

Chapter One

“I’VE INHERITED A haunted house,” Miranda said.

She surveyed the front of the Victorian home with emotions that swung from excitement to depression to guilt. The last occupant, whom everyone referred to as ‘Miss Virginia,’ had lived alone for the past seventy years—unless one counted the cats that had decorated the porch, fence, roof and the inside of her fire-engine red Cadillac convertible. Word around the neighborhood was the car hadn’t been driven since it was delivered by the dealership in 1959. Miranda’s father, Tim, had never seen it leave the driveway and no one had ever glimpsed Virginia behind the wheel. Possibly because there were always at least two cats draped around the steering wheel and ten more sunning themselves on the front hood regardless of the season.

Miranda stepped out of the SUV her dad had loaned her and glanced at her watch. She had about forty minutes before the guys from *Rocky Ridge Furniture* were scheduled to deliver a new bed frame and mattresses to a house that could be straight out of a slasher movie. Had it always seemed so eerie? The more she looked, the more she realized the creepiness was probably due to the unkempt bushes and trees and a lawn that sorely needed mowing. The house itself appeared to be in great shape. Even the roof looked new, and although the shutters needed a good paint job, the windows themselves were storm-worthy.

Dave Brennan, Virginia's lawyer, had dropped off a key for Miranda that morning. It was time to use it. If bats with fangs flew out of the house, she'd simply pitch a tent on the front lawn until she could figure out her next move.

The key turned easily and nothing attacked her as she opened the door so she ventured in a bit farther and did a little tap dance (in her sneakers) on the hardwood. There was no lingering odor of *Eau de Gato* and the switch in the front hall produced real light when she clicked it on. Not only that but those floors were in pristine condition. Possibly because nothing had been moved for years.

After taking a look at the masses of furniture, piles of books, records and boxes, Miranda nearly turned around and headed for the airport. Virginia must have moved all of her possessions down from the attic because Miranda had never seen even half of what was now crowding the room. One item, however, had not been moved. Miranda was thrilled to discover the old upright piano pushed against the north wall. Her first order of business was to shift some of the lighter boxes so she could find out if the instrument was as neglected as the furniture.

Once the path was clear she dropped down onto the piano bench and hit a chord. It was in tune. Things were looking up already. Images of starting her morning by drinking tea in Virginia's kitchen and playing this piano began flowing through her mind. Perhaps she wouldn't sell. Perhaps she could rent some of the bedrooms to reliable tenants and stay at the house whenever she came down to Birmingham. Or she could hire a caretaker.

Miranda resisted the impulse to start playing a musical number from *Phantom of the Opera*. Instead, she dug inside her purse, grabbed her mobile phone and hit speed dial number two.

“Hey, Dad.” Miranda didn’t wait for a hello. “Have you seen this place in the last few years?”

“A bit overwhelming?”

“Well, let’s just say I didn’t remember it looking like a museum. It wasn’t like this the last time I came over. Of course, that was right after I graduated college and Miss Virginia didn’t want me to come inside. We had tea and cookies on the porch.” She blinked back tears. “I am *not* a good person. Six years. At least I sent cards, right?”

“Miranda, is this going to be too much? You can stay with Farrah and me until you get things sorted. I just thought this would give you some time by yourself.”

Miranda shuddered, imagining the stress of being around her father’s self-assured “*I’ve owned my own successful catering business since the day I graduated college*” new wife. At forty-one, Farrah Nolan was only fourteen years older than Miranda—too young to be her stepmother and too old to really be a friend.

“Thanks for the offer, but I wouldn’t dream of invading your space. The good news is the piano is in tune, so I’m a happy singer. And Miss Virginia was a lady with eclectic tastes—I may find riches here...or a live cat or two. Are you sure all this is kosher? I mean, my living here before the will has been finalized.”

“As far as I know, no one is challenging your inheritance,” her father said. “If another claimant does turn up before or during probate, Dave will handle it.” He paused before

adding, “There are times I’m very glad I teach international law. I wouldn’t want to tiptoe around the intricacies of estates. Thankfully, Virginia was quite clear in her wishes. She left her house and possessions to you for, and I quote, your ‘kindness’” His voice caught. “I’m still grateful Virginia took over much of my non-existent parenting.”

Miranda closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the tall but frail woman who’d been so caring.

“It’s okay, Dad. You were going through a lot after Mom died. And Miss Virginia truly was family.” “If nothing else, I’m about to dive into the history of the mid-Twentieth century. You should see the clocks. I’ve already counted two grandfather clocks, three anniversary mantle clocks and some kind of pendulum thing a la Edgar Allen Poe.”

“Mark ’em all down, Miranda. As much info as you can to help out the executor from the Brennan firm. Also, Dave would be happy to send by a Realtor and an appraiser but you might want to contact an antiques dealer.”

Miranda tripped over a heavy box but managed to hang on to the phone. “I’ll get a better idea of who I need once I’ve taken a good tour. There are probably hidden passages with pots of gold. Or ghosts in each bedroom.”

“Scared?” “Nah. It’s cool. Miss Virginia and I were good friends from the moment we met. If she pops out of the woodwork one night I’ll ask her spirit to tea—”

“She loved giving tea parties! For kids, anyway. She’d always send you home with a bag full of fantastic cookies and little cakes. What an amazing baker.”

“Hmm. Now *that* would be a treasure—finding her recipe book.”

After a moment, Miranda's father coughed and said, "What about this fiasco with Grant? Are you sure you're okay? It's only been two days since the breakup."

Miranda pushed a box of books off an armchair then sank down into the soft cushions. "I'm fine. Surprisingly more than fine. Once it hit me that my boyfriend was a toad—which admittedly wasn't until *after* he broke up with me—I decided I'd be better off without the narcissistic jerk. What on earth did I ever see in him beyond good looks, charm and smarts and the theatre mania we had in common?"

Her refined and genteel father produced a distinct snort. "Well, I'd add charisma to that list. I thought he was great for you, so we were both deceived."

Miranda sighed. "Yep. I'll just be more careful next time. Meanwhile, I'll play Virginia's lovely piano and have a marvelous time sifting through her things. Maybe get some answers as to why she hid in this place for those seventy years."

"Now *that* would be a great mystery to solve. I remember hearing that she worked at one of the old department stores downtown back when they had their own tailors, but by the time we moved here she was sewing from home and wouldn't leave the house. You practically lived at Virginia's twenty-four-seven, especially around Halloween."

Miranda sat straight up. "Halloween. Wow. Talk about memories."

Miranda closed her eyes, remembering what it felt like to be a little girl dressed in a pink tutu and ballet slippers, ringing the doorbell of this very house and greeting a tall, elderly woman with refined features. Miranda could almost smell the scent of cinnamon-flaked cocoa and the chocolate cupcakes decorated in orange icing that had been sitting on a table in the living room. She could see Miss Virginia, dressed all in black but

smiling, as she ushered the ballerina, the superhero and the astronaut inside for what had been Miranda's first Halloween mini-party.

"I was seven at the time. I remember you let the Shapiro twins be my escorts. That's how Miss Virginia and I met. Do you remember anything else about her life? Something neighbors might have known? I don't recall her talking about her past—she probably knew I was too young to care." Miranda swallowed hard. "What a selfish little brat I was."

"Honey, you were young. No kid wants to hear the life story of anyone over the age of eighteen. Give yourself a break." He paused for a moment then continued, "Someone told me she bought the house in the mid-Forties—she might've been a war widow. But I never heard anyone call her anything but Miss Virginia."

"Didn't she dabble in art? Or maybe she told me she'd been an artist's model. I'm not sure. She said she had a portrait of a child my age who wore my 'impish expression.' But she never showed it to me. She also loved music and theatre, and I used to perform all my dance routines for her—I even recited *The Highwayman* when I was in sixth grade."

Miranda remembered playing piano and singing while Miss Virginia sat in a rocking chair, quietly listening; then the elderly lady and the small child would sit down to formal tea. Tears suddenly filled Miranda's eyes.

"Well, I'd better get a few boxes moved before the delivery guys show up. If they can't inch back into the bedroom, they might pitch my mattress into the yard in disgust. Which reminds me—can I pay them today or did you already take care of the bill?"

“It’s paid in full and you don’t need to repay me. I’ll let you go, but remember you’re coming to dinner next week. Farrah’s invited some folks to meet you. And before you say anything, yes, I’m well aware that you don’t like this kind of event but Farrah really wants to do this. And the Trussville Fair is in ten days. That should be more your speed. Lots of artwork and crafts and I think some local bands are playing.”

Miranda winced upon hearing *Farrah* and *dinner party* in the same sentence but tried not to let her feelings leak into her tone as she thanked her father and said goodbye.

After she’d started to clear boxes away from the piano, Miranda realized she’d need to buy labels so she wouldn’t catalogue the same box twice during the inventory for the estate sale. She peeked inside a box that was partially open and found Virginia’s sewing basket. Her smile warring with tears, Miranda reverently lifted it out and opened it, eyeing the ancient thimbles and the twenty-odd spools of thread in various colors. She gently unwrapped a pair of perfectly preserved scissors from their bed of fine linen and just as carefully put them back.

“No way am I selling Miss Virginia’s sewing supplies,” she said. These things had been a huge part of her friend’s life. They’d been her livelihood. Miranda remembered Virginia carefully searching to find the perfect color of thread to hem one of Miranda’s dance costumes. Even as a girl, she had recognized the older woman’s pleasure in stitching that costume with expertise and love.

Miranda set the box with the sewing goods back on top of the piano and in doing so, she upset another opened box. A jumble of bound notebooks spilled out.

“Journals?” Miranda couldn’t resist. She opened one at random and laughed. Recipes—Farrah would love this. Miranda flipped through another and scanned Virginia’s discussion of the fun side of 1990s politics—apparently she’d thought Bill Clinton played one mean saxophone. She dropped that notebook back into the box and picked up a journal that was obviously far older.

Miranda sank to the floor after reading the first three lines.

Miss Virginia hadn’t really been a Miss. She’d been the Missus to a gentleman named Benjamin Autzenberg.

1960. I ran into Marta Rosenberg tonight, and we cried at seeing one another. We were last together in Terezin on that day the Russian soldiers freed us all. Marta talked of our husbands’ deaths and we cried again. She wanted to know if I had remarried and I explained that Radinski was my maiden name. I don’t want anyone to know I was Benjamin Autzenberg’s widow because I don’t want to be hounded by art dealers trying to buy his paintings. I told Marta I simply want peace.”

The delivery truck pulled up out front. Miranda quickly replaced the journal in the box, grabbed a tissue from her purse and dabbed her eyes.

