CDs on self-actualization?"

"Huh?" I'm a pretty good student, but I didn't know what that meant.

"CDs on becoming the person you're meant to be."

"Oh." I used my fork to hack the egg to pieces, then stuffed some in my mouth.

"Well? Is that your plan?"

Actually, I was hoping to find the *Dummies Guides to Finding Out if You're Losing Your Mind*, but I was willing to play along. I nodded. "Something like that."

Her mom radar went off. I could tell because the light in her eyes went extra bright. "You're not telling me something."

I shrugged and took a bite of bacon. "I'm almost sixteen. You'll have to get used to me being mysterious."

Her lips pressed together.

I didn't know if that was because she was trying not to laugh or if she was annoyed.

"You just turned fifteen last month. It'll be awhile 'till you're mysterious."

"What can I say? I want to get a head start on it."

That made her laugh, and her laughter made me feel better.

She took a sip of her coffee. "We haven't done that enough, have we?"

I looked at her.

"Laugh," she clarified.

"No, not for a while."

She gulped her coffee and stood. "That changes, starting today. It's time to start laughing." Mom put her hand on my shoulder. "You're going to stop being afraid and I'm going to start guffawing."

I swallowed a bit of toast. "You sure you want to guffaw? That seems like big league kind of stuff. Maybe you should start small. A chuckle or a snicker."

"Watch me, Miss Mysterious. I'm going to be the Belly-Laughing Babe of Santana Crescent."

And that made me guffaw.

An hour later, she dropped me at the library.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked.

My whole life, the only friend I've ever had has been my mom.

"Tell me, honey. What's going on?"

"I think I saw a girl in the bathroom."

Mom smiled. "Did she have honey brown hair, brown eyes and the sweetest smile I've ever seen?"

I rolled my eyes. "Not me...someone else..."

She didn't say anything.

Panic hit. "I'm sure it was just a weird reflection, but I thought I'd...well, I'd look in the medical journals for information."

Mom ran her hand across my hair. "Think you're getting a brain tumour?"

"Or I'm going crazy."

"You're not crazy," she said softly. "You're just—"

"Sensitive."

Silence filled the car. Then Mom said, "What did she look like?"

Heat crept into my cheeks. "Actually, a bit like me. Her hair was curly and darker, and she was shorter...and she actually had a chest instead of mosquito bites—"

Mom grinned.

"—she stared at me. Then, when I blinked, she was gone."

Mom didn't say anything.

"You think I'm nuts, don't you?"

She shook her head.

I chewed my lip. "What do you think, then?"

She sighed. "I think the past year's been really hard on you." She paused. "Maybe we should have stayed in Toronto, closer to your cousins and aunt."

Now it was my turn to shake my head. "No, I'm glad we're gone. I...I needed a change."

She gave me a tired smile. "I did, too." She squeezed my hand. "We'll figure out all of this, together. Everything, including your visitor." Mom reached across me and opened my door. "Now, get out before your brain explodes all over my car."

I grinned and slid out of the seat. "It's not going to explode."

"If it does," she said, "You're cleaning it up."

I stuck my tongue out.

She gave me a raspberry.

I closed the door.

Mom honked the horn and drove away.

When you're known as Cowardly Claire, you spend a lot of time in the stacks of libraries and bookstores, and I considered myself a bit of a teenage expert when it came to the architecture and layout of libraries. As far as the Weaver Public Library went, they had my admiration.

It looked like a glass pyramid and when I stepped inside,

it was like stepping inside a greenhouse. Instead of being full of plants, this warm, bright spot held books. I went to a computer and tried to log on, then realized I couldn't do anything because I didn't have a library card. Because it was Saturday, the place was packed with moms and babies, and the staff seemed busy with them. The customer service line up stretched eight people long, so I decided to wander around until there was less congestion.

I walked around the tall stacks, taking in the smell of paper, old books, and new editions. My cell buzzed. I looked down, saw my dad's face on the screen. I shut off the phone. Turning the corner, I left behind the social sciences section, stepped into sciences, and saw a guy bending over a cart of books. He looked up when he saw me, and flicked his black hair out of his face.

"Hey—"

He had a deep voice.

"—you need this section?" He nodded to the shelves blocked by the cart.

"Uh, no, just wandering."

"Okay." He peered at me. "You new here?"

"Yeah." I shifted my weight from my left leg to my right.

"Thought so. I figure I know all the regulars." He slid a

paperback book into the shelf then looked at me again. "High school?"

"Grade ten—just starting." Then I blushed, because the last part had been obvious. "What about you?"

"Grade eleven." He smiled, but not in a mean way, and said, "Just continuing."

My shoulders dropped with relief. "I'm Claire Murphy."

"Kanvar, but everyone just calls me Kan." He stood. "You'll need a card if you want to borrow anything. We'll need some i.d. Did you change over your address with your driver's license?"

"Oh." I blushed harder. "I don't have one—I meant to get my learner's permit, but then..." *Life exploded.*

"No worries." He grinned.

My stomach flipped, but I wasn't sure if it was because he was super cute with his brown eyes, faded jeans and black t-shirt, or if I just felt giddy because I might actually be making a friend.

"I can still hook you up." He moved out of the stack and I followed.

We went to an empty staff terminal.

He sat down. "What's your address?" He tapped at the keyboard.

"158 Santana Crescent."

His fingers went still.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure." He forced the words, then flashing me a fake smile, tapped the keyboard.

"What's going on?"

"Just putting in your address." Insincerity breathed in the words.

It was the same tone my dad used when he'd lie and say nothing was wrong between him and Mom.

The inside of my body went hot, while the outermost layer of my skin went cold. "What's going on?" I tried to keep my voice casual, but panic was a breath away. I was about to lose a friend before I'd even gotten one.

He flicked his gaze to me, then returned his attention to the computer screen. Kan shrugged. "No one's lived in that house for a long time."

The tight feeling in my chest loosened, but didn't go away.
"That it?"

He shrugged again. "More or less."

Anxiety chewed at my stomach, but I was too cowardly to confront him. After a couple minutes, anger took over. I was mad at myself. This move was supposed to make me a different

person, but here I was, being a fraidy cat, all over again. I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything, a male voice behind me said, "Yo, Kan!"

I turned around. A blond kid wearing a varsity football jacket and jeans, strode over. He flashed me a smile and said, "Sorry, just wanted to ask a quick question." He turned to Kan. "You still coming to the pre-school pep rally?"

"Yeah." Kan nodded at me. "Colbie, this is Claire. She's new in town."

"You wanna come to the rally, too?"

I swallowed. Then I nodded and tried to pretend being asked to hang out wasn't the coolest thing to ever happen to me. "Yeah, sure."

Colbie leaned against the desk. "So, where do you live?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Kan freeze.

"Uh—" I glanced at him, then said, "158 Santana Crescent."

Colbie jerked upright. "The haunted house?"

Now, it was my turn to jerk. "What?"

"Yeah," said Kan. "I didn't want to say anything 'cause you didn't seem to know, but your house...it's haunted by the ghost of a murdered girl."

Chapter Three

"So, what did you find out about tumours?" Mom asked as I climbed into the front seat of the car.

"Nothing," I said, "but I did find out our house is haunted."

My words elicited no startled looks, no jerking on the steering wheel.

"You knew, didn't you?"

She glanced at me, then went back to watching the road. "I didn't..." She sighed. "It was the only house in our price range. The realtor told me about the legend, but—"

"Don't you think you should've told me?"

"No. It was just a story—"

"Of a girl who was killed by her father."

"No one ever proved that."

"That's because a hundred years ago, there was no CSI teams—"

"Honey." Mom slowed down for the red light. She turned to me. "What would it have helped, me telling you? Would you have stayed with your dad?"

I shook my head.

"Knowing our finances, could you have seen another place for us to go?"

I shook my head again.

"So, if I had told you, what would it have accomplished?"

The light changed and she hit the accelerator.

"Maybe I wouldn't have thought I had a brain tumor. Maybe I would have realized I was seeing a ghost."

She muttered something I couldn't understand.

"What?"

"Who were those boys with you?"

"Oh." Her question momentarily threw off my focus. "Kan and Colbie." I blushed. "They're my new friends."

She gave me a broad smile. "Your friends?"

"Yeah." I couldn't help the stupid grin covering my face. "They invited me to the pre-school pep rally."

Mom blinked rapidly. "That's good." Her voice sounded gruff. "Really good. If you want, they can come back afterwards. You guys can make popcorn and hang out."

That brought my attention back. "To the haunted house?"

"Claire..."

The way she said my name made my skin goose bump. "What?"

"We need to talk." She blinked and the creepy atmosphere evaporated. "After the pep rally. Do you need a ride?"

"No, they're picking me up."

"Are there enough seatbelts for every kid in the car?"

I rolled my eyes, but secretly loved the grilling because it meant I actually had a life. "I think so."

"I want to meet them before you go."

"Aw, mom—that's too much."

"Too bad, but them's the breaks for me paying the bills."

We pulled into the driveway and I climbed out. "Wait 'till I'm paying the bills. We'll see how much you like the rules I make up."

"You pay the bills and I'll do anything you ask." She gave me a cheeky grin. "Even live in a haunted house."

A couple of hours later, the bell rang. Kan stood on the porch, looking relaxed and casual. Colbie was on the bottom steps, glancing around like he expected a ghost to appear and drop kick him across the lawn.

"Hey," I said, "you have to come in. My mom wants to do the meet and greet."

"No worries." Kan stepped inside.

Colbie followed, at a slower pace. His gaze took in the circular foyer, narrow staircase, and the living room that stood off to the side. "Okay, I gotta ask," his words came out in a rush. "Have you seen her?"

Kan and I glanced at each other.

"Don't be stupid," said Kan. "It's not like ghosts exist."

And in that one sentence, there went my plan to ever tell them about the window and bathroom incident.

Mom came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on an old blue dish rag. "Hi boys. Just wanted to meet Claire's new friends."

I loved her for being so casual and saying "new friends" instead of "first friends."

"Hi Claire's mom," said Colbie. His lips jerked to the side and then he blurted, "Have you seen the ghost?"

"Aw, for crying out loud." Kan rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Mrs. Murphy—"

"Sophia's fine," said Mom. She turned to Colbie. "No, I'm sorry to say, the ghost hasn't seen fit to visit me."

"See?" Colbie gestured to her. "Not everyone's a cynic."

"Not at all." Mom crossed her arms. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your

philosophy."

Colbie frowned. "My name's not Horatio. It's Colbie."

Kan gave a long-suffering sigh. "She's quoting Shakespeare." He looked at Mom. "I'm Kan."

"Oh. Still, you agree with me, right, Claire's-Sophia?"

Mom's lips twitched. "Right, Colbie. Although, I'm afraid I don't know the whole story. When the realtor mentioned it, I told her it didn't matter, so I didn't need to know the details. But now..." She looked at me. "...Things have changed. I know there's a girl and her father murdered her?"

Colbie nodded "It happened, like, a hundred years ago," he said. "The girl—Mary Murphy—whooa." He looked at me. "Weird. You share the same name."

"It's a common last name," I said, defensive.

He kept staring. "You know, you kinda look like her, too."

"I'm not a ghost."

He waved away my words. "I don't think you're a ghost...but maybe you're related to her..."

"I doubt it. Trust me," I said, "it's impossible." Ice cold air brushed by me. I swallowed hard. Impossible. I wasn't related, and that wasn't the ghost walking by.

Colbie didn't look convinced.

"What's the rest of the story?" asked my mom.

"It was just her and her dad living in the house. The mom had died from some illness. Anyway, the story goes that they fought a lot—the dad and Mary, I mean."

Mom smiled. "I understand."

"Then one day, she just disappeared. Mr. Murphy tried to form a search party and they looked for weeks, but no one ever found her...they say he killed her and buried her..." Colbie turned to me. "...in the basement."

"Then why didn't they find the body?" asked Kan.

"Because he kept her in the attic, in a trunk. Then, later, he buried her."

"You'd think the servants would have noticed the smell," said Kan.

The sound of nails scratching against the window panes came back to me. I looked at my mom. She didn't say anything.

"We should go," said Kan as he looked at Colbie, "before you freak them out anymore."

"Aw, I'm just telling you what I believe."

"This from the guy who still believes in leprechauns," muttered Kan. "Let's go."

My eyes snapped open, wrenched me from sleep.

She stood over me, staring down.

I wanted to scream, to move, but terror froze my muscles. Her skin glowed silver in the moonlight. An invisible breeze made her hair wave around her face.

"Claire." She moved her mouth but I didn't hear her voice in the room. I heard it in my head. "Sweet Claire." Her ice-cold fingers touched my cheek. "So much like me." Her gaze scanned my face, lingered on my eyes and mouth. "Sisters."

I tried to swallow, but my throat wouldn't comply. She leaned in, until our noses almost touched. "You could be me."

I whimpered.

Her hand went beneath my skin. Artic cold froze my muscles. "I could be you."

I tried to speak, but all I managed was a high-pitched moan.

"Change places. See me."

Adrenaline spiked. I shook my head, but her hands went into my torso. She yanked me up. I looked back, saw my body lying on the bed. She pulled me higher, and then we were part of the night sky, hurtling over the houses and buildings of Weaver. We came to an open field surrounded by trees. Mary took us down and as we came closer to one of the oaks, I noticed a large, gaping hole.

"My place," she said. Her hair became thin, creaking branches. Her eyes lost their color and turned into black, gaping holes. "Your place." She shoved me, hard, and I fell into grave.

I looked up at her. The trees surround her had lost their leaves and the wood groaned in the night air.

"Our place," she said. "We share."

Dirt fell on my face as she began to bury me.

Chapter Four

I closed my eyes against the falling debris, then tried to fight my way out of the dirt, but it was as if it grew arms to hold me down. Then the earth grew a mouth and started calling, "Claire! Claire!"

I wrestled in its grip, but it held me tighter and yelled my name. I opened my eyes, panic made everything blurry. A couple of gasped breaths and light resolved itself. I was in my room and it was my mom holding on to me.

She pulled me close. "You were having a bad dream."

"It wasn't a dream," I sobbed. "It was Mary. She came for me." I broke my mom's embrace. "She wants my life."

Wrinkles furrowed Mom's forehead. "Your life?"

I sniffed and nodded. "She tried to bury me alive."

Mom's frown deepened. "That doesn't sound right," she murmured.

"Sound right? She's a ghost. What about any of that sounds

right?"

Her fingers tightened around mine as she said, "Come with me. I need to show you something."

She took me to her room. Reaching under the bed, she pulled out a large, brown scrapbook. "Here." She handed it to me.

I took a seat on the rose-patterned duvet and opened it. The book was full of newspaper articles, stories about hauntings and ghost sightings. A couple stories were about kids who'd disappeared then been found. I looked at my mom. "I don't understand. What does this mean?"

She sighed. "It means I may have omitted some important information you need."

I glanced down at the articles then met her gaze. "What? That you're a ghost-obsessed fan and you specifically bought the house because of the legend?"

She shifted, uncomfortable, and pulled her pink bathrobe around her shoulders.

"Oh my God. You really bought the house because of the ghost?"

"It's not like that."

"Okay...what is it?"

She took my hands in hers. Her fingers, usually warm and

soft, felt cold and clammy. "You know how I always tell you that you're sensitive?"

I nodded.

"You are."

I waited.

"Sensitive to a lot of things...and apparently, this includes spirits..."

I jerked away. "What?"

She nodded. "Most of the women in our family can see ghosts."

The weight of her words hit me like a brick. I pushed off the bed. "And you didn't think I needed to know?" My voice echoed in the room.

"I didn't think you had the gift." Her hands pedaled in the air. "I saw ghosts by the time I was three. Your aunt and your cousin started at four."

Great. I was the queen of late development. No boobs, no ghost seeing. I flopped on the bed.

"Honey, I'm sorry I didn't say anything—"

"Didn't say—" My cheeks felt hot and my voice was skipping octaves. "I thought I was going crazy—you let me believe—"

"I didn't think you were seeing anything."

"No wonder I have no friends," I muttered. "My whole

family weird. Dad's gone off on some mid-life crisis and decided to sail around the world, and you're buying haunted houses to see if I can see ghosts."

Her lips went into a straight, thin line. "Just because I made an error in judgement, young lady, does not give you the right to be rude." She took a breath. "When you were younger, you had all sorts of imaginary friends. I tested you, checked to see if what you were seeing was fiction. It was always made up, Claire. You got older, the imaginary friends vanished. By the time you were thirteen, I thought the gift had skipped you." She paused. "Ghosts are around us all the time. You have never seen them. How was I to know this house would trigger your gift?"

"But when I told you about the fingerprints."

"I thought they belonged to the window washer."

"And seeing the girl in the mirror?"

"After I dropped you off, I looked into the Mary Story. She matches your description. I wanted to talk to you about everything, but then you were invited to the pep rally..." She gave me a smile, part-pride, part-sadness. "It was the first time that anyone's asked you anywhere, and I didn't want to ruin it..."

Maybe, but my world still felt like someone had twisted

everything around. I stood. "I think—" I was going to say that I wanted to go back to bed, but then I remembered Mary. "I think I need some hot chocolate."

She stood. "Why don't I make us some—?"

I shook my head. "No, I want some alone time."

Slowly, she sank to the bed.

I went into the kitchen and stuck a cup of milk in the microwave. For the first time, it looked like I was going to be just an average kid with a couple of friends. What would people do once they found out I could see Mary?

The pep rally had only been a couple of hours, but it had been enough time for me to know I didn't want to go back to the old Claire. I didn't want to be the kid who ate lunch alone and never had a partner for group projects.

The microwave beeped. I took the cup out and slammed the door, extra hard. It wasn't fair. I heard my mother's steps down the hallway, followed by the click of Bandit's claws.

"It's not right," I said, glancing at where she stood, scrapbook in hand. "She should have left me alone." I looked up. "You shouldn't have bought this house."

"You wanted to stay in Toronto and living with grandma in her one bedroom apartment?"

I turned away and ripped a spoon out of the drawer. Then I

took extra big scoops of chocolate powder out of the tin and dropped them in the hot milk.

"I didn't think so. Honey—" Bandit dodged around her as she pulled out a chair. "I didn't know if Mary would show up, but in case she did, who better to help her than us?"

"Us?" I almost choked on my drink. "She tried to bury me alive."

The frown was back on Mom's forehead. "No, that's not right."

I set the cup on the table and sat down, too freaked out to hold a grudge. "No, that's exactly what she did."

"I'm sure that's the action but that wasn't the intention."

"What?"

"Ghosts tend to speak in imagery and symbols. It may have looked like she was trying to bury you, but I promise, she was trying to tell you something. Ghosts aren't violent."

"What about the ones that toss your pictures around rooms and stuff?"

"Those are poltergeists. They're different."

I wanted to argue, but she had years of experience.

"What happened between you two, exactly?"

I told her everything, from Mary saying she could be me, to her taking me to the grave by the tree.

Mom sat back. "We'll have to do more research." She pulled out the book and opened it. "I got a few clippings from the library, but there isn't a lot of information."

"You know who would probably know?"

She smiled. "Colbie?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he couldn't stop talking about it when we were at the pep rally."

Her smile widened. "I guess you'll have to check in with your friend, then, won't you?"

Her words made my stomach burn. "What am I going to say? How will I explain this to them?"

"This gift is yours. You don't have to tell anyone about it, unless you want to."

Maybe, but I'd have to find some explanation if I was going to grill Colbie.

I spent the night on the living room couch. Mom took the rocking chair. Mary never returned. The next morning, I got ready. Dad tried to phone again, but I just ignored him. After I walked Bandit, I biked over to Colbie.

"Hey." He stepped out of his house. "Kan got called into the library. I told him we'd meet him there, later."

I nodded.

He climbed down the porch steps. "So, what do you wanna do?"

"Uh...actually, I want to know more about Mary."

His eyes lit up. "I knew it! Kan says I'm ghost crazy, but I'm not the only one, eh?"

"I guess not...I am kinda curious. Tell me everything."

"Come on, I'll show you around the town and we can talk."

We set off towards Hollings Street. "So," I asked, "what do you know?"

"Mary's mother died in 1912 and I guess the dad wasn't really around." Colbie's face scrunched together. "He was a banker or something and never around. So, the mom dies—"

"How did she die?"

"A riding accident. The horse bucked and she fell, and cracked her skull." He paused. "Mary saw the whole thing—"

I shuddered.

"She and her dad were never close. So, after the mom died, suddenly, Mary's all alone in the house with only the servants. She'd tried to go out, but the dad wouldn't let her go anywhere or do anything. For a while, her friends would visit, but you can only be buddies with a recluse for so long."

I nodded.

"Three years later, Mary's eighteen and going crazy from

loneliness. She befriended the boy who delivered the groceries to the house, and pretty soon, it turns into a romance."

"But the dad wouldn't allow it."

"It was *the* scandal in the town. Rich girl, poor boy. Her dad figured it was all about the money and he forbid them to marry."

"And then she disappeared?"

"Something like that."

I frowned. "You said the town thought the dad had killed her, but what about the fiancé?"

Colbie grimaced. "He was in jail that night. Got into a fist fight at the bar."

"You can't shake that kind of alibi."

He shook his head. "Plus, the servants reported Mary and her father having a huge fight in the study. She ran upstairs. He followed and that was the last anyone saw of her."

"But—" My shoes crunched the fallen leaves. "If he did something to her, wouldn't the servants have seen or heard something?"

"Ah." Colbie grinned. "The dad sent everyone to their quarters and told them not to come out."

"Whoa. It totally sounds like he killed her."

"Yeah." Excitement made his cheeks flush. "But he was a

tyrant. It wasn't unusual for him to banish servants or his daughter to their rooms."

"So...they realized she was missing the next morning?"

"The housekeeper did, but the dad refused to allow her to launch the search."

"Wait, you told me yesterday the dad was the one who tramped through the bushes looking for her."

"Three days later. He thought she was hiding at a friend's house—"

"But she didn't have any friends left."

"I know, but...I don't know." His eyebrows pulled together. "The whole story is kind of weird. I mean, the dad didn't seem to realize she had no friends left, and launched the search, but at the same time, he thought she was just jerking him around and didn't want to create even more scandal by seeming to give into her childish pranks."

"So, did he kill her or not?"

"I think he did. She was pulling away, defying him, and he wasn't a nice guy." Colbie shrugged. "Makes sense to me."

"I guess..." I looked up, spun on my heel. "Where are we?"

"Hmm? Oh." He glanced around. "Crap. Sorry. We took a couple of wrong turns. This is just an empty field." He pointed to a clump of trees. "If you go through there, it opens to a

river bank. It's a great place to—" His face turned scarlet.
"Uh—hang out."

I hid my smile. "Yeah, right."

"You wanna see it?" He held up his hands. "Strictly as friends."

"Yeah sure."

We trudged through the field. The morning dew wet my sneakers. Colbie led the way into the trees. Sunlight filtered through the barren branches, but in a few spots, the leaves clung on, red and gold jewels swaying in the breeze. The trees gradually gave way to a clearing.

I stumbled to a stop.

It wasn't a clearing.

It was *the* clearing. The spot where Mary had taken me last night.

Colbie looked my way. "You okay?"

"Uh, you know, I should head back."

He made a face. "I'm not going to try anything. I'm not that kind of guy."

"What? Yeah, I know—" My gaze stayed riveted to the tree. "This place just...creeps me out." I swallowed. "Let's go, okay?"

He looked from me to the tree. "You're scared of the tree?"

"N-no. It's just...weird in here."

He grinned. "Seriously. You're scared of the tree." He grabbed my hand. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

"No! Colbie!" I pulled, but he was bigger and stronger.

"It's just a tree. You know, the thing that produces oxygen and keeps you alive?" He dragged me over. "See. All done. You're fine. Don't be a 'fraidy cat."

That got me. 'Fraidy cat. Cowardly Claire. I wasn't going to spend my life being afraid. "Yeah." My breath came in pants. "Just fine." Tentatively, I reached out, touched the hard bark. Nothing happened. I released the pent up breath in my lungs and gave me friend a sheepish glance. "You must think I'm a total weirdo."

He nodded. "But so are Kan and me, so it works."

I grinned and caught sight of the river. "Whoa."

"Gorgeous, eh?"

"Totally." I stepped to the side of the tree to get a better look.

The ground beneath me gave way and I plunged down the embankment. Roots scratched my face and flying dirt made my eyes water. I tumbled to the bottom. Colbie slid to a stop beside me.

"Holy crap! You okay?"

I blinked away the dust. "I think so."

He grabbed my arm and helped me up. "That's so weird. That bank's never given way."

Weird. That word was becoming the mantra of my life. We turned to head back up. My eyes caught sight of the white, curved pieces held in the tree's now-exposed roots.

"Is that what I think it is?" Colbie pulled away.

I scrambled after him. "I don't think we should touch it."

He dusted at the dirt. "It looks like a human rib."

"You could be wrong," I said. Dread pressed down on my chest.

"I don't think so." He pointed at the spot where a human skull lay. Empty eye sockets stared up at us.

Chapter Five

We stood in front of the Loaf N' Jug convenience store.

"What are the odds of you finding her body?" Colbie asked between sips of his cherry slushee.

"You don't really know it was Mary," said Kan. "It could be anyone."

Colbie shot him a look.

Kan shrugged. "You don't know."

Considering she'd come to me late at night, taken me to the spot where she'd died, then tried to bury me, I figured my chances of finding her had been pretty darn good. Not that I was going to say anything. I shrugged. "Yeah, weird, eh?"

"Cool's more like it," said Colbie. He took a swig of lime pop and followed it with an enormous bite of his chocolate bar. "You and Mary have the same name. You're living in her house and you even look like her." He shook his head in wonder. "She's bound to visit you. You guys could be sisters."

My spine prickled. That's what she'd said, too.

The bells attached to the store's door tinkled as the cashier stepped out. "Hey kids, you gotta move." She pointed to the sign screwed into the brick wall. "No loitering."

Kan stepped off the curb. We followed and the cashier went back inside.

"It's just coincidence," he said. Glancing over his shoulder to Colbie. "Murphy's a really common last name, and they don't really look that similar. And someone was bound to buy the house, sometime."

"Still," said Colbie, "it's still cool to think about." He looked at me. "That'd be awesome if she visited you."

"I don't think so," I said. "It'd be freaky."

His jaw dropped, showing bits of chewed up nuts and chocolate still in his mouth. "How can you say that?"

"Because it's an otherworldly visitor. I don't need to have my stuff tossed or my t.v. flashing on and off."

"That's a poltergeist," said Kan. "They're not the same as a ghost."

Now it was my turn for my jaw to drop.

He shrugged and jerked his chin in Colbie's direction. "You hang out with him long enough, you pick up stuff."

"It would still be scary," I said. "What if she was violent or creepy?"

Kan stopped walking. The remaining leaves of the trees that lined the street waved in the breeze and cast their shadows across his face. "Not that I believe any of it, but I guess there might be a problem in communication because she wouldn't be part of your existence." He saw the confused look on my face. "It's like if you're standing on the side of a pool, and I'm under the water, trying to talk to you. You'd get some of what I was saying, but not all."

"We should have a séance." Colbie drained his soda.

"Séance?" Both Kan and I spoke at the same time.

"Yeah, at your house. If she's going to talk, she'll talk to you. It'd be awesome."

Kan snorted. "It'd be a waste of time."

Colbie's blue eyes narrowed. "You say that, but you've never done anything paranormal. How do you know it won't work?"

"I've never been hit by a bus, either, but I still know it would hurt. You don't have to do something to know what's going to happen."

Colbie's cheeks went red, his eyes went into tiny slits.

"I don't even know if my mom would let me do something like that." I stepped in between the guys.

Colbie's shoulders dropped. "I think she will."

I kept my gaze on him. "I'll ask. I promise."

"If she says, 'yes,'" said Kan, watching Colbie, "then I'll come too."

"Really?" asked Colbie.

"Yeah," sighed Kan. "Really."

Of course, mom thought it was a great idea. I phoned the guys and a few minutes before they arrived, we got the table ready. Mom tossed a cloth over it to cover the top, and I set a group of white candles in the middle.

"Are you going to tell them you saw her?" she asked.

I shook my head and she nodded.

Both guys showed up early. We gathered around the table.

"It's important to be calm," said Colbie. "Spirits are emotional communicators."

I frowned. "What?"

"Okay, so when someone phones your cell, the phone uses digital networks to reach you. Ghosts use emotional frequencies. They're ability to show themselves depends on how calm and open you are. If you're afraid, she won't be able to come through."

I guess that explained why I had seen her in the middle of the night and early morning. I was too tired to be freaked out.

Kan looked at him in wonder. "How can you know all this stuff and still fail most of your classes?"

Colbie shrugged. "Priorities. Knowing algebra isn't going to get me anywhere with ghosts."

Mom lit the candles and shut off the lights. "Why don't we start?"

I set down my soda. "How do we do this?"

Kan sat to my right, Colbie my left, and Mom took the seat opposite me. "Take hold of each other's hand."

Kan's fingers slid around mine, warm, firm. My heart jumped and my stomach dipped at his touch.

"Now, we take some calming breaths—"

Easy for her to say.

"—and then we'll try to talk to her."

The air filled with the sound of our breathing, then Mom said, "Mary. Mary. We are gathered here as friends. We mean you no harm. Are you here?"

The candlelight flickered.

"Air currents," said Kan.

Mom looked at me. "Claire, you give it a try."

"What do I say?"

"Just talk to her," said Colbie, "like you're talking to one of us."

I cleared my throat. "Uh-hey Mary. It's Claire. Are you around?"

The flames of the candles went sideways.

"That's no breeze," said Colbie.

Kan squeezed my hand. "Say something else."

"Mary, did you want to talk. We know you've been in this house for a long time. Do you want us to help you leave?"

Candlelight flamed, like someone had tossed gasoline on it.

Bandit whined.

Mary appeared beside Mom.

My mouth went dry. "Hey Mary. How can we help?" I blinked

and suddenly, it was just her and I, standing on the riverbank. The only light was a full moon. I glanced around. "Where did everyone go?"

"I only need you."

My heart contracted, my lungs froze. "Need me?"

Her image flickered.

I took a deep breath. "How can I help you?"

She took my hand and then we were at the edge of the lake. The dark water bent the moon's reflection, and cut it into rocking wedges of silver light. Mary dropped my hand.

"I hated him," she said.

"Your dad?"

She nodded. "All I wanted was to go away."

"With the delivery guy."

She gave me a sad smile. "He wasn't much, but he was mine."

I took a breath. "What happened the night you died?"

"I ran," she said softly. "I ran and ran, and then—" She glanced back and up.

I followed her gaze to the spot where we'd found her bones.

"—then I tripped and that was it."

I exhaled slowly. "So he didn't kill you."

Her face hardened. "Not physically. But being with him—being locked in the house, I just wanted freedom." She looked

away from the tree. "When I realized...when I saw..." Her voice broke on a sob. "Then I really hated him. He was responsible. It was his fault." She paused. "Only later did I realize..."

"Realize...?"

She gave me a humourless laugh. "Anger imprisoned me more than he ever did."

"Do you think that's why you're still here, haunting the house?"

She nodded. "Hate binds me to this town." Her gaze locked on to mine. "The same way your anger binds you."

"I don't have anger—"

"I saw you the day you came to the house. Saw what happened when your father phoned."

Acid burned my stomach. "It's a little different than what happened to you—"

She shook her head. "Not so different. Anger will trap you."

I rolled my eyes. "Give me a break. You're not really the one to tell me what to do."

"Who better than the girl whose fate you might someday share?"

"Mary?"

We both turned.

A man, older with a hunched back and stooped shoulders, stepped out from behind the tree. "Mary, is that you?"

"I've been hiding from him," she said. "He's been searching all these years and every time he drew close, I hid. I wanted to punish him for what he did, wanted him to suffer..." She took a breath. "...but I don't want to suffer anymore." She stepped around me and looked back. "I don't want to suffer anymore. I'm tired. I want to rest. I had to stay here, had to wait until you came. You were the key to my freedom."

I frowned. "How?"

"You know my story—the truth." She gave me a lopsided smile. "The truth will always free you." She turned to face her father. "I'm here."

"Oh, Mary." Relief flowed in his voice. "I've been looking everywhere."

"I know. I'm coming." She turned back to me. "A life lived in anger and fear isn't a life lived." She moved away, faded with every step until she disappeared from view.

"I really fainted?" I sat up from the couch and took the cup of tea from my mom.

Colbie nodded. "You looked past your mom's shoulder said, 'hey, Mary,' then keeled over."

Kan watched me from his spot by the fireplace. "Did you really see her?"

I swallowed some tea.

"Claire?" Mom touched my face. "Your friend asked a question."

I took a deep breath.

Then I nodded. "Yeah, I saw her." I stared at Kan's face, waiting to see his reaction.

"I knew it!" whooped Colbie. "I knew you'd be the one to call her."

Kan didn't say anything.

I was going to get an ulcer if he didn't talk. "What are you thinking?"

"Did she say anything to you?" he asked.

I nodded again. "She said that she blamed her father for her death. He didn't kill her, but he drove her to run away and when she died, she blamed him."

"Really? He didn't kill her?" Colbie frowned. "I didn't expect that."

"What else did she say?" asked Kan.

"That she and I were alike and I had to confront my dad about leaving Mom and me."

Colbie lightly punched Kan on the arm. "See? You believe

now, don't you?"

Kan shook his head. "No."

"What?" Colbie dropped to the spot beside him. "You heard what Claire said."

"Yeah, but..." He glanced at me, then my mom. "No offense, but there's a rational explanation."

"What's that?"

"You and Colbie found her bones. That must have jacked up your feelings. Then, when the ventilation went all wonky and the candles sputtered—"

"That wasn't ventilation," said Colbie.

"Of course it was." Kan shot him a look. "The house is over a hundred years old, and needs serious renovations. The air ducts and furnace have got to be shot."

Colbie frowned and Kan continued, "The flames go wonky. You freak and pass out."

"How does that explain my conversation with Mary?" I asked.

Kan shrugged. "You identify with this girl. You guys look alike, shared the same house, same name. Plus, you just said you have problems with your dad. So did she. It was just your subconscious talking."

Colbie shook his head. "No way. The ghost came."

Kan snorted with contempt. "Ghosts don't exist."

"What do you think, Mrs. Murphy-Sophia?" asked Colbie.

Mom watched Kan, then looked at me. "I think it doesn't matter what I think."

Colbie chuffed. "What a Mom Answer."

She grinned. "Can't help it."

Kan stood. "Come on, Colbie. We should go." He nodded in my direction. "Claire looks like she needs sleep." He moved to the door.

"Fine," said Colbie, "but Claire and I know what really happened."

"We'll talk to you tomorrow," said Kan. "The school building opens tomorrow. If you bring your schedule, we'll show you where all your classes are."

I stopped. "Really?"

He gave me a confused look. "Yeah, it's better to do it before school actually starts. Some of those teachers freak if you're late—they don't care if you are new to the school."

"Oh."

His frown deepened. "What?"

"Oh, I just wondered if you guys still wanted to hang out after...well, tonight."

He gave me the incredulous look he usually gave Colbie.

"Why wouldn't we?"

"Uh, 'cause I said I'd seen a ghost and I fainted."

"So? I'm best friends with a guy who believes in leprechauns."

Huh. True.

He shook his head and smiled. "We're cool." He glanced at Colbie. "Well, as cool as some of us can ever be."

"Always the comedian," muttered Colbie as he stepped out the door.

Kan followed. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you."

Mom closed the door. "I'm proud of you for telling the truth. I would have understood if you hadn't but that took a lot of courage." She smiled. "I guess you really aren't the same old Claire, are you?"

I shrugged. "Mary said a life lived in fear and anger wasn't a life lived. I figure she'd know what she's talking about."

"Why don't I make us some hot chocolate and you can tell me every detail?"

I nodded. "Sure."

She went into the kitchen. I walked into the family room and sat down. Bandit hopped up beside me.

I took a breath.

Then I reached for the phone and dialled. When his voice came on the line, I said, "Hi, dad? It's me. Claire..."