

Madame Strange
WEB OF LIES
By R. A Conti

Bianca had been driving all day. She wasn't due anywhere and felt free of concerns, worries, and obligations. All she looked forward to was pulling into a rest stop and finding a secluded spot under the trees. Then Bianca hoped to enjoy a pleasant meal and a good night's sleep.

A small group of RVs clustered at the corner of the huge parking lot. Bianca saw a spot at the edge of the blacktop and pulled in. She turned off her motor and sat in the stillness. No sounds came from outside. She hoped the night would remain peaceful.

After she ate, she noticed a chill in the air. Bianca rarely slept in pajamas but thought they would feel more comfortable tonight. Rummaging in her small bureau, she found an old pair of flannel pjs. She put them on and sighed contentedly.

She pulled out a CD she liked hearing after long drives. It was a collection of Carter Family songs that was recorded in the 1930s. Bianca loved the honest and simple purity of the lyrics, tunes, and voices. She had never seen any of the places the songs were about but knew the kind of people whose lives the songs mentioned. Not only did she know those people, she liked them. Mostly.

The Carter Family's era was gone but their truths lived on. Bianca thought those truths were eternal but wasn't sure. It didn't make any difference, anyway. No one was eternal. No world was eternal. Everything changed. Things got worse, but they got better, too. Bianca had learned to accept the ebb and flow of life a long time ago. She found her place in the flow and was content to serve the Mystery at the heart of Being. The simple songs spoke to her of that Mystery. That was why she liked listening to them when she was alone and tired.

It didn't take long for Bianca to fall into a deep sleep. But it didn't last. Someone banged on the door. Bianca awoke to a man's voice. "Hello? Hello! Anybody inside? I need your help, please."

Bianca didn't want to leave her cozy bed. She knew she had to but hoped she would return soon. *That sleep sure felt good*, she thought. *I need more, lots more.*

"Just a minute," she said as she found an old robe. Then she unlocked the door.

"Oh, thank God you're awake," the young man said. He was lanky and seemed undernourished. There was no light in his eyes. Bianca assumed he had come to ask for a handout. "I really need your help," he said.

"What's the problem?" Bianca asked, sleepily.

"I saw the lettering on your RV, *Madam Strange, Teller of the Future*. I need a reading awful bad."

Bianca tried to suppress a yawn. "Oh. Um... what time is it?"

"I don't know... around midnight, I guess."

"I was sleeping," Bianca replied. "I'm not good with readings unless I'm rested. Couldn't we do it tomorrow?"

"No. It must right now. Please. Just do whatever you can. You're my last hope."

“Okay, since you put it *that* way, come on in.”

They sat at Bianca’s tiny kitchen table. “So what can I help you with?”

“It’s my sister,” he said.

Bianca tried to read his thoughts and feelings but got only a sense of concern with no details. She hazarded a guess. “Oh, is she ill? I’m sorry.”

“No.”

“Has she disappeared, then?” Bianca asked.

“No.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“She’s come back,” the young man replied.

Bianca was puzzled. “That’s good, right?”

“No, it’s not,” he said.

“Why not?”

“She died a year ago,” he explained.

“Oh,” Bianca said. She assumed she wasn’t going to get any more sleep. “Do you mind if I make some coffee?” she asked. “I’ll be quick. Would you like some?” The young man shook his head.

Moments later, Bianca sat down with a steaming cup of black coffee and her crystal ball. She looked at the man. “Start with your name,” she said.

“Jerry.”

“And your sister’s name.”

“Winnie.”

“Tell me about Winnie.”

“She left us a year ago after a battle with cancer,” Jerry began. “My parents did all they could for her. She died peacefully. Everyone she loved was with her. We gave her a small but lovely funeral. It was hard saying goodbye but we did. Mom, dad, and I cried for days, I think.”

“I’m sorry for your family’s loss. Did her cancer last a long time?”

“No- it was fast. But we watched her suffer and it seemed like it went on longer than it really did.”

“That’s hard, I know,” Bianca commented.

“We moved on. We told ourselves she was at peace. Her painful ordeal was over,” Jerry said. Then he paused. Bianca felt his uneasiness.

“But it’s not, is it?”

“No. Something’s happened.”

“When you say she’s returned- you mean like a ghost?” Bianca asked.

Jerry looked at her with an expression of disdain on his face. “Ghosts aren’t real,” he said.

Bianca knew *that* wasn’t true but didn’t want to argue with him. “Then... how?” she asked.

“She’s here in the flesh. She eats, sleeps, talks, and remembers stuff. It’s as if she never went away. In fact, as near as we can tell, she doesn’t know she died.”

“Many ghosts don’t,” Bianca replied. Jerry frowned at her comment. She decided to go on. “So why is there a problem? You have your sister back. She seems like she was before. Isn’t that what you and your parents would have wanted?”

“Well, yes, of course, we wished she hadn’t died. But we don’t know how she came back. We don’t understand why it happened. It isn’t natural.”

“And that bothers you?” Bianca asked.

“Wouldn’t it bother *you*?” Jerry replied.

Bianca didn’t say anything. She waited for Jerry to go on. *There’s more he’s not telling me*, she thought.

“Um, Jerry. I don’t see what the problem is. You have to be more specific or I can’t help you. Why did you come to me? I tell fortunes. I don’t deal with medical problems.”

“I wanted you to tell our fortune.”

“Okay, specifically, what did you want to know?”

“What’s our future gonna be?”

“I don’t know,” Bianca replied. She knew her blunt admission wouldn’t make Jerry leave but had to shock him into revealing the truth, whatever it was.

“You can’t see *anything*?” Jerry asked. Bianca heard disbelief in his voice. She shook her head. “*Nothing*?” he asked. Now, Jerry seemed disappointed.

Bianca sighed. “Why don’t you tell me what you *want* me to see? Maybe then I’ll be able to tell you more.”

“I want to know if she’s back for good or only for a time and she’ll be leaving again.”

Bianca looked at Jerry. He waited. “That’s not what you truly want to know, Jerry,” she said, finally.

Jerry looked at Bianca, wondering if she knew something he didn’t. “It’s not?” he asked.

“You want to know if she’s *really* back from the dead, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. I guess you’re right. I mean it’s creepy.”

“You want to know if she’s truly your sister or some sort of trick nature, God, or maybe Satan is playing on your family,” Bianca said. Jerry nodded. “I don’t know, Jerry. I’m just a fortuneteller, not a psychic.”

“Don’t you have to be a psychic to be a fortune-teller?” he asked.

Bianca scoffed. “*That’s* why you woke me up? You thought I was a psychic? I’m sorry to disappoint you. I don’t understand what’s happening with your sister. And I don’t know anyone who could help you figure this out.”

“Okay. I’m sorry I woke you,” Jerry said. His easy resignation surprised Bianca. She had expected he would coerce or beg her for more.

“Sorry I can’t do more,” she said. “But some things are beyond my abilities.”

Jerry got up and walked out without another word. Not even a thank-you. Bianca knew he was feeling let down. She regretted not being able to help him but that happened occasionally. Sometimes she encountered problems even she couldn’t fix.

Bianca assumed she had seen the end of Jerry. She was wrong. Her involvement with him had only just begun.

After Jerry left, Bianca remained wide awake. She had made the coffee extra strong. *Time for more Carter Family*, she thought. She switched on the CD player. The soothing music drifted through the RV. Bianca went back to bed.

Outside, Jerry felt hopeless. *I wasted my time*, he thought, *She can't help us. She's a fake.*

Hours later, a timid knock on the door woke Bianca again. She felt tempted to yell 'go away' but stopped herself. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Winnie, Jerry's sister."

"Just a minute," Bianca said. She got up and threw on her robe. Then she opened the door.

"Could I talk to you?" the girl said. She was shorter and chubbier than her brother and had darker hair. Her face seemed as if something was missing. She had all the normal facial features, but lacked a coherent expression. Bianca couldn't read Winnie and hesitated. *Do I really want to talk to her?* she thought. Then she realized she had to, just because Winnie had approached her.

"Okay. Come in."

They sat at Bianca's tiny kitchen table. "Did you come for a reading?" Bianca asked.

"A reading? Um, no. I came because I saw my brother leaving here last night."

Bianca nodded. "Yes. He and I spoke."

"About what?" Winnie asked.

"I'm sorry, but that's confidential."

"Was it *me*?" Winnie asked. Bianca tried not to show a response. "So it was. Well, okay, then. There're some things you should know."

"I'm listening."

"He's been acting strange since I came back."

"Came back from *where*?" Bianca asked.

"My brief marriage."

"When did you get married?"

"About a year ago," Winnie began to explain. "I left with my husband. He found a new job on the West Coast."

"What happened?"

"He not only found a new job. He also found a new woman," Winnie said.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. At least I found out early what a bastard he was. I came back home. My parents welcomed me. They tried to make me forget him and move on. But Jerry wouldn't talk to me. I couldn't understand why. We were never close but were always friendly toward each other. We never fought. But now he looks at me as if he's afraid of me."

"Does Jerry have mental problems?" Bianca asked, bluntly.

"What do you mean?"

"Is he on any medication? Or has he been told he *should* be on medication?"

"I don't think so," Winnie said. "Why do you ask?"

"I think he's delusional."

"My brother?" Winnie gasped. "He's always been a down-to-earth guy."

"Maybe you don't know him as well as you think," Bianca commented.

“Why do you say that? What did he tell you?”

“I can’t go into details, Winnie. I suggest you try to talk to him but be aware that he’s very sensitive and may be troubled. Perhaps there’s something else going on in his life that’s affecting his relationship with you.”

“There *isn’t* a relationship. It’s just the opposite. He treats me as if he’s afraid of me or as if I don’t exist.”

“But you clearly do,” Bianca replied. She got up and saw Winnie out the door. Then she wondered what the hell was going on. *Who are these people*, she thought. *And what kinds of shit are they trying to pull?*

Bianca decided not to return to bed after Winnie left. The sun had already come up. The rest stop was busier and noisier. She assumed the other RVs would be on their way just as she wanted to be. Jerry and Winnie were probably getting ready to leave as well. However, they weren’t through with her yet.

Their visits had made Bianca uncomfortable but she didn’t think there was anything she could do to help them. She wanted to pull out of the rest stop, leave them behind, and roll on down the highway. However, she wasn’t going to get rid of them that easily.

Bianca saw no need to rush her departure. She ate breakfast in her pajamas and enjoyed listening to the hustle and bustle of the activity outside. After breakfast, she opened her laptop to check her email. There were a couple of new job offers at carnivals in the region. One of them started the next day. She responded to that email and closed the laptop. Just as she was about to shower there was a knock at her door. Bianca already knew who was there. It was Jerry and Winnie.

“We wanted to talk to you,” Jerry said after Bianca opened the door.

Hoping to get rid of them, Bianca decided to be brief. “I don’t think I can help you and I’m kind of in a hurry to leave.”

“It’ll just take a few minutes,” Winnie pleaded.

“All right, but I have to get on my way. I’m supposed to be two hundred miles from here by tonight.”

“We think we’ve given you the wrong impression,” Winnie said after they sat down.

“There’s nothing wrong with our relationship,” Jerry added.

“Glad to hear it,” Bianca replied, guardedly. *But something is wrong*, she thought. *I can feel it.*

“But there *is* something wrong with the world,” Winnie added.

“What do you mean?” Bianca asked.

“You’re the first person we’ve been able to talk to in... I don’t know... how long would you say, Jerry?”

“I’ve lost track,” he replied.

“I don’t understand,” Bianca said.

“We’ve knocked on doors before but nobody answered. We couldn’t tell if they didn’t hear us or they were ignoring us. But, you heard us and let us in. You actually *talked* to us. You’re different.”

“I’m just a traveling fortuneteller.”

“We think you’re much more,” Jerry said.

“You’re likely mistaken.”

“Well, that’s what we thought,” Jerry said. “You didn’t detect our lies when we came to you separately. But you did see us.”

Bianca tried not to react when they mentioned lies.

“We think you can help us,” Winnie said.

“Help you, how?”

“Get back home,” Jerry said.

“You’re asking an awful lot of me.”

“Please,” Winnie pleaded.

Bianca didn’t respond.

“We should tell her,” Jerry said.

“Tell me *what*?” Bianca asked. She was becoming alarmed.

“The truth. *Our* truth.”

Bianca tried not to look annoyed but hoped they would see how they were bothering her. They had already admitted they lied to her. How did she know they’d be telling her the truth now? “I’ll listen but I’m not promising anything. Do you understand?” They nodded.

“Our parents stopped here almost twenty years ago when we were little children,” Jerry explained. “The whole family went to the bathrooms. But then our mother and father drove off and left us behind. We thought it was a mistake but they never came back looking for us.”

Bianca doubted their tale immediately. *They’re lying to me, again*, she thought. *I’ve had about enough of these two.* “You’re expecting me to believe you survived here all this time?”

“They left us in the dead of winter. We ran into the woods, scared out of our minds. We shouldn’t have done that. It got very cold that night, too cold. Neither of us knew what to do. We didn’t survive the night.”

“So, you’re asking me to believe you’re *ghosts*?” Bianca asked.

Winnie nodded. “We are.”

“Why do you want to find your parents, even if you could, somehow?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jerry asked. Bianca shook her head. “To haunt them.”

“Do you know anything about haunting?” Bianca asked. Her question surprised the siblings. What was there to know? “I didn’t think so. It’s a lot more than just showing up unexpectedly where you’re not wanted.”

“Maybe *you* could teach us,” Winnie said.

“Even if I could, there’s no way we could find your parents.”

Jerry glanced at the laptop. “What about that computer?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Bianca replied. “I guess that could help.”

“Their names are Jonathan and Darla Bixby,” Winnie said. Bianca thought she ought to look, at least, although it seemed likely there were many couples named Bixby.

She opened the laptop and did a search. The parents appeared on the fourth line of the search results. With photos.

“Our parents have a website?” Jerry asked.

“That seems to be the case,” Bianca replied. They all read the screen. The heading read, ‘Help Us Find Our Abducted Children.’

“Is that *us*?” Winnie asked. “See what else it says.”

Bianca clicked on the link. The Bixby's website appeared. She clicked on the 'About' page. They read the screen together. 'The couple have been searching for Winifred and Gerald who were abducted from a highway rest stop in Ohio 18 years ago,' it read. 'The Bixby's have followed numerous clues looking for the trail of their beloved children. The clues appeared in strange forms. Some were in the outside world; others appeared in dreams or visions. The Bixby's have followed every clue until it was exhausted. However, they never gave up hope. They appeal to everyone to help in any way they can.'

"Looks like their story is different from what you've told me," Bianca commented.

"This is a lie!" Winnie shouted.

"Calm down, Winnie. This just makes it more important for us to find them and expose what they did to us. Will you help now, Bianca? Please?"

"I have to think about it."

"What's there to think about?" Jerry asked.

"Everything," Bianca replied. "This doesn't feel right to me. I can't figure out what the truth is. I don't think you or your parents- if that's who these people *really* are- can be trusted."

"*Please* help us," Winnie pleaded.

Bianca still felt they weren't telling her the full story. She stood up and walked to the door. "You should leave now," she said.

"You mean you *won't* help us?" Winnie said.

"I need to think about this. Alone."

"Then what?" Jerry asked.

"Then I'll decide what to do."

"When?" Winnie asked.

"By nightfall," Bianca replied. "Maybe before."

"How will we know?"

"If I'm here at dusk you'll know my answer. If I'm gone, well..."

"Please," Jerry said. "You're our only hope."

"You said that last night, Jerry, just before you told me lies about your sister. I need time to sort this out and find a path to the truth. Please leave." Jerry and Winnie walked out dejectedly. They felt they had lost their only possibility of leaving that place in years.

"So what do you think?" Winnie asked after they left the RV. "Will she do it?"

"I honestly can't say, Winnie. She's the best one we've seen so far. But she seems the most obstinate, too."

"What can we do to persuade her?"

"Let's just watch her, for now. It will be a good thing if she doesn't go right away. At least it will mean she's thinking about us."

After the siblings left, Bianca reviewed what had happened since Jerry came to her at midnight. She couldn't be certain of anything about them. *Well, there's one thing I know for sure*, she thought. *They're both ghosts*. That knowledge wasn't much use. She wasn't sure if she cared why they were ghosts or what their true story was.

Bianca wished her crystal ball would show her future but she had tried a few times and been unsuccessful. Moreover, the ball often proved unreliable when she looked into someone's past to understand their present circumstances. Sometimes the images were clear.

Other times they were murky and required interpretation. Once or twice, the ball remained cloudy and nothing appeared. She thought that's how it would be if she inquired about Jerry and Winnie.

Bianca realized she would have to figure out what to do on her own. It didn't take her long to make up her mind. She knew they wouldn't like what she decided.

Bianca didn't look in her rearview mirror as she pulled out of the rest stop just after lunch. She hoped Jerry and Winnie hadn't seen her leave. They, however, knew what her decision was as soon as she made it and had climbed atop the RV to await her departure. Bianca didn't hear them. Ghosts make no noises unless they want to.

She pulled into a small roadside stop two hours later. It was time to use the bathroom. She sat on the toilet, thought about her destination, and looked forward to seeing some old friends in the carnival she was joining. There was a knock at the door. Bianca assumed it was another motorist asking for help with directions. She finished and went to the door. Jerry and Winnie greeted her.

“What the fuck?” Bianca said.

“Hello,” Jerry said. “We said you were our only hope, didn't we? Well, we meant it. You *have* to help us.”

“We won't harm you or anything,” Winnie added. “But we had no choice. Neither do you.”

Bianca glared at them. She wondered if there was a way to escape. There wasn't.

“Come in,” she said. They entered and stood looking at her. She felt they were waiting for something. “What is it you want from me?”

“Take us to our parents.”

“Where are they?”

“Look them up again,” Jerry said.

“I can't. There's no Wi-Fi here.”

“What about your phone?”

“Oh, yeah,” Bianca said. She took out her phone and Googled the Bixbys again. “It seems they're in suburban Philadelphia. I was planning to go to New York State.”

“I think your plans just changed,” Winnie said, coldly. For the first time, Bianca sensed menace in Winnie's tone of voice. She didn't know what they could do to her if she didn't cooperate and didn't want to find out. Bianca wasn't certain if she could fight them if she had to.

Bianca had had previous sporadic encounters with ghosts. The most frequent were when they appeared in her crystal ball. The ghosts she saw were customers who came to her for their futures and she was seeing them after they died. What she saw often chilled her. She rarely mentioned it to them. Instead, she made up an evasive story for the unsuspecting client.

There had been other encounters with ghosts that were not in her crystal ball. They were in the real world. Bianca had learned that ghosts were unpredictable. She never made assumptions about what they would or would not do. All she knew for certain was that she had to be careful.

Bianca wasn't afraid of death. Not her own, anyway. Most people were, and they didn't like being reminded about it. How do you tell someone you're seeing them dead? She

had never figured out a way to do that. That sort of honesty would be bad for her fortunetelling business, anyway.

But, this wasn't business. These ghosts wanted something from her, and it seemed there was no way to escape doing what they wanted. Bianca felt trapped. She had been trapped enough times before to learn that sometimes what seemed to be a trap wasn't one. Maybe those who did the trapping were the ones who were trapped. Bianca would have to wait to see how this ordeal with Winnie and Jerry played out before she could decide what she ought to do.

She drove to suburban Philadelphia and found the Bixby's house. A stout woman with a plain face and blonde hair answered the door.

"Mrs. Bixby?" Bianca said.

"Yes."

"Hello. My name is Bianca Estranho. I saw your website. I've had a couple of dreams," Bianca lied. *Now, I'm doing it, too*, she thought. *This situation keeps getting worse.*

"Oh? Please come in."

Bianca entered the modest row house. Darla glanced outside at Bianca's RV and read the words painted on the side. The RV looked out of place on the quiet residential street.

"Jonathan!"

"Coming!" Mr. Bixby said as he walked in from an adjoining room. He was the same height as his wife and had dark hair and a pleasant face. Two children tagged along gleefully.

"He loves playing with our grandkids," Darla explained.

"You have grandchildren? The website didn't mention that."

"Yes. We had older kids besides Gerald and Winnie. Losing them was a blow, of course, but we had to keep the family going."

"Of course."

"This is Bianca. She might have information for us." *I've got more than information*, Bianca thought. *I've got two ghosts who claim they belong to you. They're planning to haunt you.*

"Please sit down. Can I get you anything?" Darla asked. Bianca shook her head.

"So, you said you had dreams," Darla said. "Please tell us more."

"I was sleeping at a rest stop in Ohio. I saw two people in my dreams. I didn't know either of them. They've never been my customers."

"Customers?" Jonathan asked.

"Bianca's a fortuneteller," Darla explained. "I hope it's okay to call you that."

"Of course," Bianca replied.

"So you're somewhat psychic, I guess," Jonathan said.

"A little. I can never be sure. I won't claim special powers or anything like that. Let's just say I'm highly intuitive. I've learned over the years that when I get a strong intuition-like someone appearing in two successive dreams- it might mean something. I saw on your website that you've sought leads from various sources. I felt I owed it to you to share what happened in my dream."

"We appreciate that, don't we, dear?" Jonathan commented. Darla didn't nod. "Please go on."

“Well, two people in the dream came to me and told me about you. They claim they were deliberately abandoned by you years ago when they were younger than your grandchildren.”

“Gerald and Winifred were *abducted*,” Darla said, coldly.

“That’s what the website says,” Bianca remarked.

“What are you suggesting?” Darla replied.

“Maybe *they* don’t think they were abducted. Maybe they were brainwashed or something. Remember, this was only my dream. But I thought it was too strong a coincidence to ignore.”

“How did they look in your dream?” Jonathan asked.

“They were adults.”

“They didn’t appear as little kids?” Darla asked.

“No. That’s what I thought was so strange. I would have expected them to appear as kids if I was dreaming about what I read on your website. If *that* had happened, I would have dismissed it and went on to my next job. But them appearing as adults seemed significant to me.”

“So what do you think that means?” Darla asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Where were you?” Jonathan asked.

“At the Towpath rest stop on the Ohio Turnpike.”

Darla gasped. “That’s where we were stopped when they were abducted.”

“That’s what I thought. You think it’s a coincidence that I dreamed about them there?”

“I don’t know,” Jonathan said.

“Well, I don’t think it’s a coincidence. That’s why I drove all this way to talk to you.”

“It may not be a coincidence, but I don’t see what it means. Jonathan. How could this be useful?”

“It’s not much of a lead,” Jonathan replied. “I guess it could tell us they’re still alive somewhere. So that’s something, right?”

“You didn’t *assume* they were still alive?” Bianca asked.

Jonathan shook his head. “We assumed the worst a while back but never admitted it on our website. It seemed hopeless.”

“So I’ve brought you some hope, at least,” Bianca said. *And, I’ve brought so much more. You have no idea*, she thought. Bianca wondered if she could prevent Winnie and Jerry from doing what they intended to do. She didn’t know if she could stop them from haunting an innocent grieving family.

“Yes, you have,” Darla said. “Forgive me. This is quite a shock. I don’t know what we ought to do about it. Is there more you could tell us, like where they might be?”

“Well, they came to me while I slept at the very rest stop where you last saw them, so I would guess they’re somewhere in that area. But that’s just a guess.”

“Interesting,” Jonathan replied. “The police canvassed that area thoroughly. Nothing came up. Since it was a rest stop visited by thousands of cars every day we assumed they were taken away as soon as they were abducted.”

“A logical assumption,” Bianca replied. “But maybe you ought to look again?” She got a strong sense one or both of the Bixbys didn’t want to look again. Not at the area near the rest stop or anywhere else. She couldn’t tell if they were tired of searching unsuccessfully or didn’t want to find out what had really happened to Winnie and Jerry because they had abandoned them as the children claimed.

It seemed every step Bianca took enmeshed her more deeply into the mystery surrounding this family. She felt her entanglement in this strange dilemma was not finished. Bianca wished, again, that she could see her personal future in that crystal ball of hers. It might have helped her see a way out of this mess.

Back in her RV, Bianca found Jerry and Winnie seated at the small kitchen table. “You’re still here?” she said.

“Where did you expect us to be?” Jerry asked.

“I brought you where you asked. So why are you still in my RV?”

“We can’t go in the house,” Winnie explained.

“Why not?”

“We don’t know. We just can’t.”

“So now what happens? Am I stuck with you forever?” Bianca asked. She felt exasperated. “I’m leaving here. This is *not* my problem. It’s yours. I didn’t even want to be here. I only came because you threatened me.”

“We *never* threatened you,” Winnie insisted. “What could we have done to hurt you?”

“You’re ghosts and you still don’t know what you can do?” Bianca asked. She knew what ghosts could do to the living because she had seen it a few times.

Then she thought about the situation and realized why she doubted Jerry and Winnie’s story. *They might not be lying*, Bianca thought. *They might not know the truth about what happened to them*. Bianca still felt her priority was to keep Jerry and Winnie from harming the Bixbys. However, she had to know more. *This just keeps getting worse. I keep getting sucked further and further in. Where will it end?*

There was one other thing she could try.

Bianca went back to the house and rang the doorbell.

“Oh, it’s you again,” Jonathan Bixby said.

“Hello. Maybe I could do something to help you find out more about Jerry and Winnie. I do possess some psychic ability. But I would need to know more about them.”

“Why, that’s very kind of you. We’re grateful you brought us hope, but we had no idea what to do next. Please come in.”

“Actually, it would be better if you came to my RV. That’s where my crystal ball is. It’s the only place it works,” she lied. “I don’t know why.”

“Well, we have the grandkids here now,” Jerry replied. “We can’t leave them alone. Could you stay around until they go home? Why don’t you have dinner with us?”

“That’s kind of you. I’ve been traveling for almost a week. A home-cooked meal would be lovely.” *And I can get to know you a little better*, Bianca thought. *Maybe I can pick up something that would help me figure out the truth.*

Over dinner, Darla and Jonathan chatted about their family. Darla seemed uncomfortable talking about Jerry and Winnie but enthusiastically praised her other children

and grandchildren. Bianca talked about her life on the road going from carnival to carnival. She left out all the other stuff she did. Bianca never bragged about her involvement in people's lives.

"So you never married, never had children?" Darla asked.

"None that I know of," Bianca joked. Jonathan guffawed. Darla glared at him. She suspected her husband was smitten with Bianca but didn't know why. *Is it because she's attractive, because she lives on the road, or because she's a fortuneteller?* Darla wondered. *It doesn't make any difference, anyway. She'll be gone soon. I'll just have to make sure I don't leave them alone.*

Darla's insecurity about her marriage made her feel jealous of the smallest attention Jonathan paid to other women. In the past, she had seduced him whenever she felt threatened. Darla overwhelmed him with sexual gifts to make him forget his attraction elsewhere. That was why the couple had five children. Jonathan had never been genuinely attracted to those other women but he liked the attention Darla lavished on him and enjoyed her erotic favors. He also loved the children that resulted from their sexual extravagances.

Jonathan had always been more devoted to their babies than Darla was. She provided motherly support but Jonathan did all he could to engage, entertain, and bond with the babies as early as possible. They grew up with a strong sense of their father's love. Their mother's love was less a deep feeling and more of an assumption. They knew their mother loved them, but she rarely made them feel it.

The abduction had affected Jonathan more deeply than Darla. She felt shocked but would have been content letting the police handle everything. The website and nationwide search were Jonathan's ideas. His obsession with the search had distracted him from Darla but she never raised any objections. She waited until all the possibilities were exhausted and hoped he would forget about Jerry and Winnie. He had let the search lapse until Bianca showed up. Now Darla felt threatened not only by Jonathan's renewed obsession with the search but by Bianca's presence.

"Tell me about that day you were at the rest stop in Ohio," Bianca asked. She knew the memory was likely to be difficult but it was necessary to ask. Plus, she hoped to probe their minds as they were recalling what happened.

Jonathan answered immediately. "We were heading toward Chicago hoping Darla's brother would take us in but weren't sure he could. He was in a bad way himself. We had lost everything- both jobs, our house, all our possessions. All we had was our car and the kids. They were hungry and there was no food and almost no money. We couldn't decide between buying food or gas. If we bought food, we would likely run out of gas somewhere in rural Ohio snow and we would all be dead from the cold. If we bought gas, we could make it further down the road and maybe find a miracle."

"A miracle?" Bianca asked.

"One of us could get a job. We asked everywhere we stopped but there was no work. Anyway, at that rest stop, we left the youngest kids in the car and only the oldest went inside. We didn't want the youngest to smell the food or see people eating. We spent some time asking if there were jobs. When we came back, Jerry and Winnie were gone. We told the cops right away..." Jonathan began tearing up. Bianca waited for him to continue.

“They searched the rest stop, of course. That was before there were cameras everywhere so there was no way to see what vehicles arrived or departed, or maybe see if someone approached our car and took Jerry and Winnie away. The cops put out an alert on the radio. But it was too late. Our kids were gone.” Jonathan finished and began crying.

Jerry and Winnie told me their mom and dad drove off without them, Bianca thought. Jerry's grief looks real. But why isn't Darla crying? I would think this memory could be worse for a mother than for a father.

“The cops and people at the rest stop took up a collection for us,” Jerry went on. “We were gonna stay in the area while the search was underway but one of the people we met knew of a job I could get immediately. Ironically, it was back here, where we started. So, we left.

“We kept in touch with the cops. After we got back on our feet, I set up the website to publicize what happened and thank all the people who helped us. The site got a lot of traffic, and several leads, but nothing panned out. I guess I'll never know what happened to my kids...” Jonathan added. Then he continued sobbing.

Darla was silent. Bianca tried to probe her mind but got nowhere. *Either she blocking me or something else is going on*, Bianca thought. She didn't want to speculate about possible reasons Darla seemed emotionless. Bianca felt no closer to the truth. The meal had been great but she still had no sense of what was going on with the Bixby family.

Bianca went back to the RV. Winnie and Jerry were waiting. “So, did you learn anything?” Winnie asked.

“No. Did you?” Bianca replied, sharply. It seemed obvious the two ghosts were unaware of the abilities they possessed. They could easily probe the minds of anyone they wanted to. They could discover hidden feelings or memories. Bianca had seen other ghosts do it. It was easy.

“So now what?” Jerry asked.

“You tell me. I'm not even supposed to be here. I already did what you demanded. I don't owe you anything more. I want to leave and let you figure out what you're gonna do next. This isn't my problem, it's yours.”

“But don't you go around helping people? Isn't that what you do? Isn't the fortune-teller thing just a front?” Jerry asked. His question shocked Bianca. *How does he know that? Has he been probing me without my knowing it? Maybe these guys are better than I thought.*

“People, yes. Ghosts, no.”

“You don't believe us, do you?” Winnie asked. Bianca nodded. “Why?”

“I don't believe what anyone in this family is telling me. Something else is going on, but I can't figure out what it is. And I'm fed up with being manipulated.”

“We're not manipulating you!” Winnie yelled.

“You forced me to come here. You're expecting me to get information from your parents- if these people even *are* your real parents. Maybe that's a lie, too.”

“But they know our names,” Jerry protested. “They know who we are.”

“Oh, yes. They lost children named Gerald and Winifred. But, how do I know if you two are the same Gerald and Winifred? Maybe you're impostors. Or, delusional. Maybe you

only *think* you're Gerald and Winifred. *Or, maybe I'm talking to two crazy ghosts*, Bianca thought. *How can this get any worse?*

"She's right," Winnie said. Her comment surprised Bianca.

"So, are you going to tell me the truth, now?" Bianca asked.

"Well, no," Winnie replied.

"Why the hell not? Don't you think you owe me?"

"It's not that easy," Jerry said.

"What do you mean?" Bianca asked.

"What Jerry means is that we don't know what the truth is, Bianca. I'm sorry. We thought we knew but we're not sure now. Of the truth or anything else."

"I see..."

"Don't be angry with us," Jerry said.

"How could I *not* be angry? You used me, and now I'm trapped in whatever bizarre family drama is unfolding here. I should just dump the two of you out on the street and peel away from here. You can work it out with the Bixbys."

"You could, but you won't," Winnie said. "That's not what you do." Bianca knew Winnie was right. There was a reason these ghosts had found her and drew her into their dilemma. The deeper she went, the stranger things became. Bianca didn't want to leave now, even if she could. She wanted to know the truth. Her help was needed, obviously, but what she could do and how she could do it escaped her. *There's no way out but in*, Bianca thought, grimly. *I'm stuck here until this plays out.*

Bianca sighed. "So now what?" she asked. "What do I do next? I'm out of ideas." She knew by their silence they were, too.

There was a knock on the RV door. Bianca opened it and saw Darla. "Could I speak to you?" she asked. "Oh, I'm, sorry. I see you have company. I'll come back later."

"No, it's okay, Darla. Please come in." Bianca paused to consider the opportunity that had arisen suddenly. The ghosts and their alleged mother were together for the first time in many years. What would happen next? What could she *make* happen?

"Darla, this is Winnie... and her brother Jerry." Darla didn't react when she heard the names. Bianca waited. "Didn't you have children named Jerry and Winnie?" she asked.

Darla nodded, nervously. Bianca's question had pained her. "My Winnie and Jerry are gone... *long* gone. I think about them often," Darla said. Bianca nodded. Jerry and Winnie waited silently.

"Is there a reason you came to see me?" Bianca asked.

"Um, yes. But, I don't want to speak in front of your other guests. It's sort of private."

"We'll leave so you can talk," Jerry said. He started for the door. Winnie followed. Bianca let them go.

"Your friends-," Darla said after they were gone.

"I hardly know them. We only met a few hours ago," Bianca said. She gestured for Darla to sit at the table. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Well, I came to beg you not to give my husband any false hope. He's been through a lot. I'd hoped the ordeal was over but now he's gone back to being the way he was at the height of the search."

"How was he?"

“Excitable, agitated, uneasy,” Darla replied. “He almost lost his job a couple of times. I had to steady him and pull him through.”

“And what about you? How did you handle everything?”

“I guess I was more realistic from the beginning,” Darla replied. “I knew they were gone... forever.”

“You had no doubt, no hope?”

Darla shook her head. “Hope seemed unrealistic.”

“Hope is *never* unrealistic, Darla.”

Darla seemed unhappy with Bianca’s comment. “Please, I beg you, don’t give him false hope. I don’t know what another disappointment would do to him.”

They sat in silence for a few moments. Bianca felt sorry for Darla. *Maybe I misjudged her*, she thought. Bianca felt more frustrated than before. The mystery had deepened and there seemed no way out of it.

“I’m only trying to help,” Bianca apologized.

“I know, and I appreciate your interest. It’s just that I don’t want to go through all that again. And I don’t want Johnathan to go through it all, either. It was horrible.”

“I can imagine.”

“I’m guessing you can do more than imagine,” Darla said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re psychic, right?”

“Somewhat, yes,” Bianca replied.

“You get inside people’s heads, don’t you?”

“Well, sometimes- but not often. I don’t do it by choice,” Bianca lied. “It just happens.”

“But you do know what goes on inside people, not just because they tell you, but because you can see and feel it for yourself.”

“You could say that, yes.”

“And you must have run across people with experiences like ours,” Darla said.

“Once or twice.”

“So, you know what it feels like to lose a child.”

“I’ve had glimpses, yes,” Bianca replied.

Darla looked directly into Bianca’s eyes. “I invite you to use your powers on me, Bianca. Look inside me. See if my feelings are genuine. I know you’ve doubted me. Check me out. See for yourself.”

How does she know I’ve felt suspicious about her? Bianca wondered. The answer seemed obvious.

“You’re like me, aren’t you?” Bianca asked. Darla nodded. “Does anyone else know?”

Darla shook her head. “I’ve never told anyone. I don’t think anyone would have believed me if I had. And, it’s like you said- it just happens. I can’t control it.”

“And, you know what happened to your children, don’t you?”

Darla looked down at the empty table. There was a long silence. Bianca wondered if she should offer Darla coffee or tea. “Nothing happened to them,” Darla whispered, finally.

“What do you mean?”

“They didn’t exist,” Darla said.

“What do you mean?”

“We never had children named Jerry and Winnie.”

“The whole thing was a hoax?” Bianca asked.

“More or less, yes,” Darla replied

“But why?”

“It was because of our *other* children.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I wanted to frighten them,” Darla explained. “We were traveling. They kept wandering off. I told them the story about Jerry and Winnie to scare them. But it went too far.”

Bianca sensed the truth Darla was hiding. “You didn’t just *tell* them, did you?”

“No. I hypnotized them. Jonathan, too. It was the only way I could keep everyone in line. I was losing him... and them.”

“Losing?”

“Jonathan was threatening to leave me. He wanted to take the children with him. He would have been the abductor, you see. So, I made up other children and also an abduction to frighten him into staying. It was easy.”

“I guess it seemed easy back then, but it doesn’t look that way now, does it?” Bianca asked. Darla shook her head. “You could have just worked things out with Jonathan.”

“I tried. He wouldn’t listen.”

“I pity you, Darla. You’ve done incalculable damage.”

“It was the only way.”

“I doubt it,” Bianca replied. She didn’t believe any of Darla’s story and wondered if Darla could truly sense her doubt or anything at all. They sat in silence, again.

“There’s something I needed to ask you,” Darla said.

“That’s the real reason you came, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Darla hesitated. Bianca waited. “Um, why did you come here, Bianca? What brought you here?”

“Those two people who just left asked me to bring them here.”

“Who are they?” Darla asked.

“They’re your abducted children.”

“Oh, dear God,” Darla whimpered. “What have I done?”

“That’s not the right question,” Bianca said. Darla looked at her. She saw no compassion in Bianca’s eyes. Bianca suspected Darla had lied yet again. “The question is, Darla, why are you *still* lying?”

Darla jumped up and started toward the door. Bianca grabbed her arm. “You can’t run away anymore. What you did has come back to haunt you, literally. I can go away but they won’t.” Darla wrenched her arm from Bianca’s grip and left the RV. Winnie and Jerry appeared immediately.

“Did you hear any of that?” Bianca asked.

“We did.”

“Your mother is a sick woman. Are you sure you want to stay here? I could take you back where we met, far away from them.”

“We came to hurt them.”

“I know, but I feel she’s already hurt far more than you could ever could do.”

“Oh, no. There’s a *lot* more we could do. Her guilt was all inside her, until now,” Winnie said.

“But it’s outside, in a sense, now that we’re here,” Jerry added.

Winnie nodded. “Her suffering has only just begun.”

Bianca grimaced. She knew what kinds of suffering ghosts could cause. She also wondered if the guilt Darla felt had anything to do with what happened to her children or something else. It was baffling.

Bianca had made no progress toward a solution and was no closer to the truth. It seemed everyone had been lying to her- Winnie, Jerry, *and* Darla. She was starting to doubt there was any truth to be found. Once again, Bianca didn’t know what to do.

Until now, she had felt no personal risk or threat, just inconvenience. Now she wondered if she would ever be free of this strange drama. There seemed to be no way out.

But, Bianca had not yet heard from one other member of the Bixby family. It was Jonathan. She prayed the real story would emerge when he finally came to see her but was not optimistic. All she could do was wait.

Bianca settled in for an evening alone in the RV. She reached for her CD player but didn’t want to hear the Carter Family this time. *I need some Philip Glass to cleanse my brain cells*, she thought. Bianca found her old CD of *Glassworks* and put it on. Glass’s music enveloped her and she surrendered herself to the flow. The music reminded her of a river, but not just any river. A long one that ran not just through miles of geography but flowed through eons of time as well. The music was working, healing her deeply, as it always did. Bianca sighed.

Jonathan showed up early the next morning. Bianca knew he was outside her door before he knocked. “Please come in,” she called. He entered hesitantly. “I was waiting for you,” she said. The RV smelled of coffee. Jonathan noticed. “Want some?” Bianca asked. He nodded. “Sit.” She got a cup and filled it. “Black, right?” she asked.

“How did you know?” he asked. Bianca ignored his question. She didn’t want to talk about coffee. She handed him a cup and sat down.

“I wanted to thank you for coming all the way here to talk to us,” Jonathan began. Bianca felt that was not why he came at all. There was something else on his mind. She tried to see inside him but no clear feelings or thoughts surfaced.

Bianca waited in silence. She had all day. She couldn’t go anywhere or do anything else until this ordeal ended, and it seemed like it would never end. *I expect he’ll lie to me, too*, she thought. *But, maybe I can get a little closer to the truth.*

Bianca wasn’t a Christian. She didn’t belong to or follow any religion. She had nothing against religions. It was just that none of them appealed to her. She had read many sacred texts and recalled Jesus and Pilate in John 18:30. ““What is truth?” retorted Pilate,” the text said. She didn’t identify herself with Pilate but she wondered if she would ever learn the truth about this strange Bixby family.

“Jerry and Winnie were my life,” Jonathan began. “Losing them shattered my world. I’ve never recovered. I act as if I have, but it’s just a false front. I do it for Darla and my other kids. Inside, I still feel empty. I think I always will.”

Winnie and Jerry appeared inside the RV. Only Bianca could see them.

Jonathan sighed. "I've relived that day every day since. What could I have done differently? Where did it go wrong? Was it my fault?" Jonathan appeared genuinely distraught but Bianca had learned to distrust everything she saw or heard from these people.

"Tell me what happened," she said.

"It was simple- something we had done many times on other trips. I took Jerry into the men's room with me. Darla took Winnie with her. Both rooms were crowded. We got distracted by what we were doing, turned around for a moment, and when we turned back, the kids were gone. No one in the rooms had seen them or knew what happened. It was as if they had been invisible.

"I heard someone yelling outside the men's room and ran out. It was Darla. She looked at me and shrieked, 'I can't find Winnie!' Then she noticed Jerry wasn't with me. 'Where's Jerry?' she screamed. 'I don't know,' was all I could say.

"People started looking immediately. I somehow knew they wouldn't find our kids. I felt guilty for being so certain they were gone, but I was. I didn't say anything to Darla. She started going up to children who looked around the same ages as Jerry and Winnie, frightening their parents. People explained that our kids had disappeared. It was chaos for a while.

"Then people drifted on their way. We were left with police and the rest stop manager. Even though it had only just happened, I felt like my kids had been erased from the world. It was like when you're dreaming and you find something and hold it in your hand and then you wake up and it's not there and you feel strange. I just had it! It was right here! Where did it go?"

Jonathan looked at Bianca. She listened impassively. "Since then I've felt like I've lived in a nightmare that won't end. I hoped you coming here out of the blue meant we could get closure but I guess that's not gonna happen. But, I thank you anyway. I guess the nightmare isn't over."

"Sometimes they don't end," Bianca replied, sympathetically. She meant the comment for Jonathan as much as herself.

"I just want to wake up and see Jerry and Winnie again," Jonathan sobbed. "Is that asking so much?"

"Dad?" Winnie said. Jonathan didn't hear her. "Dad?" she repeated, louder.

"Dad?" Jerry said. "We're right here." Jonathan didn't respond. Bianca looked at them. She wondered if she should tell Jonathan they were there. *Would he believe me? Or, would it break him, finally?* Bianca thought. She decided not to risk it. She recalled the story Darla told her and had another idea.

"Why did you do it?" Bianca asked.

"Do what?"

"Lie about your children being abducted that day?"

"It wasn't a lie."

"Yes, it was, Jonathan. You and Darla never had any children named Jerry and Winnie, did you?"

Jerry scowled. "You must be *insanely* cruel to say something like that."

“Am I? I think it’s the truth,” Bianca replied. Winnie and Jerry looked at her. They had no idea what she was doing. “You and Darla played a cruel prank on everyone that day. Why? Was it to get attention, sympathy, money?”

“No! Shut up! You’re evil!”

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Bianca said, calmly. Jonathan jumped up. His coffee spilled on the table and seat. He ran past Winnie and Jerry and out the door.

“Why did you do that?” Winnie asked.

“Because everybody’s been lying to me and I’m sick of it,” Bianca shouted. “I’m trapped with this insane family until the truth comes out. I was trying to provoke him. I guess I failed.”

Bianca decided to try leaving immediately. Maybe she had broken the Bixby family’s hold over her. She checked her cabinet doors to make sure they were tight, put her books and CDs back in their compartments, and eased herself in the driver’s seat. She turned the key to start the RV. *Will it even start?* she wondered. It seemed as if she had been stuck there for ages. Maybe the battery was dead.

The engine sputtered and started. Bianca shifted into Drive. She released the handbrake and eased away from the curb. Darla jumped in front of the RV. Bianca hit the brake. She wasn’t surprised. She opened the window. “Please get out of the way,” she ordered.

“Don’t leave! Not yet! We need your help!”

“I’ve done all I can. You’re on your own now.”

“Don’t do it,” Winnie said, from behind Bianca. “I know you want to, but don’t.”

“I’m useless here and I have a life to get back to.”

“Not anymore,” Jerry said.

Bianca froze.

“What Jerry means,” Winnie said. “Is that your work isn’t done yet. We still need you.”

“But I’ve done everything I can. There’s nothing else left,” Bianca protested. “I brought you here. I’ve spoken to the people you claim are your parents. No one seems to possess a modicum of truth. I don’t know if you are all lying, but it sure seems like you are. I’m caught in the middle of a web of lies and I can’t see any way out.”

“You have to break the web,” Winnie replied, calmly. She didn’t know why she said it. The words just came to her at that moment but seemed relevant. “But first you have to find the spider that made it.” Bianca realized that not only was the truth eluding her, it was also possible no one- not Jerry, Winnie, Jonathan, or Darla- knew what the truth was either.

Bianca was good at finding webs. She turned off the engine. She had a new purpose.

An hour later, Bianca assembled the Bixby family members in her small RV. She could see them all. Jonathan and Darla could not. “Maybe I’m not the one who is supposed to find the truth,” she said. “Maybe all of you are.”

“All of us?” Darla asked.

“You, Jonathan, Jerry, and Winnie.”

“I don’t see Jerry and Winnie,” Jonathan said.

“They’re here, too.”

“Kids?” Darla said. Nothing happened.

“Show yourselves,” Bianca ordered. Jerry and Winnie appeared. Jonathan gasped.

Darla smiled. “I thought so.”

“You two... you’re *our* Jerry and Winnie?” Jonathan asked. They nodded. “But how? What happened?”

“We don’t know, Dad. That’s the problem.”

“They came to me separately when I was parked overnight at the same rest stop where they disappeared,” Bianca explained. “I reluctantly agreed to help them but I haven’t been much help.”

“Oh, but you have,” Jerry commented. “You brought us all together.”

“You think that’s what this is all about?” Bianca asked. No one answered. It seemed obvious everyone wanted an explanation but no one had any idea what it might be.

“So, I thought the best way we could proceed was to tackle this together. Each of you has told me a different story. I’ve felt totally confused and didn’t know whom to believe. What I think now is that all the stories you told me are your genuine memories. Only I’m not certain any of the stories are true.”

“*None* of them?” Winnie asked.

Bianca nodded. “Someone or *something* is messing with you. That’s the only way I can put this. I thought at first that three of you might be victims of the fourth. Now I think you’re *all* victims- but of whom or what?”

“You have no idea?” Jonathan asked.

Bianca shook her head again.

“I hoped getting you all together would make other memories jell and new information might come out,” Bianca went on. No one spoke. They all looked bewildered. “What about other people in your family, people you haven’t told me about? Parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins? Is there someone who might be able to help us figure this out?”

There was silence. Bianca couldn’t tell if they were clueless or still hiding something. She feared the latter but didn’t have time to dwell on her anxiety.

She was about to find out she was wrong about everything.

The RV door swung open. A short slender black woman dressed in white looked in. She smiled. It wasn’t a warm, friendly smile but a chilling, threatening one. “Good. I’ve finally got you Bixbys where I want you,” the woman said.

Darla gasped. “Monica? Is that you?”

The woman walked in. “Yes, Darla it’s me. Are you surprised to see me?”

“Well, yes. I haven’t seen you since high school.”

Monica looked at Darla contemptuously. Darla recoiled from Monica’s gaze. “What happened to you?” she asked.

“Do you remember the last time we saw each other?” Monica asked.

“Yeah. It was the night of our prom.”

“Do you remember what happened that night?”

“Vaguely,” Darla replied.

“Let me refresh your memory,” Monica said. “You lied about the most important night of my life.”

“What are you talking about, Monica?”

“I didn’t have a date. You went with Craig but you and he left early. You told me you were going off to celebrate. I knew what that meant. I knew all about Craig and the other girls he ‘celebrated’ with. I warned you about him. I pleaded. But you laughed scornfully and went anyway.”

“So, what if I did?” Darla asked. “That was a *long* time ago.”

“I had no way to get home, Darla. He heard me beg you not to leave me stranded. He also overheard me warn you about him. So when he took you back to his hotel room and you wouldn’t let him screw you he came back for me.”

“He did?” Darla asked.

“You don’t recall him leaving you?”

“No. I got pretty wasted. But he was there when I woke up.”

“Craig came to kill me, Monica. That was because you refused him at the last minute. He blamed me for warning you and ruining his game. He said you made him promise to take me home. That’s the only reason I went with him.”

“Well, I was looking out for you,” Darla said.

Monica scoffed.

“Then, after I disappeared, you lied and said Craig was with you the entire night. That he never left the room. No one knew what happened to me. I was your best friend, Monica, but you chose Craig over me. I’ve never forgiven you. And now I’m gonna wipe out your family the way Craig wiped out my future.”

“Monica, I’m sorry. This all happened a long time ago. I don’t remember it clearly.”

“But I do. You’re gonna pay, Darla. I’ve already taken Jerry and Winnie. Now I’m gonna take you and your husband. I may take your other children, too. I haven’t decided yet. It depends on how I feel after I’ve taken you. Maybe that will be enough revenge and it will satisfy me. And maybe... it won’t.”

“Look,” Bianca interrupted. “I hate to interrupt this little reunion. I don’t know who you are but I have nothing to do with any of this.”

“You are what’s known as an innocent bystander,” Monica replied, coldly.

“Yes, I am.”

“But you’re part of this now, so you can’t leave.”

“What do you plan to do with me?” Bianca asked.

“I haven’t decided. But it will go better if you don’t interfere.”

Bianca knew she would have to interfere but didn’t know how. “What are you planning to do with *them*?” she asked.

“End them,” Monica replied.

“You mean kill them?”

“No, I mean *end* them,” Monica said. “I will make them deader than dead. They won’t even be ghosts. They will vanish. They will be erased.”

“Is that even possible?” Bianca asked.

“I wouldn’t say it if it couldn’t be done.”

“But you haven’t said *how* it will be done.”

“Patience, Bianca Estranho. You’ll find out when they do.”

Bianca remained silent for a few moments. Her mind raced as she considered possible solutions. *There must be a way I can help*, she thought. *Or else, why would I be here?*

“I have another idea,” she said.
“Don’t interfere!” Monica shouted.
“I’m *not* interfering! I can help you.”
“How?” Monica asked.
“Darla isn’t the one you ought to punish.”
“What do you mean? Who is it, then?”
“Who murdered you?” Bianca asked.
“Craig.”
“What happened to him?”
“Nothing. Nothing at all.”
“Where is he now?”
“I don’t know,” Monica replied.
“What if I helped you find him?”
“You would do that?”

“If you agreed to let these people go, I would do everything I could to help you find Craig. Isn’t he the one you want, anyway? Darla lied, and that’s awful. Craig is a murderer, and that’s infinitely worse. Since the police didn’t catch him, maybe you and I can.”

Monica considered Bianca’s offer. Darla and Jonathan looked at Bianca and wondered if she could save them. Maybe Monica would reject her suggestion. Everyone waited.

“Okay. I’ll do as you say- but only temporarily. If I don’t find Craig, I’m coming back for them.”

“And if you find him, you’ll leave them alone?” Bianca asked. She wanted to pin Monica down. “You swear?”

“Yes. But, if you betray me or try to trick me, Bianca, I’ll take them *and* you. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Perfectly,” Bianca replied. “Now let them leave so we can get started.”

After the Bixby family left the RV, Monica turned to Bianca. “So, where do we start?” she asked.

“The same place I started with Jerry and Winnie. The internet.”

“What’s that?”

“I guess it was still pretty new when you died. It’s an essential resource now. What was this Craig guy’s last name?”

“Edwards,” Monica replied.

“Let me Google him.”

“Do *what* to him?”

“Look him up,” Bianca said. She typed in Craig’s name. “There are quite a few. We’ll have to check them out.”

“Just tell me where to go,” Monica said.

“You can move that fast?” Bianca asked.

Monica smiled. It was an evil smile. “I can be anywhere in the blink of an eye. All I need is a location.”

There must be some sort of ghost GPS, Bianca thought. “Okay, let’s do the local ones first. Maybe he’s still around.” She gave Monica an address. Monica disappeared. Bianca waited anxiously.

Monica returned a few minutes later. “He’s too old,” she said. “Gimme another one.” Bianca read another address. Monica vanished. She was back a moment later. “That one was too young. Can’t you narrow it down?”

“The more details you look for the less accurate the information becomes. Google is notoriously unreliable.”

“They why use it?”

“It’s the best thing out there right now.”

“Well, do your best,” Monica replied. “Use your intuition or something.”

“It would be better if you gave me more facts to go on. How about a birth year? When were you born?”

“In 1977,” Monica replied. Bianca added the year to see if it made a difference. “There are still a few,” she said. “It seems to be a popular name.”

“Stop procrastinating!” Monica yelled. “Gimmie an address.” Bianca read off another address and Monica vanished. Bianca got up and found the keys to her RV. She inserted them in the ignition and then hurried back to the laptop on the table. If she could be ready to drive away as soon as Monica left again, she hoped Monica wouldn’t be able to relocate her. It was worth a try.

Monica appeared a second later. “He was a Black guy.”

Bianca sighed. She searched again. “Here’s another one,” she said. She gave Monica the new address and Monica vanished again. Bianca stood up but never made it to the driver’s seat.

“It’s *him*! Now, all we have to do is decide how to punish him,” Monica said.

Bianca now had a new problem. It was how to prevent Monica from taking revenge on Craig Edwards. “We?” she asked.

“You promised to help me.”

“I promised to help you *find* him and I did. In return, you promised to leave the Bixbys alone and I’m expecting you to keep your promise.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I’ve never threatened anyone, Monica. I won’t start now.”

“Then you will help me finish what I need to do.”

“No. My obligation to you is finished. What happens now is between you and Craig Edwards.”

“I can’t do anything without you,” Monica said.

“Why is that?”

“I can’t hurt him. I’m a ghost. Only another living person can harm him. I need you.”

Monica’s lack of understanding regarding her ghostly abilities surprised Bianca.

Maybe it’s a good thing she thinks she needs me, Bianca thought. *She doesn’t, but she doesn’t know that.*

“I *won’t* harm him, Monica. That’s not what I do.”

“You have to. Or, I will punish the Bixbys.”

“How? You’ve just said you can’t do anything to them.”

“Not the living ones- the children, Winnie and Jerry. They’re part of my realm, not yours.” Bianca knew Monica was correct. She had seen what ghosts did to other ghosts and never forgot the horror she witnessed.

Monica vanished. Bianca felt grateful she was gone because she needed time to think. There were many moving parts to this crisis and she couldn’t decide which were the most important. Should she concentrate on protecting the living Bixbys, the ghost Bixbys, or Craig Edwards? *Or, Bianca asked herself, maybe I should focus on Monica? She seems to be the key to everything, the spider who wove this intricate web.*

Bianca went to speak to Darla later. “Tell me everything you can remember about Monica,” she said.

“We were best friends for many years,” Darla replied. “There’s a lot to tell. Why do you ask?”

“I need to find a possible weakness. There might be something in her past I can use to stop her from hurting anyone.”

“I thought she just wanted to hurt Craig Edwards,” Darla replied. “He kind of deserves it, don’t you think?”

“I don’t accept that, Darla. Moreover, she seems capable of hurting other people, too. She’s already threatened your family. I think she’s unstable and capable of anything.”

“You’re scaring me,” Darla said.

“Good. You should be scared. You’re dealing with strange powerful things. You can’t possibly imagine how bad this could get. I’m trying to stop anything worse from happening.”

Darla shared details of her friendship with Monica. The girls had spent almost all their time together both in school and out. They never argued and often joked they were like sisters but closer than sisters could ever be. Monica had a real sister. Darla didn’t. However, she had Monica.

After a few minutes of listening, Bianca interrupted Darla’s reminiscence. “*Weakness*, Darla. I’m looking for weakness. Something that happened in her childhood or adolescence, something that hurt her or changed her. Did you ever have to help her with a problem or trauma?”

“There was only one in all the years I knew her, but it was a big one. Her dad died suddenly when she was ten. Her mom was never the same. Monica had to step in and take care of her younger sister and brother, but not all the time. Some aunts and uncles helped out, too. Monica was never the same, either, but she and I remained steadfast friends. She told me stuff that was going on but she handled it all. I admired her.”

“Maybe she was hiding her deepest feelings,” Bianca commented.

“About what?” Darla asked.

“Losing her dad, having to take care of her siblings, worrying about her mother. That’s a lot for a kid to handle. She had to assume adult responsibility fast; she had no choice. But maybe it warped her.”

“What do you mean?” Darla asked.

“Maybe she remained the little ten-year-old girl inside and hid her real feelings from everyone,” Bianca explained. “Did you ever see her cry?”

“Not once, Bianca. She told me she wasn’t allowed to.”

“Who told her that? Her mother?”

Darla shook her head. “No. I think it was Monica herself.”

Based on what Darla told her, Bianca suspected there was more to Monica’s rage than what Craig did to her. Much of the girl’s pain likely resulted when death suddenly took her father. Without adequate time to grieve, she had been forced to grow up and take on big responsibilities. Then, Craig robbed Monica of her own life. Now, she had nothing left to lose and all she wanted was revenge.

Bianca didn’t want to stop Monica with force. She preferred healing Monica by somehow changing her from within. It would start with making Monica want to give up her desire for revenge on Craig Edwards. If she could accept the fact that she could do nothing to change what happened in the past and see revenge as useless, perhaps she could find healing for Monica’s other traumas as well.

Back in the RV, Bianca got out the crystal ball and sat it on the small kitchen table. Then she summoned Monica. When she reappeared, Bianca persuaded her to sit for a reading. It was a trick. Ghosts don’t have futures because they are outside time. They don’t exist at all. Monica didn’t know that. Bianca did.

Ghosts do have pasts, however, and Bianca hoped she could explore Monica’s past while pretending to read her future. She would have to come up with believable lies to distract Monica while probing her deepest secrets. If she couldn’t locate and heal Monica’s pain, Bianca feared she would be unable to do anything to stop Monica from hurting people, alive and dead.

“This is a new one for me,” Bianca said. “I’ve never read a ghost’s future before.”

“Look, I only consented to this to find out how I might achieve my revenge. I’m not sure it will work but at least I might get some ideas from it.”

“Fine by me, Monica. Shall we get started?” Monica nodded. “Close your eyes and relax. I’ll watch the ball and see what appears.” A bright flash almost blinded Bianca. *What the hell was that?* she wondered. Monica didn’t seem to notice. The flash was followed by a torrent of overlapping images that made no sense. Bianca thought the crystal ball might overheat.

Then she saw a pattern. One image dominated all the others. It was that of a man. His face changed from memory to memory but Bianca recognized him each time he appeared. She tried to think of a way to ask Monica who he was.

“Are you seeing anything?” Monica asked impatiently.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am.”

“So, how do I get my revenge?”

“Well, I haven’t seen anything in your future yet. So far, I’m only seeing what I assume is your past. Sometimes it works that way.”

“I already know what my past is, Bianca.”

“Yes, you do, but the ball doesn’t. It has to catch up.”

“Tell it to hurry up,” Monica demanded.

“There is one thing I’m noticing.”

“What’s that?”

“The same person keeps appearing. It’s a man. I’ve seen his face maybe a hundred times already. He’s always smiling.”

“Oh, that’s my dad,” Monica explained.

“Wow! You must have loved him very much to recall him so fondly.”

“I did,” Monica replied. “But, I don’t anymore. He hurt me badly.”

Bianca recalled Darla told her Monica’s father died when she was ten. She hoped Monica would tell her about what had happened. “How did he hurt you?” Bianca asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it. It has nothing to do with my revenge on Craig.”

“Suit yourself. But I can’t work with you unless you’re honest with me.”

“Drop it!” Monica barked. Bianca suspected she might have just found the key to Monica’s pain. She waited. More images flashed in the crystal ball. Monica sat silently, impatient for the reading to produce a result. There was only one outcome she wanted.

“This is a waste of time!” she finally exclaimed, frustrated.

“It’s not finished yet.”

“Well, *I’m* finished,” Monica said. “That thing’s a joke. You’re a fraud. I did what you wanted. Now you have to do what I want.” Bianca remained silent. “Okay? Do you understand what I’m saying? I have to move on.”

“But I don’t,” Bianca replied, calmly.

“You refuse to help me? I can hurt *you*, too, you know.”

“No, you can’t, and you know it,” Bianca replied. She knew the opposite was true but Monica seemed unaware of what she could do if she fervently wanted to. It was time to bluff.

“Monica, I’m trying to help you. That’s all I’m trying to do. You don’t seem to realize how mistaken you are about wanting to take revenge.”

“Mistaken? How?”

“Did you ever hear of karma?” Bianca asked.

“It’s bullshit.”

“It’s real. If you do what you want to all the people you’ve threatened, you will incur bad karma that will haunt you for eons. You can’t escape it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Bianca lied. “Let me help you find another way.”

“There is no other way.”

“I think there is. And, I’m the right person to help you find it. I know a lot you don’t about the supernatural. I can help end your suffering.”

Until that moment, Monica hadn’t realized she *was* suffering and she didn’t know what to say. Bianca waited. The crystal ball sat empty of images. It had done its job. It had opened Monica so Bianca could reach within her and offer her healing. However, Monica had to invite Bianca in.

“The reason why you saw my father so much in your crystal ball is that he died when I was ten,” Monica explained. “But I never stopped thinking about him. I made an effort to remember every single moment he and I were together going all the way back to my infancy. I wanted to freeze those memories in my mind and never let them fade. They didn’t, and I was happy, even though he was gone. At least I still had my memories. Until...” Monica paused. She seemed ready to cry. Bianca waited for Monica to continue.

“I know this is hard, Monica, but you can trust me. Just tell me everything.”

“It’s too painful.”

“I can end your pain,” Bianca said, soothingly.

Monica shook her head. "No one can end it. It will be with me for as long as I exist. It is me."

"I disagree. Your pain can end, Monica, and you can go on, but only if you want to."

"I don't believe you," Monica said.

"Why don't you just tell me what happened and then let me help you?"

Monica recounted the circumstances of her murder. "After Craig hit me hard, I was lying there, and I knew I was dying. I was hurt and angry but also strangely happy-."

"Happy?" Bianca asked. "Why?"

"I didn't want to die but I knew I would be with my daddy again. That made it almost okay."

"You loved him very much and missed him very much," Bianca commented.

Monica nodded. "But it was what happened *after* I died that ripped me apart."

"What happened?"

"I found him right away. The world of the dead is a strange place. It seems that families gravitate together. It just happens, I don't know how."

"He must have been happy to see you- even though you were dead," Bianca commented.

Monica broke down and cried but there was no wetness. Ghost tears are eerily dry but the feelings are real. She shook her head. "He wasn't," she said.

Bianca didn't know what to say. She needed to take Monica into the darkest region of her pain but knew the hurt would increase the closer Monica came to the source. Bianca had to know what that source was so she could heal Monica. She hoped Monica would finish the journey before the pain became overwhelming. Could her father be the source?

"What do you mean, Monica? Tell me what happened."

"I found my daddy. I went up to him. I threw my arms around him. I was so happy! Can you imagine it? I was truly happy that I was dead, just because I got to see my daddy again."

"But something happened?" Bianca asked.

"I expected him to be as happy as I was..."

"Oh. I think I understand," Bianca said. "He wasn't?"

Monica nodded slowly. "He didn't even know me. He didn't say my name, smile at me, or call me his favorite daughter, like he used to. There was *nothing*."

"I'm so sorry."

Monica became enraged. "Sorry doesn't cut it! My daddy didn't know me! Or, at least he pretended not to know me. I don't know which is worse. Anyway, I hated him at that moment. I hated the world I just came from. And I hated everyone I knew in that world- not just Craig Edwards, who murdered me, but everyone else I knew, including Darla."

Bianca ignored Monica's rage. "What happened with your father wasn't his fault," she explained.

Monica didn't believe Bianca. "Well, whose fault was it, then?"

"There's something you should know. Some people, like you, retain all their memories after they die. Other people lose everything. They don't even know their names. Everything gets stripped away when they cross over into the afterlife. I think that's what happened to your father."

Monica's expression changed. "You mean my daddy doesn't hate me? Not really?"

"It's sad to say, but your father doesn't even *know* you. Or himself, for that matter. He doesn't know anything about this world."

"How could that happen?" Monica asked.

"Some people believe it has something to do with reincarnation, but I'm not familiar with all the details. Maybe your daddy's stay in the afterlife was supposed to be temporary. Maybe he was supposed to come back-."

Monica's expression changed from anger to hopefulness. "Back? You mean to *me*?" she asked.

"Well, to someone."

Monica became excited. "No, no, I see it now," she said. "He was supposed to come back to me. He was waiting there until I got married and pregnant and he would have been my first child. Craig Edwards stole my daddy from me," she shrieked. "I'm gonna punish him so bad..."

Oh, God, Bianca thought. We're back here again. I had hoped we could get past this.

Bianca would have preferred not visiting the land of the dead for many years to come. If she hoped to stop Monica, however, she had to find her father and convince him to change his daughter's mind about revenge. Bianca had no idea how she would do that but she had to try.

The land of the dead was different for every person. It wasn't a real place or realm. But, then again it was. It depended on how someone experienced it. Bianca didn't know how to anticipate the way it would appear to her. Searching for someone might be impossible. She might be all alone or surrounded by hordes of faceless ghosts. Bianca didn't expect any danger but knew there was always the possibility that a living person who entered the land of the dead voluntarily might not be able to leave. She was willing to take the risk. She didn't have much of a choice.

The only heavens or hells were in the minds of those who dwelled there. There was no existence or non-existence, either. Both are illusions. Bianca anchored herself in the certainty that she was not an illusion. She felt confident she could navigate the strange realm and find who she was looking for but didn't know how long a search could take. Time didn't exist there and Bianca hoped she wouldn't lose too much time in the real world while she searched in the afterlife. No time at all, if she was lucky.

Then Bianca recalled the instructions she had received from an ancient shaman who had appeared in a dream when she was ill with a high fever as a teenager. Her father had worried she was going to die. He didn't tell her but she sensed his fear. "When you journey to the land of the dead," the dream shaman said. "Don't waste your effort searching for someone; let the dead find you."

Bianca found a quiet spot and sat down. She crossed her legs and straightened her back. Bianca closed her eyes, cleared her mind, and summoned Monica's father's image. She prayed he would find her quickly.

"Where am I?" a voice asked. "How did I get here?" Bianca opened her eyes and saw a ghost forming in front of her. "Who are you?" the ghost asked.

"It's not important who I am. Do you know who you are?"

“Um... is that important?”

“Yes, it’s very important,” Bianca said. “Your daughter needs you.”

“My... daughter?”

“You left her when she was ten. She’s grieved for you ever since. She looked for you when she arrived in this realm and then found you. But you didn’t know her and she was shattered. I’ve come to help the two of you reconnect.”

“My daughter...?”

“Do you know who you are?” Bianca asked again.

“Is it important?”

“Yes! Listen to me. Your name is Roger Withers. Your wife’s name was Gladys. Your oldest daughter is Monica. You lived in Philadelphia. You were killed by an infection that entered your body after minor surgery. You’ve been here for many years.”

“Where am I?”

“This is the land of the dead.”

“Are *you* dead?” Roger asked.

“No.”

“How were you killed?”

Bianca sighed. “I’m not dead, Roger. I just came here to find you and reconnect you with your daughter. She needs you.”

“My daughter?”

“Do you remember her?”

“Remember? What is remember?”

“Your *life*, Roger.”

“What is life?”

His question stumped Bianca. The situation seemed hopeless. Not only was he disconnected from Monica, he was disassociated from his memories and former life. Roger didn’t know he was a ghost in the realm of the dead.

Maybe I need Monica here, Bianca thought. *Maybe if he sees her again, that might jar his memory*. Bianca forgot that Roger had died when Monica was ten. She lived until age seventeen and it was unlikely he would recognize her. He didn’t even recognize himself.

Bianca thought she had reached an impasse. If Roger had no memories of his lifetime, he couldn’t reconnect with Monica. Then Bianca thought of one more thing she could try. It would be a long shot, but it could work.

She didn’t have her crystal ball. It was only a device for focusing cosmic and psychic energies, but was a useful tool. She would have to become that tool. Bianca would do a reading with Roger and attempt to restore his memories. It was possible they were all still inside him but were shrouded. Bianca would have to remove the veil. *I’ve never done an apocalypse before*, she thought, *but it’s worth a try*.

Bianca asked Roger to sit down.

“I’m going to help you, Roger,” she said. “You don’t have to do anything. Just sit there. I will do everything. But you must trust me. I will not harm you or let any harm come to you. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Roger replied, although he still seemed passive and confused.

Bianca wasn't certain any of his old life remained inside him. Maybe he was just an empty ghost. She had heard of them. They were the saddest residents of the afterworld. They had no place in the realms of the living or the dead. They merely existed and roamed, unaware of anything from their past.

"Good," Bianca said. "Let's begin."

The key to Roger might be cherished memories of his daughter Monica. *If I help him recall his love, Bianca thought. Maybe everything else will come back.*

She tunneled until she found Rogers memories and tuned into them. Bianca could see them, although he couldn't, for now. She watched for special memories. She saw an infant, a toddler, and then a precocious little girl, and knew it was Monica. Glowing warmth permeated Roger's memories of his daughter. He had adored her from the moment he first saw her. All Bianca had to do was bundle Roger's disparate memories together and try to reopen his mind. She, of course, had never done anything remotely like that before.

Then Bianca summoned her memory of Monica's appearance as a seventeen-year-old and added it to the images hidden deep within Roger. She focused on those images of Monica and tried to remove other extraneous memories so that only his daughter remained. Then she tried to amplify the glowing warmth attached to the new image so Roger would feel it and connect it to the older images of Monica.

It worked.

"M... Mo... Monica?" Roger stuttered.

The air shimmered. Monica appeared, slowly. She looked at her father. "Daddy?" Roger opened his eyes. "Oh, my little girl. You grew up! I've missed you so much." "I've missed you, too, Daddy! You don't know what it was like after you died."

"I'm sorry I left you, Monica. I couldn't help it. Something awful happened and before I could do anything about it, I was gone."

"I never stopped missing you, Daddy."

"Well, we've found each other, Monica, and we'll stay together, always."

"That's all I've wanted since the day you died- to be with you again. You're my daddy and I love you more than anything else in the whole world."

"And I love you, baby," Roger replied. The ghosts tried hugging but since neither was corporeal, it didn't work. Bianca felt sorry for them.

It didn't occur to Roger to ask *why* his daughter was in the realm of the dead. They had found each other again and that was all that mattered.

Bianca left them and went back to her RV. She wondered if she should tell Jonathan, Darla, Winnie, and Jerry the danger was over before she drove away. Monica hadn't said she'd given up on her revenge but Bianca felt certain she had. Bianca also hoped she would have no further encounters with the Bixby family or ghosts but felt too exhausted to worry about either right now.

This had been Bianca's weirdest adventure so far and she felt relieved it was over. As she drove away, she looked forward to going back to her mundane life as an ordinary carnival fortuneteller. However, Bianca knew that sooner or later, other adventures would beckon and she hoped she would be up to the new challenges she would face.

THE END

