

The Christmas Cafe

Lyle Garford

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 by Lyle Garford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by:
Lyle Garford
Vancouver, Canada
Contact: lyle@lylegarford.com

ISBN

Cover by

Book Design by Lyle Garford
lyle@lylegarford.com
www.lylegarford.com

First Edition 2019

Printed by Createspace, an Amazon.com Company.
Available on Kindle and other devices.

Dedication

This one is dedicated to the memory of
Charles Dickens.

Prologue

The cafe's resident cat was named Shadow. The name was no coincidence as his fur was all black, except for a small white patch on his chest below his chin.

Savory smells emanating from the kitchen on the main floor of the old house drew the cat in, as they always did when the cafe's owner forgot to close the door leading to her second floor rooms where the cat lived. Winding his way around the main kitchen worktable Shadow reached up and placed a paw on the cook's leg to beg for a morsel. The cook, a grizzled, grey haired black man in his fifties named Willie Low, glanced down without surprise and grunted.

"You again, puss? You're going to get fat if I keep feeding you people food like this."

But the cook knew Shadow was a smart cat and, even if he could have somehow understood the man's words, nothing would change. The cat was always patient, hopeful and confident the man would relent soon enough.

Willie looked up as outside the wind howled and the rain lashed even harder yet again at the old house now serving as a cafe, drowning out for a moment the tinny sound of the Christmas music playing on the cook's small portable radio. The heavy rain pounding the house had started several hours earlier in the middle of the night and was showing no signs of letting up.

Feeling the gentle touch of a paw on his leg once again the cook sighed and reached down to scratch behind the cat's ear.

"I guess you've figured out I'm a pushover, haven't you, Shadow? Well, it's not up to me to watch your weight."

Willie cut off a generous sized piece of the roast chicken he had pulled from the oven a few minutes before. After putting it on the floor for the cat to eat, Willie went back to doing the preparation work for the daily soup they would serve in the cafe later that day and he was soon lost in the task at hand. He was so deep into what he was doing he initially shrugged off the tiny voice that came as a strange jolt to his consciousness.

He tried carrying on with thought about the work at hand, but the question of what just happened clawed its way to the surface from the deeper recesses of his mind and he stopped what he was doing. Lifting his head, he looked around in curiosity. Willie knew no one else was in the house, as the owner had closed the cafe after the early morning rush and went shopping, or at least, that was what was supposed to be happening. But he saw no one as he peered about with a puzzled frown and he rubbed his chin in thought. He tried calling out in case someone had slipped in without his knowledge.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" he said, but no answer came back.

"Huh," said Willie to himself. "Could have sworn I heard someone say something. Must be hearing things."

Willie tried focusing back on what he thought he had heard, but the voice was so ephemeral he couldn't pin down what the exact word or words had been. He shook his head and looked around one last time, intending to go back to his work.

But before he could do that he felt a light, but distinct chill touch him from behind. The sensation was faint and like nothing he had ever experienced before. His conscious mind rebelled at its touch, knowing the kitchen was in fact toasty warm from the oven being on. As he struggled to process what was happening he sensed with a flash of certainty another presence was in the room with him. Ignoring the small stab of fear that coursed through his body he turned fast to look behind him for the source, but no one was there. Willie's eyes narrowed as he whipped his head back and forth.

"Who's there?" he called, this time louder and with an edge to his voice. Once again, no one answered.

Looking down, he realized Shadow was no longer beside him and the piece of chicken he had given the cat remained untouched where Willie had left it. The strange sensation of a presence he still felt seemed to emanate from a spot near the doorway to the kitchen. With his peripheral vision Willie realized Shadow was now bottled up in the far corner of the room, the furthest distance possible away from the door.

The cat was hunched into a crouch, staring hard at the entrance, and whisking his tail back and forth. As Willie continued watching him the cat uttered an unintelligible, low sound that seemed like a growl or a deep hiss of fright or maybe both.

As the stab of fear returned because of the cat's reaction Willie turned back to face the doorway, but there was still nothing to be seen. He edged closer to the door to ensure he had a clear look down the hallway and made sure he wasn't missing anyone or anything. The slight touch of chill grew the closer he got.

"Who's there?" he said, in a more insistent tone this time. "What do you want?"

He waited, but nothing happened. Unsure of what to do, he kept waiting for several more long moments until with another flash of sudden insight he realized the chill sensation was gone. Mustering his courage, Willie left the kitchen through the doorway and went to explore the entire main floor of the cafe. Finding no one, he returned to the kitchen. The cold spot had not come back and, looking down, Willie saw Shadow had returned to eating the piece of

chicken with content, as if nothing had happened. Willie looked around the kitchen one more time before shaking his head hard, as if doing so would somehow make the pieces of the puzzle of what had happened finally fall into place. Willie sighed, as nothing came to mind to explain any of it.

"Well, puss, I don't know what that was all about. I'm not even sure it happened. Maybe I'm just starting to lose my marbles or worse, maybe I'm just a stupid old man. And here you are, begging for even more chicken like its just another day in the life of a cat. Well, one more piece and that's it for you."

Willie gave him another generous morsel and scratched behind the cat's ear before turning back to his worktable with a shrug, listening once more to the heavy rain continuing to slam into the house in irregular gusts. As the radio began playing one of his favorite Christmas tunes Willie turned up the volume to drown out the rain. With effort he focused once again on the work before him, but this time he positioned himself in a spot where he could watch the door.

Chapter One

He gave in when his stomach growled for the second time, knowing it was time to find a place to stop for the night. His eyes were also tired from driving, enough to make the decision easy. He shook his head at his own foolishness, cursing himself for spending too much time wandering around in a small town further up the coast earlier in the day.

The driving, heavy rain wasn't letting up and now that night was falling trying to see where he was going would become even more difficult than it already was. He kicked himself mentally again for waiting too long to stop, but he knew the real problem was motivation to pay attention to details like that. Without a schedule to adhere to or even a real destination, he had little to force himself into making a decision. One hotel room bed wouldn't be much different than the next.

The traffic was heavy with Friday rush hour commuters going both directions, heading home to nearby bedroom communities. The next exit

after he made the decision to stop had a sign announcing a nearby town with accommodations and after a moments hesitation he took it. He couldn't remember why the name of the town struck a chord in his mind, but he was sure it would come to him and soon enough it did. The seaside town he was driving to was one of many small summer vacation destinations along the coast of the Pacific northwest of America, popular with families looking for a big, pleasant beach to let the children run free. Somewhere in his mind was a vague memory from the long dim past of his childhood of playing on that beach and staying in this town.

The road soon took him along a winding waterfront route cutting a path between cedar forests on one side and the water on the other, while following the shape of the small coves dotting the shoreline. In one such cove he found several ramshackle buildings and obviously derelict old fishing boats abandoned on the beach and he knew for certain he was right about where he was, as the town in his memory had a long abandoned, small cannery to process the catch of local fishermen nearby. He also had a

memory of staying in a quaint, stately old hotel right in the heart of town and he resolved to find it.

Further along the road came dim streetlights, lighting a section running parallel to a long stretch of beach. This proved to be the edge of town and was an area dedicated to hosting several campgrounds and recreational vehicle parks. He was unsurprised to see they were devoid of customers.

The campgrounds finally gave way to the town itself, which wasn't large, consisting of a stretch of four long blocks along the waterfront where a variety of businesses clustered together. Several oak and northern pine trees large enough to testify they and the town around them were many decades old were sprinkled throughout the area, fighting for space with the numerous cedars. The small town cemetery was the only patch of ground in the business district not dedicated to making money. Back from the shoreline and the business center were several old wood frame houses with a couple of small, but newer condominium developments mixed in. As he drove slowly through the area he got a

quick impression most of the little businesses were oriented to parting tourists from their hard earned money.

His memory had not let him down about the hotel. Finding it on the main street of the town wasn't a problem as it was the largest structure in sight. The building had a sprawling footprint, taking over half of one of the long blocks right in the middle of town. The hotel was set well back from the water, with nothing but a long stretch of beach and what looked from a distance to be a path along the shoreline between it and the ocean. The view from all three upper floors of rooms would be commanding.

He parked as close as possible and dashed through the downpour to the shelter of the hotel. Even with the hood up on his heavy raincoat it felt as if the wind had driven enough rain through his defenses to soak him completely. Despite his hurried sprint from the car he had time to gain a quick impression of the stately grace and age he remembered about the exterior of the building and he realized little had changed since his youth. Someone in the long distant past had obviously banked on the small seaside town

becoming popular enough with tourists to warrant making a significant investment in the property.

The interior of the hotel confirmed his quick, initial impression. The lobby was wide, with ornate crown mouldings and high ceilings. The hotel was clearly at least a hundred years old, but had along the way been given plenty of tender care over the years. Some obvious renovations had been done since his childhood visit, but someone clearly made a point of ensuring the changes had no effect on the atmosphere of understated elegance still maintained throughout.

Further past the hotel check in desk that was off to one side a huge stone fireplace was centered on the far opposite wall, framed on either side by several large glass windows looking directly out onto the beach. A number of people were sitting with drinks, alternatively watching the storm outside or the large fire roaring in a wood-burning fireplace that was converted from its original state to burn natural gas now.

On the drive in he assumed finding a room would be easy given it was now the middle of December, but the hotel seemed far busier than he expected. As he waited in line to check in behind a family with children he watched two employees struggling to find places to add even more Christmas decorations than what was already in place around the front desk. A big, festively adorned Christmas tree already stood in the lobby off to one side. The clerk finished with the family and waved him forward.

"Good evening. You appear to be a little busier than I thought you would be. I don't have a reservation, so I'm hoping you have a room to spare for the night?"

"We do, sir," said the clerk. "You would have been out of luck a few weeks back, but it's no problem now."

He watched the clerk smile in reply to the puzzled look he knew was on his face. The clerk took the identification and credit card offered and began the check in process as he offered explanation.

"Winter storm watchers always keep the hotel busy especially in November, sir. Of

course, we also get storms in December, as you have obviously noticed. It slows around this time because people are busy getting ready for Christmas. We get a few more people staying with us over the holidays, but we usually aren't full again until the good beach weather is back."

Taking one last look at the driver's license and credit card the clerk slid them back across the counter along with a form to sign.

"Right, Mister—Jonathan Thomas. Welcome to our hotel, sir. If you could sign in the spots with an X beside them you will be done. Actually, I don't know if you are aware, but word is we are due for an even worse storm tomorrow night, if you can believe it. Might even be bad enough we could get a little snow. You may want to stay hunkered down with us an extra night or so if that's the case. Roads will be awful."

"I've been living back east and have snow tires, so I know how to navigate snowy conditions," said Jonathan, giving the signed form back and taking the key to his room.

He made to turn away, but stopped as he thought about it. "You know what, maybe I'll

take you up on that. You don't get snow as much out here on the Pacific coast and everyone else around me might not be as prepared as I am."

The clerk made a tentative reservation for a few more nights, assuring Jonathan it wasn't a problem to cancel and leave early. Jonathan paused again and asked for recommendations of good places to eat.

"Well, the hotel here has a nice restaurant through those doors over there. You can get meals there at all times of the day, but you might find the prices a little steep for dinner. It's primarily a high-end steak house at night. We have a few places around town, but the closest and, probably the best, if its decent food for a reasonable price you want, would be Gwen's Cafe. It's just to your right as you leave here, down the street to the end of the business district."

After thanking the clerk Jonathan made the dash to his car for his bags. His feet and the bottom of his jeans were already wet and he was too tired to get dressed up for a more formal dinner, so he decided to make the short trip to the cafe. After dropping his bag unopened in his

room he made his way back to the lobby. With a sigh as he eyed the foul weather outside he stepped into the driving rain again and hurried down the main street to the cafe. He was forced to lean into the strong gusts of cold wind that buffeted every so often. He passed the old cemetery dotted with thick, ancient trees he had seen on his way in and in the dim light of the streetlights he saw numerous headstones that looked quite old. The sight did little to lighten his mood.

As he struggled against the full force of the wind every time there was a gap in the buildings he realized it was easy to understand why people came to watch the storms. Huge waves were crashing to the shore as far as he could see in both directions on the long, downward slope of the beach to the waterline. The impossibly long waves rolling steadily onto the log and debris strewn sand seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance. If an even worse storm blew in the waves would be towering.

The cafe was a sprawling and weathered looking, two-story house with a commanding view of the beach from a verandah running

along one side. Like the hotel, Jonathan immediately formed an impression of age from the outside. Relieved to finally be in shelter from the elements as he stepped inside, he sensed right away his feeling was correct.

Inside he found half of one side of the building was crammed with a dozen tables of various sizes for customers. A door leading to the verandah outside was set into the wall between windows on either side to afford customers inside a view, too. Jonathan realized parts of the house had obviously been gutted and converted to its current purpose at some point in the distant past.

On the opposite wall that divided the room someone had cut a long rectangular pass through and added a shelf with heat lamps above for plates of food orders. Through this the kitchen could be seen, where an older looking, big black man wearing a white chef uniform was bustling back and forth inside. Most, but not all, of the patrons in the cafe were white. Unlike the hotel, the cafe was decorated with only a small artificial Christmas tree in a corner of the room

along with a few other Christmas decorations sprinkled about.

Jonathan slid onto one of the eight stools at the old-fashioned diner counter running parallel to the kitchen wall, amused to find it had a row of four small, old juke boxes set on the counter at regular intervals between pairs of stools. He was curious to know if they actually worked, but an attractive waitress scurrying about in the service area between the kitchen and the counter caught his attention.

"Miserable night, huh?" she said, as she bustled over with a menu. Jonathan was forced to hide a double take at how pretty she was. She had long and straight, light blonde hair tied back in a ponytail and he thought she was a true, natural blonde. He was surprised as her hair was in a style almost no one wore anymore, with her hair close to her waist in length.

Forcing himself to focus he saw beer on the cafe menu and he ordered a bottle, despite her obvious surprise. A calendar tacked to the wall told him today was December 13th and he knew there likely weren't many people ordering beer this time of year. He didn't care, as beer was his

alcohol of choice most of the time, although he was happy to drink whatever was put in front of him. After studying the simple menu he ordered a small bowl of homemade chicken soup to go along with a clubhouse sandwich for his dinner. He knew he was hungry enough to eat all of it.

As the waitress went off to place his order he began looking around closer at his surroundings. He quickly judged the cafe was probably about the same age as the hotel, but could see it had not enjoyed quite the same degree of tender care. The equipment the waitress was using was a curious mix of old and new. A large espresso and cappuccino machine was obviously a recent addition, while a milkshake mixer sitting beside it that would have been new in 1955 gave contrast. Although what looked like a fresh coat of paint had been added not too long ago it couldn't hide the subtler wear around him, like the slight tears in the weathered vinyl padding of the stool next to him. The hardwood floors were scuffed and in dire need of resurfacing, while the wood tables and chairs showed a similar degree of need.

The cafe was about half full. Several people were devoting their full attention to the screen of their cell phones, ignoring both the people they were with and the food before them. Jonathan focused on the snatches of conversation around him and wasn't surprised to overhear a few people complaining about the endless rain and grey skies. A young woman staring intently at her phone excitedly announced to her boyfriend she had found a deal to a sun destination for a decent price.

With a start Jonathan realized a large black cat with a white patch on his chest had appeared and was sitting at his feet, looking hopeful he would be fed. Jonathan smiled and scratched behind the cat's ear, but as no food was on offer the cat left. The server saw the cat and came over to scoop him into her arms, scolding him as she disappeared into the back of the cafe.

As he turned his attention away he caught part of a conversation between a group of two women and one man sitting nearby and was surprised to realize from the snippet he heard that they seemed to be talking about a ghostly presence in the cafe. The topic was so unusual

he reacted by turning his head back to focus on them. The woman speaking caught his reaction and lowered her voice. Although curious, Jonathan couldn't think of a polite way to intrude and ask them about it. The waitress reappeared, coming over to set his beer in front of him, so he turned his full attention to her.

"Your dinner won't be long, sir," said the waitress with a harried look. "We're past the dinner rush now and our cook is catching up."

Jonathan smiled back. "Thanks. That was your cat?"

"Yes. Shadow and I live upstairs and he's supposed to stay up there, but the little devil likes to sneak out every chance he gets to explore and beg for food."

She hurried off again as Jonathan smiled, doing his best not to be too obvious in his appreciation of her. He judged her to be close to his own age of thirty-one. Before she scurried off he noted she wore no wedding ring on her hand.

As she left again he turned to idly browse through the song library listed on the old miniature jukebox set into the counter. The

songs it listed were all over forty or more years old. He was amused when he fished a coin out of his pocket, dropped it into the machine, and found it still worked as he punched in the number for a song. A rhythm and blues tune from the late sixties blared out of the tinny sounding speakers, just loud enough to catch the attention of a few of the other patrons sprinkled throughout the cafe. Despite being obviously deep in their conversation, the nearest group looked over from their table at him for a moment before turning away again.

His thoughts drifted as he turned his attention back to the music and the sound of his stomach still growling, not satisfied with just having beer to fill it. The time showing on his cell phone told him it was far later than his stomach was used to being fed. He debated checking his emails, but knew there was little point. Nothing he really wanted to see would be there.

As the song finally ended he thought of dropping another coin into the jukebox, but he couldn't make up his mind. In the silence following the song's end the conversation of the

other patrons filled the void, so he kept his money in his pocket. Idly sipping at the beer that was disappearing too fast and making him lightheaded, he couldn't help focusing on trying to listen to the people talking nearby again.

The conversation had grown more intense and, to his surprise, he realized they really were talking about the cafe he was sitting in being haunted. He turned his head slightly to hear even better with one ear while keeping eyes forward to the cafe counter in front of him. He focused on the female voice speaking that had originally caught his attention. She sounded mildly exasperated.

"I tell you, I thought I saw something. I definitely felt it, because that's what drew my attention to look in its direction. It was like a cloud—a wisp of energy. I don't know how else to describe it. I know I never said anything at the time, because it just seemed so odd and I've never had anything like that happen to me before. I have no idea what it was or why it was there. Look, I realize this may be hard to buy, but I'm telling you the truth. There are great

mysteries in life and nothing is impossible, you know."

"So do you not see a certain irony here, Miriam?" said a male voice. "You're telling me you run a new age shop selling all this esoteric, metaphysical stuff and this is the first time you've actually seen a ghost?"

"James, for God's sake. Don't be stupid. She's being serious," said the other woman at the table. "Miriam, he's just trying to tease you."

"I know. Some things about people change and some things don't. You always teased me in high school, so I'm not surprised. And for the record, James, I prefer to think of it as a spirit, because that's what a ghost is."

"Well, I am at least partly serious," said James with a laugh. "Is this really the first time you've seen a spirit?"

"Yes. Look, the metaphysical world is much more than silly television shows with people chasing ghosts around trying to get video clips of them. That sort of nonsense really isn't my focus. I suppose I am more attuned to the spiritual world and that is why I sensed it. I've certainly tried to grow my understanding of it.

But I don't know why it's a surprise I've never encountered this before. If there really is a spirit in the cafe it has to be one that is unwilling to let go and transition from its former life for whatever reason. I don't believe for a second this is an everyday occurrence. I think the vast majority of people really do move onward when they pass away."

"So you say you saw it in the hall over there on the way to the washrooms? I find it interesting that's where it was. I wonder why it would be there?" said the other woman at the table.

"Yes, like I said, it seemed like a faint cloud or swirl that was there for the barest moment. It disappeared into that passage off the hall that leads to the kitchen and the storerooms in the back. But why do you find it interesting, Melanie?"

The woman sighed. "Well, I'm going to confess here. Keep in mind I've never really believed in this kind of stuff or given it much thought, which is why I discounted what I felt last week when I was in here. I went to use the washroom and as I came out I felt a very faint

chill as I passed by that entrance to the kitchen. It was just enough to make me stop in my tracks and look around, because this place is always a bit stuffy and warm. But there was nothing there and in seconds it was gone. So it just seems weird and more than coincidental you are telling us about seeing a spirit in the same general location this happened to me."

"Huh. I guess I'll be paying more attention when I go to the washroom," said James. "But why would this place have a gho—I mean, a spirit?"

"No idea. Could be a host of reasons why a spirit might be about," said Miriam. "Like I said, this isn't an area of the metaphysical realm I've ever spent much time on."

"Were you scared, Miriam?" said the other woman. "I'm going to confess again here, it kind of scared me. I didn't like what I was feeling at all."

Curious to know how she would respond, Jonathan turned his head in time to see the woman named Miriam frown before answering.

"Well, come to think of it, no, I wasn't scared, although I don't know why not. I

probably should have been, but it was such a fleeting experience I didn't have time to be scared, I guess. Mind you, I was much further away from it than you obviously were."

The sound of a bowl being set on the counter in front of him announced the arrival of his dinner. Jonathan gave the waitress a grateful smile and ordered another beer before reaching for a spoon to dig in. The soup was delicious, thick with bits of chicken, noodles, and vegetables, and he was soon scraping the dregs from the bottom of the bowl, wishing he had ordered more. Even as the thought came he saw his dinner appear on the pass through counter from the kitchen and the waitress bustled over to bring it to him.

As he began eating the sandwich and fries that came with it he thought about what he had just heard. He had no experience with the supernatural and had never known anyone that had any, at least to his knowledge. He felt a mild curiosity nag at him to learn more, but he knew it was unlikely he would. He was half way through the meal when the waitress finished

tidying her counter workspace and came over to him.

"How is your meal, sir? Everything tasting good?"

"Wonderful. I was starving when I came in here. Say, it looks like you've had a busy day."

She gave him a tired smile and brushed aside a stray strand of her hair. "The dinner rush is always crazy. I'm the only server so I always need to soak my tired feet when the day is done."

She made to turn away, but he forestalled her with another question.

"So I'm assuming you are the Gwen lending her name to Gwen's Cafe?"

"I am," she replied, reaching out to briefly shake his hand. "Gwendolyn Fairchild, sole proprietress, in addition to being the only server on staff. You are new here, aren't you? Just passing through?"

"I am, but I might stay a little bit longer. It says Jonathan on my driver's license, but you can just call me Jon or whatever suits you. This seems a lot of work for just one server, isn't it?"

"It is, and thank you for noticing. Most people don't. The restaurant business is hard, harder than I thought it would be. Long hours and it's a struggle to stay afloat."

"Harder than you thought? I take it you haven't been in business long?"

"I opened the doors in late August at the end of the tourist season, so it's been less than six months. It helps the place came with a few regular customers because I already knew people in town, but my timing was lousy. Mind you, I hadn't planned it that way, but circumstances forced the bad timing on me. It's a long story."

She made to leave, but he forestalled her with one more question. "So you're from here are you?"

"Yes, but my husband and I moved away for a few years before coming back to open the cafe."

Jonathan inadvertently glanced at her hand and she saw the look on his face, so she answered the question before she could ask it.

"My husband passed away."

"I see. I'm sorry to hear that."

Someone looking for their bill waved at Gwen from the other side of the room to catch her eye and she nodded to acknowledge their need.

"I'd love to chat, but I really must go. More customers to help."

She turned to leave, but Jonathan thought he saw her gaze linger deliberately for a bare fraction of a second on his own left hand. The moment was so fleeting he couldn't be sure, but it seemed to be her own obvious attempt to see if he wore a ring, too. As she began walking away he realized his second bottle of beer was now almost empty and after a moment's deliberation he called after her once more.

"I normally don't have a third beer, but what the heck, you can bring me another when you get a second. All I have to do is stumble back to my hotel room."

She gave him a quick smile and nodded over her shoulder as she walked away. Jonathan watched her go, feeling the stirring of the kind of desire he hadn't felt in a while. She really was quite pretty, with a slim and willowy body. As she disappeared from his line of sight he turned

his attention back to finishing off the remnants of his dinner. He watched the cook moving back and forth in the kitchen, presumably busy now with clean up as no new orders were coming in. The beers were doing their job and he felt a pleasant buzz from the alcohol, but he chided himself for ordering a third. He knew it would be all too easy to succumb to an alcoholic haze on a regular basis and that it would be a bad idea to do so.

He was just finishing the last of his meal when the fresh bottle appeared in front of him. He smiled up at her, but she didn't stay as yet another table was looking for their bill. He stared at the beer and asked himself why he had ordered it, before shrugging and grasping it to take a sip. He knew he should have just paid the bill and left too, but something had kept him from doing that.

The beer was affecting him, but it was also obvious there were only two possible reasons to stay. The owner Gwen held some allure and he felt the stirring of his need, although a sense of trepidation came with it and he knew acting on his need could complicate his life even more.

But the other thought nagging at him was the curious talk of the cafe being haunted. He wondered if Gwen had ever encountered the spirit herself and what her thoughts would be about it.

Jonathan sighed, mentally kicking himself one last time for the third beer and for getting himself lost in what somehow seemed trivial matters when he had far larger questions to deal with and answer in his life. With a sigh over his weakness he caved in to the urge to check his email and pulled out his phone, but he soon regretted the decision. A number of concerned emails from friends asking how he was doing, a sarcastic note from his lawyer telling him matters with his ex had improved as she was now asking for only 99% of everything, instead of the 100% she had started with, and a whole bunch of emails trying to sell him something were all he had waiting for him.

In addition to the emails a few people from his workplace had sent him texts to ask how he was doing, but he decided to leave them for response later, knowing he would risk succumbing to the urge to tell everyone what he

really felt. If there was one thing he had learned over the years, it was never a good plan to start sending emails or texts on sensitive topics after drinking a few beers.

Putting his phone away Jonathan focused on the conversation behind him once again and realized they were still on the topic of a spirit in the cafe. The greying, older black man Jonathan had seen working in the kitchen came out carrying a rack filled with small plates and coffee cups that looked still warm from the dishwasher and he began adding them to the counter shelving to replenish what was already there. As he finished rearranging them to suit his preference, he stopped and took a moment to catch his breath and look around the room. Catching Jonathan's eye, he smiled.

"Hope you enjoyed your meal, sir?"

"I did. You make that soup from scratch, did you?"

"Yes, sir. Made it fresh today."

"It was awesome. I could have made a meal of that alone."

The cook smiled and nodded, turning to look around at the rest of the cafe. No one new had

come in and the place was now barely a quarter full. The cook wiped his hands on his apron, as he appeared to focus on the three people still in deep discussion about a presence in the cafe. As Jonathan watched a strange look came over the cook's face, as he stood rooted to the spot obviously listening to them. After a few moments he gave a small start and Jonathan knew the man had realized he was being watched. The cook turned away and went back into the kitchen, returning a short time later with more racks of dishes to put away. But as he finished this time he remained, wiping his hands on his apron before taking it off and putting it aside to step around the counter.

Jonathan was still focusing on the nearby conversation, which had finally shifted to another topic. As he continued watching the cook from the corner of his eye he saw him perch on one of the nearby stools, close to the people at the table that had been talking about a ghost. The male at the table was in the midst of talking to the women, but he saw Willie approaching and finished what he was saying before acknowledging his presence.

"Yeah, well, believe it or not, it's true. Paula ran into him and confirmed that Dunstan has in fact returned to town. God knows why since he told us we were all losers and left years ago, swearing he would never come back, but she said to expect he is going to pop in here," he said, turning finally to face the cook.

"Evening, Willie. That was a damn fine meal, as always. You must have been a chef for a long time to get this good."

The chef shrugged and offered him a sour grin. "Maybe not as long as you think, James. Let's just say I had the time and motivation to pay attention and focus on a skill for the first time in my life once I got older. But say, I heard you talking about a ghost in here?"

James grunted, stifling a bigger laugh as he replied. "It's a spirit, Willie. Miriam is insisting we call it a spirit. Oww—"

"Yes, Willie, we were talking about a spirit," said Miriam, although she was still giving James a mock glare of frustration after punching him on the arm. She turned to the cook once she was satisfied he got the point.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I don't know why you are all talking about this, but I confess I had a strange experience in here earlier today when I was on my own."

Jonathan shifted slightly to get a better view of their reactions and he saw surprised looks flit across their faces. Their response seemed enough for Willie to launch into the story of what had happened to him in the kitchen without further encouragement. As he finished he gave them a wary look, almost as if he was expecting them to discount what he was saying.

"Well, isn't that interesting?" said Miriam. "Yes, we were indeed talking about the possibility there is a spirit or two here. I thought I saw something over there by the kitchen entrance and Melanie here said she felt a chill in the same area a while back. This is more than a coincidence we are all sensing a presence in the same general area at different times."

"Willie?" said Melanie. "Is this the first time you've encountered this? Have you ever seen a spirit before?"

"Uh, never encountered a spirit before and don't really want to again. This was the only

time I've felt anything like that, at least while I was awake."

"What do you mean by that?"

Willie looked uncomfortable, but continued. "Well, as you know, Gwen gave me a room in the cafe here to stay in. I dunno, the mind plays tricks sometimes, especially when you are sleeping and on your own."

"Go on."

The cook sighed. "Look, all I know is I was in a real deep sleep before waking up from the strangest dream I've ever had. This was a couple of weeks ago. Something was in the room with me. I—sorry, all I can tell you is it was very strange.

"My God," said James. "What happened?"

"Well, look, I think my mind rebelled at what was happening and I forced myself awake. It just didn't—feel right. Of course, once I was actually awake there was nothing in the room with me."

"Did you feel a chill or anything like that?" said Melanie.

"No, but then I had a blanket on me. To be honest I can't be certain, as I was focused on

getting my bearings and figuring out what just happened to me. I was really disoriented when I woke up. Look, I wasn't going to tell you about this, but you asked. I don't know if it was a dream or what, but if it really was just a dream it was the most vivid and real dream I think I've ever had."

"I understand it's hard to explain. Did you find any of this frightening, Willie?" said Miriam, a thoughtful look on her face.

Willie grimaced. "Yes, today I was scared, but you know what? I'm not sure I could tell you why. I came away with a sense it wasn't trying to hurt me, but I don't know why I know that. As for the dream, yeah, I guess I was a bit frightened by it all. That may have been why I woke up so fast."

They were all silent, obviously contemplating what they had heard. By now Jonathan wasn't surprised it was Miriam who broke the silence, given her interest in the supernatural.

"Willie, has Gwen said anything about this?"

The cook shook his head. "If she's felt something like this it's news to me. She hasn't said anything."

As one they turned to look for the owner. Jonathan did the same, unable to stop himself. Gwen was on the far side of the room with the only two other people in the cafe. They had just finished paying for their meal and the couple was now rising from their chairs to put their coats on. Jonathan looked down at the beer bottle in front of him and realized it had been empty for some time now.

With a shake of his head he sighed, wondering why he was still sitting here. Listening to ghost stories was the immediate answer, but the lassitude he felt had a deeper source. He pulled out his credit card and waved it at Gwen, who detoured over with the machine to process his payment. Jonathan knew the conversation beside him had stopped, as they were watching and waiting for Gwen.

Jonathan gathered himself and gave her a winning smile as he finished paying and stood up. He said goodbye and complimented the cook while she picked up the empty bottle and wiped

the counter. She gave him a tired smile in return and walked away. He turned around to look at the still waiting group of people as he put on his raincoat again. One of the two women locked eyes with him, lingering long enough to make her frank appraisal of him obvious.

She appeared to be similar in age to the owner Gwen, but the similarity ended there as this woman had vaguely East Indian features. Sultry was the word that instantly appeared in his mind and for a moment he couldn't place why it did, but then he realized it was her midnight black, dark hair framing her alluring, pretty face and the air of sensuality she emanated.

With the rest of her body hidden by the table and a large shapeless sweater he knew he wasn't going to learn more that night, but even as that thought came he felt a strange certainty a simmering, powerful desire lay behind her dark eyes and it was focused entirely on him. Jonathan knew most women considered him handsome enough and at six feet tall with a lean, fit looking frame he would garner attention. Other women had in past set their sights on him,

but he had never felt anything quite like this from anyone else.

He finished zipping up his coat and stepped out into the night, standing for a moment in the light of the doorway to get his bearings. The rain had finally turned to a steady, light drizzle and the wind had eased significantly, although occasional gusts still buffeted the trees along the street. The thought of going straight back to the hotel appeared in his mind, but he dismissed the idea, knowing he would just be tempted to sit in the bar and get loaded.

Since the pounding rain had lessened, at least for the moment, he decided to try a walk along the beach. A vague memory from long ago told him the town had some sort of a big promenade between the edge of the beach and the buildings of the town. Thinking back to when he checked in he remembered seeing the path outside the bar windows and knew it must be the promenade he was thinking of.

He went further past the end of the cafe's empty verandah and saw a small, tree lined, but unlit pathway in the gap between the cafe and the building next door leading to the beach. He

let his eyes adjust to the darkness before following it along the edge of the verandah and was soon standing on the edge of the beach. The gusts of wind here were stronger and every so often a stronger bout of rain lashed him like the touch of a whip, but he stayed where he was for a long time before finally turning to walk along the promenade, heading even further away from the center of town and the hotel. He couldn't remember how far the walkway went, but he would find out.

No one was outside on the walkway with him, but as he got further away from the business center he found there were homes sprinkled along the shoreline. Several had lights on inside, as it was only just past nine o'clock. Many had Christmas light displays outside, varying from a few simple strings of outdoor lights to ostentatious, massive installations of lights and huge lawn ornaments.

Being alone felt appropriate, as it fit his mood. With a sigh he turned his thoughts back to the problem at hand, knowing he would have to make yet another decision about what to do the next day. The absence of a goal of any sort

made this a daily issue and it was becoming more of a burden each day. With nowhere to go and no one to see, both everything and nothing seemed possible.

The visit to his sister up north in the small coastal town they were born in had seemed a good enough plan for lack of anything better to do. He had not seen her or been back home for over five years. With both of their parents gone and no other siblings, she was the only close relation he had. But her husband was the same curmudgeon he remembered, a small town traditionalist dismissive and distrustful of anyone who lived in one of the big cities back east. Jonathan soon grew tired of the attitude and sarcastic remarks and left early, despite his sister's invitation to stay for Christmas. He knew she was in reality secretly relieved he had left, as a Christmas filled with tension was not what she wanted to have.

The paved walkway ended soon enough, turning into a gravel path that wound its way along the shoreline into the distance. The homes lining the shore grew further and further apart while the small street lamps that lit the paved

walkway ended when the gravel path began. In the distance Jonathan could see the vague outlines of what looked like mobile home trailers.

Jonathan finally stopped and began retracing his steps, deciding he should have made a point to use the washroom before he left the cafe.

With no one about he relieved himself in a patch of brush near the shoreline. Although the weather was moderating and the gusts had finally stopped, he knew he was growing chilled from the still steady wind and damp weather.

The thought of sitting in front of the gas fireplace at the hotel with a glass of liqueur to warm him seemed appealing. At least it gave him something to do and if nothing else he could surround himself with the presence of other people, as he had been spending far too much time alone with his thoughts.

Back at the hotel he shed his wet clothes in his room and changed into something dry before making his way to the lounge and ordering the drink he had promised himself. Within moments a glass of the cognac he ordered appeared.

Cognac wasn't a drink he normally enjoyed, but

he felt the need to sip something slowly as he contemplated his future yet again.

The high ceilinged room he was in was built in a large semi circle jutting out toward the beach to afford as many view seats of the ocean as possible. On closer inspection he realized the large glass windows that stretched from the floor to the ceiling were a recent modification, similar to the gas fireplace, for his childhood memory was of much smaller windows. But at this time of night there was little to see and there were few people in the lounge. No obvious opportunity to talk to anyone arose and Jonathan didn't feel like making one, so he nursed his drink in silence as he stared into the gas fire.

When it was almost empty the server came by to ask if he wanted another, but Jonathan shook his head. No flashes of insight had come to him and Jonathan wasn't surprised, as he knew all too well there weren't answers to be found in an empty cognac glass. He paid his bill and went to his room, mechanically readying himself for bed.

When sleep came it was fitful, and he found himself tossing and turning. He was semi awake

when he realized it sounded like the rain and wind had started again, loud enough he could sense it flaying the hotel. Turning, he looked at the bedside clock and saw it was now three o'clock in the morning. Sighing, he sat up and got out of bed, going to the window to pull aside the curtains. From the darkness of his room he could see the main street outside and in the cones of light from the streetlights it was clear fresh waves of rain were lashing a large puddle of water around a street drain clogged with leaves.

He stood at the window for a long time before he finally shook his head. The dream he had been having before he awoke grew more vague with every second, but he knew it had revolved around an ephemeral feminine presence drawing him ever closer. The problem was he had not been close enough to grasp her.

"My God. I guess I need someone tonight," he whispered to himself as he stood watching the rainwater pour down the street in steady rivers.

He knew he had questions that needed answers, but he had no idea what they would be

or how he would find them. As he was about to turn away yet another dim memory of his long ago stay in the town as a child surfaced, a memory of playing on the beach in the early morning sunshine with a host of other children turned loose by their mothers. The simple joy of finding a kind of small, strange looking flat fish none of them had ever seen before marooned in a tidal pool was followed by the thrill of discovering a Dungeness crab that had buried almost its entire body in the tidal mud to await the return of the water with the tide.

The memory lightened his mood a fraction and he came to a decision, taking the memory as a sign. He wondered if more such happy memories could be found or new ones made if he stayed a bit longer in the town. With images of the pretty owner of the cafe and the sultry, dark haired woman that seemed interested in him in his mind the notion seemed worth the chance, but he still wasn't certain it was what he really wanted. Jonathan shook his head, closing the curtains before going back to bed.