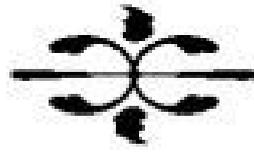


Ghost of a Chance

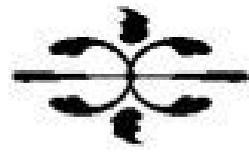


Yasmine Galenorn



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

Ghost of a Chance



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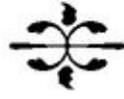
There she was. Susan Mitchell. Standing by the bottom of my son's bed with a luminescent smile on her face. As I watched, a shadow rose up behind her, and I caught the merest whiff of jackal bites and crocodile smiles. Susan turned, pulling back when she saw what was there. I decided that if she was making tracks, so would we. I started to back up, pushing Kip behind me, but the apparition was growing larger, amorphous and swirling like a whirlpool of energy, and I found myself mesmerized. I couldn't look away.

"Mom? Mom!" Kip's tentative voice shook me out of my paralysis. As I broke free from the trance, I thought I caught a glimpse of cold steel teeth in the heart of the shadow. I broke into a sweat—the shadow couldn't be good. Couldn't be safe. I had to get Kip out of the room *now*, but before I could move the creature lunged, dissipating Susan's image as it shot right through her misty body on a beeline for . . . me!

Chintz 'n China Mysteries by Yasmine Galenorn

GHOST OF A CHANCE
LEGEND OF THE JADE DRAGON
MURDER UNDER A MYSTIC MOON
A HARVEST OF BONES
ONE HEX OF A WEDDING

Ghost of a Chance



Yasmine Galenorn



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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To the memory of my mother, Helen, who has visited me from “the other side”

*I miss you
1927—2000*

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“Thank you’s” are due to many people: Samwise, my wonderful husband; Carolyn Agosta, my brilliant critique partner; Jeff Kleinman—for his support, advice, and encouragement.

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And last, to all of my readers, both old and new. Without you, all of our stories would languish in the corner, dust-covered and forgotten.

Bright Blessings and thank you!

~the Painted Panther~

~Yasmine Galenorn~

Writing is nothing more than a guided dream.

—*JORGE LUIS BORGES (1899-1986) Doctor Brodie's Report*

One



MY NAME IS Emerald O'Brien and I never set out to be a detective, but when Susan Mitchell's ghost appeared in my bedroom and told me that she'd been murdered, my life took a U-turn and I've never looked back.

Oh, sure, most people would have been scared out of their wits, but I'm used to dealing with the supernatural, so spirits and spooks don't bother me unless I figure out that my shadowy guests intend some sort of nasty surprise. My Nanna taught me how to work with my psychic abilities early on, and when the ghosts come calling, I don't freak out or hide under the covers or scream for help. I fully admit to being a coward when it comes to ill-tempered brutes and eight-legged beasties, and I have an unnatural hesitation about eating mushy bread. But show me a ghost and I can usually hold my own.

I'm not a professional ghost-hunter, though. I own the Chintz 'n China Tea Room. Not Tea *Shopp* spelled with the cutesy extra *pe*, but *Room*. We sell fine china, go hunting for rare pieces customers ask for, serve tea and cookies all day long, and soup for lunch during the week. I also offer my services as a tarot reader.

Chiqetaw may be a small town, but I get my fair share of clients coming in. Mainly wonderful old women who want to know how the coming holidays are going to be, or if it's the right time to make that investment they were planning on. I don't answer health questions, I don't lie and tell them what they want to hear, I just read the cards as they fall, and most of my customers come back for more. They seem to find my candor refreshing, a relief to me since I'm not always as diplomatic as I probably should be.

Considering that I'm the only professional tarot reader in town, and considering my handiwork with folk magic, it's not surprising that I got labeled the "witch of the village." At least they didn't stick "old" in there—I don't quite fit any of the clichés *in* the movies, you know—the scary old hag out on the edge of the woods, or the lovely wise woman always ready to heal the sick. I'm thirty-six, divorced, and as far from a domestic goddess as you can get. I wouldn't know my way around a health food store if you paid me, and I have two brilliant, quirky children.

Anyway, that's where Susan Mitchell comes in. Or her ghost, rather. Given my reputation, it didn't really surprise me when she showed up at my bedside. I just wish she'd picked a better night. I was lying under the covers, fighting my usual insomnia, with a sinus headache so bad that it felt like somebody was using my face as a punching bag. I had on my sleep mask, trying to doze off in the desperate "please, oh, please, let me go to sleep" way all insomniacs have, when I heard a rustle in the corner. Samantha yowled and bounded off the bed. Somebody else was in the room.

Great. My eight-year-old wanted to get up to play Ninja Fighters or some equally violent video game and had startled the cat. Or my daughter was sneaking in from a late night's star gazing and wanted to talk over her latest discovery. I never knew when I'd find her sprawled on the roof in the

middle of the night, using the telescope to spy on both Mars and the neighbors. More than once she held me breathless as she filled me in on some pretty kinky goings-on next door before I'd snapped out of it and warned her about the dangers of becoming a teenaged voyeur.

Prepared for anything—or so I thought—I sat up and pulled off the mask and there she was. Susan Mitchell. Or rather, the ghostly remains of Susan Mitchell. Of course, at the time, I didn't know that was her name. All I knew was that a short, translucent blonde was hovering about three inches above the edge of my bed. With a groan, I rolled over and closed my eyes, willing her to go away. After a moment the hairs on my arms stood at attention and I knew she was still there. Sigh. I was going to have to take care of this.

I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and felt for my slippers, all the while keeping track of the now-alert and rather excited-looking spirit. The gleam in her eye made me nervous, and I wondered if I'd have to resort to my handy-dandy middle-of-the-night exorcise-those-beasties ritual, but she pulled back as I poked my arms through the sleeves of my flannel robe. Then she folded her hands together, prayerlike. Maybe it was this gesture that warmed my heart, maybe it was the grateful look on her face. Whatever the reason, I felt a little kindlier toward her and, sinus headache or not, decided to find out what she wanted.

I tucked my hands in the crook of my underarms. It was so cold I could see my breath. *The Sixth Sense* had it right—it did get colder when ghosts were around, but it wasn't because they were angry. I'd dealt with enough spirits to know that they seemed to coast in off the astral breeze and bring the wake of it with them.

The ghost hovered there, about two feet taller than me thanks to the fact that she was floating midair. She seemed to be waiting for me to speak. I wasn't sure what to say. Most spirits I'd dealt with in the past hadn't been interested in the humans who shared their space. I rather preferred it that way.

After a few minutes of this standoff, I decided that she was either shy or didn't know how to speak to me. If I ever wanted to get back to sleep, I'd have to be the one to make the first move. I took a deep breath and planted myself on the foot of the bed, near enough to seem friendly, but not enough to be a target should she decide to get nasty. "Hi, I'm Emerald. You can call me Em. Who are you, and what do you want?" Not very original, but blunt and to the point.

She cocked her head, beaming. I hoped she wasn't one of those spirits who could manipulate physical objects. The last thing I needed was a hug from beyond the grave. Granted, my grandmother had done just that, after Roy blackened my eye and stomped out to go live with his bimbo. But right now I didn't feel like being the recipient of any ghostly embrace.

She seemed to be trying to speak—her mouth moved but I couldn't hear anything. I shook my head and she tried again. Finally, her eyes flashed with frustration and she glided over to my desk, which sat below the Monticello window overlooking the backyard. A pen began to vibrate and went scribbling across the stationery scattered on the top of the desk.

In scrawls that were almost illegible, the name "Susan Mitchell" covered the page. The name seemed familiar, but I couldn't place it. I looked at the ghost. "You? You're Susan Mitchell?"

She nodded. As soon as she filled another page, the pen fell to the floor. I gingerly picked up the paper and looked at the letters that danced across the paper. What I saw made my blood run cold.

glanced up, and Susan looked at me wistfully. She pointed to the note, then to me, and vanished in a puff of icy air.

I looked at the note again. The words were damning. In looping letters she had written: “*I was murdered by my husband but nobody knows. Help me.*”

What did she expect me to do? True, I was considered the town witch, but I owned a *china shop*, for cripes’ sake—I didn’t run a detective agency. Now I was supposed to go to the police and say that Susan Mitchell’s ghost had appeared by the foot of my bed, begging me to prove that her husband had killed her? I didn’t know who she was or where she had lived. I didn’t even know if she was telling the truth—ghosts could lie, too. And I wasn’t sure why she’d shown up in my bedroom, except for the fact that I was a pretty good medium and happened to be Chiqetaw’s only professional tarot reader when I wasn’t busy selling Earl Grey tea and Royal Winton china. But somehow, the paper in my hand seemed to have captured the spirit’s mood. Sorrow echoed through her words . . . sorrow and resignation. How could I ignore the plea for help? Just because she was dead didn’t mean Susan Mitchell was at peace. But what could I do? And where would I start?

Feeling more awake than ever, I trundled downstairs. Nothing beat a good pot of Moroccan Mint served up in a chintzware teacup at three in the morning when you were trying to figure out how to help a ghost prove she was murdered.

MORNING CAME FAR too early. I squinted, aware in some faint corner of my mind that I had fallen asleep in the rocking chair, and found myself staring into my son’s bewildered face. My eyelashes were stuck together, and there was a ball of fuzz on my lap—Nebula, one of Samantha’s kittens, had curled up for a good, long snooze. I gently shooed the cat down. I had the feeling that standing up would only going to lead to pain, so I avoided it for as long as possible. In the end, I gave Kip a blurry-eyed grin as I pushed myself to my feet.

“You okay, Mom?”

I leaned down and planted a kiss on his head. “I’m fine, bud. My insomnia’s been acting up, but it’s nothing to worry about. Have you had breakfast yet?”

He shrugged. “Leftover pie.”

“Healthy, huh?” Nature called and I made a stiff-legged dash upstairs to my bathroom.

Sun slanted through the rose window that I had the carpenter install when I bought the house a little over a year ago. The light cast a rosy hue over the pale canary of the walls, and the result always startled me as a blush of tangerine filled the room. I leaned against the vanity as I washed my face, savoring the few moments alone, not thinking of last night, not thinking of the day—just enjoying my own company. My mother had sent me a bar of jasmine-scented soap from her last trip to Hawaii, and I worked up a good lather because I loved the smell and because it felt like soft cream.

After a quick shower, I slapped on some moisturizer and braided my hair so it would dry into a mass of waves. I had stopped dyeing it when we moved to Chiqetaw and only now was getting used to seeing the long, silver strands interweave through the Brunette. I tucked a bandanna around my head to keep from catching cold. Utilitarian, if not pretty.

Still blurry-eyed, I pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. As much as I'd rather spend the morning figuring out just what had happened last night, Saturday was cleaning day down at my shop. We opened at noon, after waging war on all the cobwebs and dust bunnies that had collected under the counters and tables throughout the week.

Kip pounded on the door. "Mom, are you sure you're okay? I grabbed a Pop-Tart, too."

I smiled. Eight years old and he didn't know how to work a cereal box yet. My little slacker. But he helped around the house and finished his chores without complaining too loudly, so I wasn't going to bitch about his lack of motor skills in the cornflakes department. I blinked at myself once, twice, then opened the door and shuffled out. My mind was beginning to race, but my body definitely lagged behind.

Kip leaned against the wall with the remains of the toaster pastry. He had a wary look in his eyes and crumbs on his face. I immediately knew something was up. I reached out and tousled his hair. "Whatchyu doing, kiddo?"

He gave me one of his long looks. He was so good at them that he could reduce an adult to gibberish within five minutes. I was proud of him for it. Not every woman's son had the ability to disconcert his elders, and it seemed more useful than anything the Boy Scouts could have taught him.

"Waiting for you. Why did you stay up all night?" Did I detect a hint of concern in his voice? Could Kip have possibly seen the ghost, too? My son was far too psychic for his own good at such a young age. I'd been trying to help him learn how to control and cope with it for the past year. Though his talent had been apparent from birth, it had blossomed out since Roy left us. A lot of things had blossomed since then.

He took a deep breath and plunged ahead with what I was afraid I was going to hear. "Mom, I thought I felt something in the house last night. I had a nightmare."

Nightmare? Kip hadn't had nightmares for over a year. "What was it about, kiddo?"

"Some lady, I guess. I dunno. I woke up in the middle of the night and was worried about you. I thought maybe something was going to hurt you." He swallowed the last of the Pop-Tart and wiped his hands on his jeans.

Normally, when Kip was upset in the middle of the night he would come tapping gently on my door and creep under the covers next to me. That he hadn't done so this time told me that he'd been too frightened to leave the security of his own bed. I didn't want him to worry, didn't want to talk about the ghost until I'd figured out what was going on. "Well, I look all right this morning, don't I? It was probably a dream, my Kipling."

He gave me a penetrating glance, and I knew he knew I was hiding something, but I also knew I knew I wasn't going to tell him until and unless I was good and ready. He nodded and bolted for the stairs, stopping long enough to turn at the railing. "Okay. Can I go over to Sly's?"

Sly was his current best friend and a little con artist, but Kip had enough brains to keep from getting involved in whatever trouble that kid had cooked up. I waved him away. "Wear your jacket—it's cold out. And don't forget that I want you at the store in an hour. Be there." One of the kids' chores was to help out on Saturday mornings. He took the stairs two at a time and vanished out the front door with a slam.

On the way to the kitchen, I stopped by the rocker and picked up the sheets of paper on which my ghostly visitor had written. The moment I touched them, I felt a wave of sadness overwhelm me. I looked at the writing. No, it hadn't been a dream. Susan's presence had been real enough. "*I was murdered by my husband but nobody knows. Help me.*" How the hell was I supposed to deal with this? I didn't even know who she was.

I cracked eggs into the skillet and started toasting the bread, while Miranda grabbed the paper from the front porch. She gave me a quick peck on the cheek as I slid our breakfast onto the ruby crystal dishes I had so coveted for years. Roy had thought them too old-fashioned. After he left, I didn't care what he thought. In fact, I had decided to find a set of Cranberry Spode to go with them. The contrast would be startling and eye-catching.

Miranda poured the juice. With a bite of runny yolk on toast, I opened the paper and glanced through the news. There, down at the bottom of the page, an article caught my attention. The headline read, "Local Romance Writer Found Dead in Home."

Susan Walker Mitchell died Thursday evening after slipping into a diabetic coma. Maureen Taylor, the Mitchells' housekeeper, found Ms. Mitchell unconscious upon returning to the residence at about 4:00 P.M. on Thursday afternoon. Blood tests confirmed the presence of both alcohol and Valium in Ms. Mitchell's system, a dangerous combination. However, doctors attribute her death to hypoglycemic coma, brought on by a failure to eat after taking her morning insulin.

"The levels of Valium and alcohol were high, but not within life-threatening ranges," Dr. Johansen, the Mitchells' family physician, stated. "Mrs. Mitchell has been admitted to the hospital four times in the past year for low-blood-sugar seizures . . . unfortunately, no one was with her this time to prevent her from slipping into a coma." Ms. Mitchell died without regaining consciousness.

Ms. Mitchell was well loved for her work in the community theater, but she was best known for her career as a romance novelist. She produced twenty-nine books over the past fifteen years, including the best-selling *Love on Clancy Lane*. Her books are read worldwide.

Survived by her husband, Walter Mitchell, Chiqetaw, and a daughter, Diana Mitchell, Seattle, Ms. Mitchell will be greatly missed.

I stopped reading. *Of course. Susan Mitchell. The romance novelist.* I remembered seeing her name mentioned in the paper before, though I'd never met her. The photograph beside the obituary was most definitely that of my ghostly visitor.

"Is everything okay, Mom?" Oh no, not her, too. It was bad enough that Kip had sensed something, but Miranda spooked too easily, and I didn't want her involved in any part of this yet.

I squelched the urge to blurt out the truth. "No . . . no . . . nothing wrong. Go ahead and run along. Remember to be at the store by ten."

She grabbed her pack and raced out the door to catch the bus. Grabbing a pen and a steno book, I always keep handy near the phone, I ripped the article out of the paper and tucked everything in my purse.

So my ghost was real, or had been. Diabetic coma? Murder? With a dozen thoughts reeling through

my head, I made my way out to the car and pulled out of the driveway. I had a lot to do before opening the shop. The only trouble was, I didn't know where to begin.



CHIQUETAW IS AN easy town to navigate—the streets are fairly straight, and the traffic, sparse. I was spitting snow as I guided my car down Main Street. The town council had decided to put up the Christmas decorations early this year, starting the day before Thanksgiving. Now, two weeks before Christmas, strands of colored lights sparkled around the lampposts and bare-branched trees that lined the main drag. I took a deep breath of the chill air that flowed in through the open crack of the window. God, how I loved this time of year.

Forty-five minutes before I was supposed to meet the kids at the store—enough to do a little digging. I pulled into the parking lot of Harlow’s Gym. Harlow Rainmark was my best friend in this little burg, and without her I think I’d have gone bananas when I first moved here. Named after Jean Harlow by her starstruck mother, she had valiantly tried to live up to the legend, slipping into dangerous territory as she forced the envelope farther and farther in her youth.

I slammed the door of my Grand Cherokee—one of the few real luxuries I allowed myself—and pushed through the double doors of Chiquetaw’s only spa.

Harlow was behind the desk. Her face brightened and she wrinkled her nose. “I was hoping you’d show up. It’s dead in here. If it gets any slower I’m going to have to turn this place into a morgue.” Her windblown tangle of hair never failed to amaze me. It was as if someone had taken a curling iron and crimped the shoulder-length strands into ribbons of shimmering, coiled gold. It came as no surprise to anyone when they found out that she’d been a professional model until she gave up her career and moved back to Chiquetaw to marry her childhood sweetheart.

“Cleaning day at C ’n C. I’m not due at the store for close to an hour. It’s snowing, by the way.”

“Ugh.” Harlow hated both cleaning and snow. I agreed with her on housework, but the cold—I loved winter. She was much more of a sun bunny than I.

I dropped into one of the chairs that faced the customer service desk. “Sure is dead in here.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I know. What’s up?”

I dug into my purse and pulled out my notebook and the clipping. “I need some info if you’ve got it.”

She leaned forward, always curious. The woman had a nose for gossip like no one else I’d ever met, and if I needed to know anything about anybody in this little burg, she was the place to start.

I handed her the obituary and flipped open my notebook. “Susan—did you know her?”

She read the clipping. “Yeah, I knew her. She was in the Chiquetaw Players.”

“That’s why I asked you.” I knew that Harlow was one of the primary sponsors of the little theater group. If anybody knew anything about the members, she would.

Harlow tapped a polished fingernail against the paper. "Susan had talent. Lots of it. I've read all her books. It's hard to believe that she'd let this happen. I always assumed she was careful about her diabetes. I guess the condition is harder to keep track of than I thought." She handed me back the article. "What do you want to know?"

"What about her husband? Did they have a good marriage?"

She raised one eyebrow. "You aren't looking for a sugar daddy, are you?" When I glared at her, she winked. "Just kidding. I'm going to assume you have a good reason for asking, since I've never known you to go muck-raking before." She glanced around. The gym was bare. Luckily, she didn't really need the income. She'd been one of the few smart ones with her money, investing for the days when she would be too old to play the cover girl.

She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Susan used to think her marriage was perfect, but I hear she filed for divorce recently. Walt's a scum. Rich and powerful, but a scum. He tried to seduce me last spring, and when I told him to fuck off, he spread a few well-placed rumors that I was a dyke who just married James for his money. Nobody believed him, but nobody would confirm that he was the one who was spreading the gossip, either. I never told Susan though. I didn't want to hurt her."

I knew Harlow well enough to know she wouldn't lie about something like this. "So, Walter's a scuzbag. I wonder why she married him."

Harlow shrugged. "I dunno. We weren't really close. I wanted to be friends and there were times when she opened up, but when I think about it, she never let anybody get too near. You know what I mean? It was almost like she was afraid to let people into her life." A puzzled expression crossed her face. "I wonder what happens to her estate now."

"Won't Walter get it? They were still married."

Harlow frowned. "I don't know. They've got a daughter, though I gather she never comes home. Apparently the girl isn't very stable." Leaning forward even though the gym was empty, she whispered, "You know, Susan ran away when she was a teenager. Rumor mill had it that she went chasing after a boy, but I have no idea what happened. She ran off before she graduated. About a year and a half later, she returned to Chiqetaw, pregnant. She married Walter and would never talk about the time she was gone."

I jotted everything down, making brief, terse notes and underlining the words. It made me feel a little bit like a detective, and I bit my lip to keep back a silly grin. I probably wouldn't be able to read my own writing tomorrow, but what I could decipher should jog my memory.

"Interesting." I sat back and contemplated the huge sculpture that took up almost a third of the lobby. Harlow loved being a benefactor; the spa was liberally peppered with local artists' attempts to break into the spotlight.

She rested her legs on the desk, full of old *Shape* and *Muscle & Fitness* magazines, her feet encased in a pair of Sketchers. Chic. Everything about her was trendy, always a few months ahead of everybody else. When I hung out with her too much, I began to feel like a blimp next to that sleek, too-thin, too-toned body of hers.

"Can I ask why you want to know all this?" Harlow was used to me talking about all sorts of occult and spooky things, but I wasn't sure how she'd take my latest revelation.

“Susan showed up in my bedroom last night. I think she has some unfinished business she needs take care of.”

She stared at me. “*Susan* was hanging out in your room? You mean her ghost?”

“Well, she’s dead. She couldn’t be there any other way, now, could she?” I feigned a sudden interest in my fingernails, glancing at Harl through my lowered lashes.

“I see.” Her voice was so even it scared me. One of these days, she’d break down and have the cart me away to the funny farm. “And did she tell you what she wanted?” A mixture of laughter and fear danced in her oh-so-blue eyes.

“Kind of.”

“Awfully cryptic, aren’t we? I have *got* to hear the full story, but I have the feeling you’re not going to spill it right now, are you?”

I gave her a rueful grin and stood up. “Not now, babe, but I promise to tell you everything as soon as I’ve got more time.” I was on my way out when another thought struck me. “Hey, I’d love to ‘casually’ meet a few people who might have been close friends of hers. Is there going to be a reception following the service?”

Harlow tossed her magazine back on the pile. “I have no idea, but I’ll try to find out. Meanwhile, why don’t you come with James and me to the opening of *Obsidian*? Starts at eight sharp, tonight. It’s a play by a local writer. His name is Andrew Martinez, and he was in Susan’s writing group.” She grinned. “You won’t believe what else he writes. Anyway, James and I are taking him out afterward to celebrate the new show. Tag along?”

“Are you sure that I won’t be intruding?” I hated being a fifth wheel and chances were Andrew already had a girlfriend. Celebrations like sit-down dinners always felt awkward now that I was divorced.

She got that all-too-hopeful look that always spelled trouble for me. “He’s unattached and won’t be bringing a date. I’ll say that you and I want to play catch up. The autumn’s been so hectic that it’s really true, you know—we need to spend an afternoon gossiping. And who knows? Maybe something will come of the meeting.”

I narrowed my eyes. “It never works out, Harl. Don’t even go there. But yeah, I’ll come with you. We can use an evening out, and the kids can grab something from McDonald’s.”

She told me that the play would be at the local high school gymnasium. I gave her a hug and headed out, wondering what she would think when I told her the whole story. Unlike most of the residents of Chiqetaw, Harl accepted my quirkiness without comment, but when I started talking about ghosts, she got spooked. I think she must have been scared by some mutant pervert on a bad Halloween.

BY NOON, WE’D polished every inch of the Chintz ’n China. I excused Kip and Miranda after handing them each a five-dollar bill. “Be home by six at the latest. If you want, stop and pick up something take-out for dinner. I’ve got to go out for a while tonight and won’t have time to fix anything.”

They pocketed the money and took off, Miranda for the library and Kip for Sly's. In Seattle, I never have been so carefree. ~~Too many things could happen to kids if we didn't keep tabs on them.~~ But in Chiqetaw it seemed as though the outer world hadn't quite caught up. At least not on an everyday basis. Here, it was still safe to leave the car unlocked when I ran into a shop. Kids in Chiqetaw didn't disappear on their way to Mickey D's.

Once Cinnamon and I were alone, I snapped up the "Open" sign and smiled wearily at her. "Well, the place looks better. Thanks for coming in this morning. We needed the help. Starting Monday, I need you here all day, six days a week, through the Christmas rush. Can you manage that?"

She nodded, eyes wide. This was her first real job. She was twenty-two and took her responsibility so seriously that sometimes it made me want to laugh, but I didn't, because you just couldn't buy loyalty like that in an employee anymore. The girl had three kids. Her boyfriend had been thrown in jail a little over six months ago. "I can use the extra money." She fiddled with the linen napkins she was folding. "Christmas is going to be tight this year." Tight was right—Cinnamon didn't get any child support, and she lived with her mother.

She put the water on to boil. We served tea and a few baked goods that I ordered from the local bakery every day. On weekdays, we dished up homemade soup and biscuits during the lunch hour. Most of my business, however, came from people buying china and imported teas, jellies, jam, crackers, real anglophile stock and wares.

As she filled three giant thermoses I saw that she had chosen Misty Lemon, Orange Spice, and, of course, the ever-present Earl Grey. With sudden inspiration, I chalked "Citrus Surprise Afternoon" on the menu board and broke open a couple of jars of marmalade and lemon curd to go with the sliced pound cake and muffins we were selling. The scent of lemon curd made me hungry. Remembering my uneaten breakfast, I slathered a spoonful on a piece of the cake, grinning at Cinnamon as I wiped crumbs off my shirt.

"Is good," I mumbled. She snorted, but within a moment she joined me in the impromptu lunch. We pushed aside the newspapers on one of the little tea tables that set in the alcove by the window and sat down with our tea and cake to wait for the first customers of the day.

Within moments, Nancy Reynolds pushed through the door, looking for her special order. A flurry of snow followed her in—winter had arrived strong and early this year. I popped the last of the cake in my mouth, gulped down my tea, and dove into the afternoon.

BETWEEN CLEANING THE shop and getting ready for the play, I had no time to follow up on any of the information I'd gotten from Harlow. I raced home, made sure the kids were okay, then shuffled through my closet. Someday soon I was going to have to break down and go shopping, like it or not.

Jeans and sweatshirt wouldn't do. I'd always preferred long skirts and warm turtlenecks. I finally decided on a calf-length black rayon skirt, a royal purple turtleneck, and a gold necklace. Dressy, but not so dressy that I'd stand out. I didn't want to admit that I might end up on a blind date. Harlow's fix-ups never worked. I perfunctorily sprayed my wrists and neck with Opium and brushed out my hair. The braids had left it with a gentle cascade of waves. It had been a long time since I had a chance

dress up.

Kip meandered into the foyer as I clattered down the stairs. He stopped cold at the sight of me. “Mom, you look great! Where are you going again? I forgot.”

“To the opening of a play. One of Harlow’s friends wrote it.” I fastened a pair of gold hoops on my ears and transferred everything over to my good purse.

Kip pursed his lips in a grin. “Yeah, I bet. She fixing you up again? You sure look ready for a date.”

“You’re eight going on eighteen, know that?” I pointed to the clock. “I’m not going to be out late, so your homework better be finished by the time I get back. Miranda’s in charge, and if something goes wrong, you have my cell number, and Mrs. Trask is right down the street. I called her, she knows I’m going to be out for a couple hours, so she’ll be home if you need her.”

He snickered—a habit he picked up from me. “Yeah, yeah. My homework’s already done.” I gave him a hug, and he hugged me back. “You smell good.” Softly, he added, “Mom, are you ever going to get married again?”

The question stunned me. Was he worried about me, or worried that I would replace his father? I sat down on the bench in the hall and pulled him over to sit next to me. “What makes you ask that?”

“You seem lonely.” With a twinkle in his eye, he poked me in the ribs. “I wouldn’t mind, as long as he’s nice! It’d be cool to have another guy around again.” He jumped up and, waving his bagged sandwich, disappeared into the living room.

Lonely? I grabbed my keys and slid behind the wheel. I suppose, after my reaction to Roy’s defection, that it was obvious to the kids that I didn’t relish being single, though I’d come a long way since those days. Granted, I did wander around the house till 3:00 A.M. on the nights when I couldn’t sleep, but I thought of myself as happy. Miranda and Kip were good kids, they weren’t in trouble, and they were healthy and thriving. My business was doing pretty well, and I lived in a town that, for the most part, accepted my eccentricities. I had friends and a social life of sorts. I could take care of myself.

So was I unhappy being single? As I pulled out of the driveway, I realized that as much as I’d like to, I couldn’t answer the question.

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