

One

The word *eidolism* means a belief in ghosts.

Until last week, when a ghost visited me for the first time, I didn't believe in ghosts. I didn't even think about ghosts much. I thought about plants—and no, that's not weird. Plants are fascinating. They're part of our world, but they live in a mysterious world of their own at the same time. They're so...different. The way they turn sunlight into food. The way they use chemicals to talk to each other. The way they lure birds and bugs into helping them make more plants.

Plants.

Are.

Fascinating.

That's why I'm going to be a plant scientist like Ms. Winger and my Uncle Everett. I'll work in the Botanical Gardens right here in Clear Creek. My name will be on the sign at the entrance of the Gardens: Chrysantha Howe, Botanist.

I had the future planned out.

The ghost was not in the plan.

After the first visit, I still didn't really believe in ghosts. But when she came back the second time, I had to change my mind. I hadn't been dreaming and I wasn't crazy. The only other alternative was: I had seen a ghost.

I started researching ghost visitations. What made them stick around in this world? How did they choose who to haunt? Why had no one ever caught a legitimate sighting on video or made a recording?

Mostly what I learned was that people argued a lot about whether ghosts existed. People who believed in ghosts liked other people who believed in ghosts. People who didn't believe in ghosts thought people who did were crazy.

I was not crazy.

Finding out the answers to my questions about ghosts should have been easy. I had my own personal ghost to ask. But every time she visited me, I couldn't say a word. My thoughts got all tangled and my breath stuck in my throat and I got dizzy. Having my own personal ghost was not helpful. The visits were...creepy. Like are-you-here-because-I'm-going-to-die creepy. Maybe the creep factor was why no one had ever documented a ghost.

I shivered, though I hadn't seen the ghost in hours and cheerful sunlight warmed the early June morning. The Water Garden, a magical green fairyland of trickling streams and arched bridges, closed in around me. Shadows shifted. Bushes rustled.

I'd never seen a ghost before, not even when my dad died. Why had one decided to haunt me now?

"Just lucky, I guess," I said. "What do you think, Barkley?"

My long-legged Schnauzer scratched his ear with his hind foot.

"That's what I think too."

I tugged Barkley's ear and picked up one of the quarter-size flat stones scattered beside the path. I tossed the stone into the deep end of the Water Garden pond.

Barkley scrambled to the bank, then yipped and jumped back, almost jerking the leash from my hand. The ruff on his neck rose straight up. He stared at the pond, his lips curled, his teeth bared.

I gripped the red plastic leash more tightly.

The ghost liked water.

Barkley growled.

In the pond, twin black shafts of water shifted into the wavy outline of feminine eyes. Pale lips, reed-thin and white as unearthed slugs, parted. The lips tried to form a word. A gurgle rose from the depths like a deep sigh.

"Daaaaay...daaaay..."

Bubbles roiled the surface of the water.

Barkley growled again. Then he barked, as if to prove the ghost hadn't silenced him.

I tried to speak, to ask the ghost what she wanted. My tongue clung to the roof of my mouth. My lips moved in a quivery jiggle as if I were silently whistling. But I could not force out a sound, much less a whole question.

Maybe if I could *think* a question, the ghost and I could communicate. Maybe she didn't need actual words to hear me and to answer.

I tipped forward. My glasses slipped down my nose. I wanted to ask her...something...something...important...

What would touching her feel like?

I stretched out my hand.

The buzz of a bee snapped me out of my trance. I scrambled back as the edge of the bank crumbled under my foot. The ghost vanished.

The buzz grew louder and turned into the *whump-whump-whump* of a helicopter.

Barkley whined and crowded against my leg. I patted him, my fingers stiff and cold.

"We're all right, boy." My voice was rough and my throat was so dry swallowing made me cough.

The still, calm pond reflected only my own face. Had I imagined the ghost? Had I wanted so much to find out why she was haunting me that I had made up an image in the water?

Of course not. I didn't want to see her!

No, I hadn't made her up. She had really been there. The fresh-breeze-and-crushed-leaf fragrance of the Water Garden thickened the air. I wasn't imagining the scent. The same fragrance lingered every time she appeared.

I shoved my glasses back into place as the drumming of the helicopter engine became a roar. Its shadow flitted across the ground. Then the silver and blue chopper dropped like the rock I'd tossed into the pond.

I ducked, even though the helicopter was nowhere close to me.

The chopper leveled out, then circled once, twice, three times. The person in the seat beside the pilot waved.

I shaded my eyes with my hand and squinted into the morning sun.

The helicopter tilted, wobbled, dropped lower. The passenger waved again.

Uncle Everett!

I waved both arms in a criss-crossing X.

Uncle Everett smiled. The sunlight glinted off his glasses.

My phone buzzed. I grabbed it and read the incoming text, but Uncle Everett hadn't sent the message. I ignored that text and sent one to Uncle Everett. He didn't answer, so I called him. As his voice mail picked up, my phone beeped the low battery warning and disconnected me.

The helicopter lurched and slipped sideways. It skimmed over the tops of the tallest oaks and pines and chopped away to the east. It could barely stay in the air.

My stomach cramped as if I'd eaten a poisonous mushroom. Was Uncle Everett in danger? Was that what the ghost had been trying to tell me?

Two

I ran.

Barkley raced beside me. We dashed over bridges and along winding paths. We ignored all the garden signs and the early morning visitors. A woman in a red hoodie yelled at us to stop running. I didn't answer. Explaining would have slowed me down.

The mulched footpath for visitors curved right beside a tangle of scrub oaks. I turned left instead, onto a blade-thin unmarked gap in the dense growth. The path led to South Garden, a five-acre field at the edge of the Botanical Gardens.

Tomorrow I was supposed to collect samples from South Garden and start a list of the plants I found. Compiling a database was the goal of the month-long survey Ms. Winger and I had designed for my summer project.

I had a secret goal too. I was going to find a Spring Coralroot, one of the rarest plants in this part of Florida. The Coralroot was kind of like a ghost. It was so rare hardly anyone had ever seen one. Botanists bickered with each other over whether another specimen would ever be found.

I didn't know who was right. But according to my research South Garden was exactly the kind of place the Spring Coralroot liked to grow.

The shiny barbed leaves of a holly bush clutched at my jeans as I plunged through the woods. The ground was squashy, layered with rotting leaves and fallen branches. I tripped and almost lost a sneaker in the soft matted loam. I grabbed a tree so I wouldn't fall, pushed my glasses back into place, and kept running.

Beneath the thick stand of trees, the air smelled of dirt and mold. The overhanging canopy blocked the helicopter from view, but the thump and roar of the straining engine marked its path.

Would the pilot be able to keep the helicopter in the air until they reached South Garden?

And what would they do when they got there? South Garden was not a safe landing spot. The ground was marshy and overgrown and too soft to support the heavy helicopter. The chopper might disappear into the mud before the pilot and Uncle Everett were able to get out.

I had walked through the meadow yesterday. I'd sunk to my knees in muck in some spots, and I weighed a lot less than a helicopter.

I darted out of the woods as the helicopter wobbled in a slow circle over South Garden. I waved my arms and pointed to the east. A wide grassy clearing lay beyond the trees that framed South Garden on three sides. The land there was higher and drier.

The chopper moved in the direction I pointed.

I dashed around the edge of South Garden, avoiding the sharp thorns of the wild blackberry bushes that stabbed out of the ground in untidy clumps. Barkley stayed close to my heels, spooked by the noise of the helicopter's engine.

When I reached the open space on the far side of the field, I stopped. I waved both arms at the pilot to let her know the clearing was safe to use as a landing site.

The pilot waved back, but instead of dropping down to the field, the helicopter continued to hover. Uncle Everett smiled like he had no idea of the danger he was in.

Then the helicopter swept up, shot forward, and sped away.

What the heck was going on?

The engine noise dwindled from muted roar to dull thump and faded into silence as the chopper vanished into the distance.

I rubbed my fingers across the smooth glass of the daisy pendant that dangled from a silver chain around my neck. What was Uncle Everett doing in the helicopter? He was supposed to be in Tampa, working on his latest book. Was he concocting another one of his publicity stunts?

I hoped not. He'd only avoided being hauled off in handcuffs after his last crazy adventure because Mom was a good lawyer.

My life was getting more complicated by the minute.

What else could go wrong?

Barkley bumped my leg and woofed.

"You're trespassing, you know," Dalton Dyer said.

Three

"Shove it in your ear, Dalton Dyer!"

Instead of being offended like a normal person, The World's Biggest Nuisance grinned.

Too bad I was too old to stick my tongue out at him. I said, "In case you've forgotten, your parents donated this land to the Botanical Gardens six months ago."

"I haven't forgotten." Dalton held his hand out for Barkley to sniff, then patted him.

I retracted the leash and drew Barkley back to my side. "Then you know you're the one who's trespassing."

He'd gotten taller. I had to look up at him. When I'd last seen him, eight weeks ago, he'd been the same height as me, even wearing his always-present cowboy boots and hat.

Not that what he looked like mattered. Tall or short, he was still The Nuisance. With a capital "N."

"Sorry, Flower Girl. You're wrong."

"I am not wrong. And—" I ground my teeth to stop myself from telling him to quit calling me Flower Girl. Every time I did, he repeated the nickname. He lived to annoy me.

"And what? My folks donated that property six months ago." He pointed. "See the survey pole by the yellow jasmine? The land you're standing on still belongs to the Double D Ranch."

A narrow wood post with a wind-tattered orange ribbon jutted from the earth exactly where he said. I wanted to kick the post right out of the dirt. "So I'm trespassing. What are you going to do? Have Sheriff McNamara arrest me?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'll tell my mom. Then she'll call your mom. And you'll spend the summer grounded."

I fisted my hands and dug my fingernails into my palms. I had to clamp my lips together to keep the word I was thinking from bursting out.

He grinned again. "Or I might decide I didn't see you at all—if you tell me what Dr. Plant was doing in the helicopter."

Even if I knew, I wouldn't give Dalton the satisfaction. I made myself smile, though my nostrils flared out at the same time and I probably looked like Barkley did before he growled. I said, "That sounds like blackmail. What makes you think Uncle Everett was in the chopper anyway?"

"Come on!" Dalton shoved at his broad-rimmed black hat with two fingers. "I saw him. Besides, who else in Clear Creek does weird things like that? Everyone knows he's crazy."

"Uncle Everett is not crazy! He's a genius."

"He's plenty smart, all right. But people can be both crazy and smart. And you didn't say why he was flying over South Garden in a helicopter." Dalton hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. "So? Do I tell my mom you were trespassing? Or are you gonna explain what your genius uncle's up to?"

If I had been talking to anyone else, I would have told them I had no explanation for why Uncle Everett was flying around in a helicopter. But this was Dalton, so I said, "Whatever Uncle Everett does is none of your business."

"Uh huh." He looked at the meadow. "You're going to miss out on cataloging South Garden if you're grounded."

"I—How did you know about that?"

"Ms. Winger told me right before she disappeared." His lips twisted down. "She wanted me to help you."

I didn't want his help. And I didn't believe for a second Ms. Winger would have asked him to help. Ms. Winger was my friend. She knew Dalton Dyer was a Nuisance.

My eyebrow twitched. The top of my head itched, as if my brain would explode in one huge blast like a puffball mushroom. I took a breath to keep my voice even. "The survey is *my* summer project."

"Wrong." His voice was smug. "We'll be working out here together. Assuming you tell me what your uncle was doing. Otherwise I might be by myself."

"You'll be by yourself, all right. But not because *I'm* off the survey."

I turned on my heel and stomped back to South Garden, towing Barkley with me.