

Brietta Thomas

It was late and Bryce couldn't sleep. She sat up in the bed and reached for the remote; mindlessly she flipped through the channels, passed all the infomercials, in search of familiar childhood sitcom reruns. Through the open window she could hear the surf of the ocean as it crashed onto the sandy beach. A gentle evening breeze softly skimmed across her cheeks, temporarily relieving her of the muggy, stale summer air that engrossed the bedroom. The small beads of sweat that clung motionlessly on her bronzed toned brow were swept free and slowly slid down the side of her nose. The salty sweat droplets stung as they eased their way into her eye.

"Damn! I swear, if we don't get an air conditioner soon somebody's going . . ."

"Did you say something?" Tom groggily asked as he rolled over to face her. Half asleep, Tom reached for the sheet that Bryce had tossed off the edge of the bed earlier in the evening.

"How can you stand being covered up like that? I'm dying! I feel like I'm in an oven here. When are you going to get that air conditioner we talked about?"

"Can we talk about this in the morning? I have to get up early . . . and I'm tired." As he rolled over, he pulled up the sheet and tucked it under his chin. "Good-night."

"Yah, tomorrow never comes," she fumed as she climbed out of bed and yanked on a pair of boxer shorts and a tank top that left her midsection exposed. She glanced back toward the bed in hopes that he might have stirred from all the commotion; instead he was snoring. Agitated, she stormed out of the room in search of something cold to drink.

With a tall glass of raspberry iced tea in hand, Bryce headed for the porch. She loved this time of the night; not a soul was on the beach, and the seagulls were off nesting elsewhere. There was a sense of tranquility as the moonlight spilled onto the rippling waves, scattering its molten gold for miles. She leaned back against the cedar porch swing that her uncle had made for her and Tom as a wedding gift, seven years ago. Like her marriage, the swing was slowly losing its luster. The salty mist from the ocean spray had weathered the cherished beauty beyond its years.

Closing her eyes, she remembered how they had sat swinging on it for hours, talking about their future together. Growing up she had decided that two children would be perfect. Her childhood was as perfect as one hope, but still, she had always felt an emptiness engraved in the core of her soul. That very night, while staring out into the vast ocean, they had chosen names. They agreed on Nathan for the boy; however, the girl's name wasn't as easy. Tom wanted the name Elizabeth, his mother's name, for the girl

and Bryce was set on Brianna. She couldn't explain her adamant persistence, but there was no deterring her. Eventually, they had agreed on Brianna Elizabeth.

Bryce stood and began pacing the length of the dingy brown patio deck, the polyurethane coating now diminished from years of neglect. "Nothing gets done around here anymore. I'm tired of trying to fix everything myself," she shouted into the beckoning ear of the surf. The tension between them had increased as the years passed by without a pregnancy.

Bryce calmly walked across the porch to the railing and climbed on it. Swinging her legs over the side of the rail, she sat facing the vacant beach. *It's hopeless*, she thought, glancing back at the darkened house, *there's nothing left* . . . "Nothing," she whispered as she leaned forward, beyond the boundaries of the earth's gravitational forces. With a dull thud she landed on her hands and knees in the sand below. She headed for the caressing arms of the surf, barely noticing the embedded sand under her nails. Engulfed in the bosom of the ocean, she relaxed her body and slowly sank to the sandy depths below.

It wasn't long before she was drifting deeper and deeper into a strange world where the black sky enveloped the earth below. She drifted further and further into nothingness, down into an open room that floated in the blackness. Bryce studied the room intensely; there was a familiarity about it. The walls were ballerina pink with unicorns prancing about on a border that surrounded the room. As she looked around, she noticed a child's bed next to a lace covered window. The pink tulle that draped from the canopy top flowed to the floor, enclosing its treasures within. She found herself drawn to the tiny bed. Her feet glided across the plush white carpet, past a tea party in progress at Barbie's house. She paused before gently parting the material to expose a sobbing child on the white embroidered bedding. The little girl's frail body heaved with each convulsive gasp. Bryce felt a heaviness upon her chest, and her heart ached as she looked upon this child's broken spirit. As she reached out to caress the child, the lights flickered and dimmed. The colors began draining from the walls, spilling onto the carpet. Blackness surrounded her; she began to choke and cough as smoke filled the room. Red and blue lights illuminated the smoke screen in front of her. Frantically, Bryce turned to reach for the little girl, but she was gone.

The bed, with its flowing tulle, had been transformed into a crescent moon-shaped bar top. At the far end, opposite her, sat a lone man silently clutching a short bar glass filled with an amber colored liquid. His callused knuckles whitened from the intense grip he had on his translucent companion. For a moment he appeared frightened, but it didn't last long. From the shadows, behind the bar, a burly, gruff voice penetrated the dense stillness. "That'll be your last, Sam. You get on home now." The man tossed back his head and gulped down the entire drink in one swift movement, then slammed his glass onto the wooded bar with enough rage and force to shatter it into millions of transparent slivers. As the man sprang to his feet to avoid the shattering glass, his bar stool went crashing to the floor. Bryce backed off into the corner as the man stormed past her toward the door. She followed him into the darkness, down a

long corridor with a door at the end of it. Cautiously, she turned the knob and inched the door open. The brightness of the white light burned her eyes as she crossed the threshold.

There in the front yard of an old farmhouse she noticed a set of large footprints in the freshly fallen snow that led up the hidden porch stairs and disappeared. Carefully, she followed each snow-packed print up the porch to a bay window, taking care not to make her own set of prints. She peered through the frosted glass. Inside, wet footprints on the hardwood floor revealed the man's destination. She could see that the soggy prints led from the front door along the length of the back wall, disappearing behind the sofa, then reappearing in another room that had a soft white light emanating from it. On the floor, in front of the fireplace, were two young girls snuggled in sleeping bags eating popcorn and watching television. On the wall above the children was a family portrait. Bryce stared intensely at it, trying to make out the faces. Both girls, with their long, golden brown hair were wearing pale blue dresses with a blue cameo necklace. Behind them, in a similar blue dress, was their mother. The heart-shaped diamond wedding ring that she wore sparkled with life. Bryce studied the man next to the woman; it seemed odd that his face was the only one she could make out clearly. Even though this attractively dressed man was smiling, his eyes had an uncanny vacant stare that sent a shiver up her spine.

As she turned to leave, she caught the mysterious man from the bar out of the corner of her eye. He stood in the doorway of the other room, staring blankly towards the girls. His shoulders slouched toward the floor, accentuating the length of his arms. His chin was tucked deep into his chest as he looked up with only his eyes. There was an eeriness about him, but it wasn't until after he began moving towards the girls that Bryce noticed the puddle of red, glossy liquid oozing past the door frame behind him. She frantically pounded on the window, and screamed at the children to get out, but it was too late. In a heated frenzy, the man seized one of the girls by the neck and held her in mid-air until her desperate, savage fight for her life ended. The other child cried out, "Brianna!"

Upon hearing her voice, the man's attention turned towards her. He dropped the lifeless body of his victim to floor and called to the frightened child, "Come on now, Brietta, come to Daddy. You know Daddy's not going to hurt you," he moved toward her, his feet dragging across the scattered popcorn. Horrified, she fled the room, running through the kitchen, her pale naked feet dragging red-stained prints behind her. Bryce jumped over the railing and ran around the side of the house. There, through the mudroom window, Bryce could see the frantic child as she tugged and twisted at the doorknob. With all her gathered strength, the child threw her tiny shoulder into the swollen, stubborn door. It gave in to her desperate attempts and she went tumbling to the floor, landing on a pile of discarded coats, mittens, hats and snow boots. When the child stood up, Bryce felt the world closing in on her as she realized this was the girl from earlier. With a sudden gush of cold air the child bolted from the house leaving pink imprints in the snow behind her. With each step she struggled, as the snow gave way underneath her. In a flash,

Bryce was in the barn standing in front of the ladder to the hayloft. Instinctively, she grabbed the rails of the ladder and climbed to the top, into the loft. With an enormous burst of energy, the child heaved the ladder away from its resting place, then, before it could crash to the floor she turned and scrambled over the bales of hay toward the back of the loft. Bryce felt the chill of February's icy breath on the back of her neck when the barn door flung open. "Hurry," she mouthed as the girl wiped away the hay to uncover a tiny, wooden trap door. She lifted it to reveal a narrow feed shoot which led to the lower level stalls. Without hesitating, the child climbed onto the cold steel slide and let go. Once below, she crawled under the gate of the pig pen and headed for her secret hideaway behind a false wall.

Bryce scrambled behind her and squeezed inside before the child closed and latched the door. Inside the hollowed area was a makeshift club house with flashlights, coats, blankets, books and magazines, and even a variety of snacks and chips. The girl wrapped a blanket around herself and leaned against the back wall shivering. She closed her reddened eyes and turned off the flashlight; everything went dark. Bryce began to grow weak; she sat down and slowly felt her body relaxing.

It wasn't long before she heard what seemed to be a cry for help. Dumbfounded, she strained her ears. *I must've been dreaming*, she rationalized. She tried to open her eyes, but there was nothing except darkness surrounding her. Remembering the flashlight, the little girl was holding, she felt around for it. Oddly, all she felt was damp, grainy sand under her hand. Confused, she struggled again to open her eyes, only to find she was lying on her back on the edge of the ocean; the dark, black sky above her. Coughing and spitting, she slowly dragged herself back to the porch. Her soaked and sandy clothes clung to her chilled body, making every step more miserable than the last. The saturated, gritty sand rubbed against her inner thighs, polishing her skin to a vibrant red. She could feel her body aching from the ordeal as she climbed the stairs, *How in Hell did I manage to sur . . . I mean . . . Jesus Christ, that was bizaare. It seemed so real!*

Bending down, she picked up the empty glass and started for the house. As she reached for the paint-chipped doorknob she heard a ghastly cry pierce the darkness. A sudden, overpowering panic struck her, freezing her in mid-reach. Instinctively, she turned and ran towards the wailing; the glass fell to the porch, shattering into tiny slivers of glass.

Bryce ran along side the shoreline frantically searching the darkness for any signs of a helpless child. She strained her eyes against the darkness. In the distance, in the glow of the lighthouse's illumination, she thought she saw something, or someone move. "Hello, is anybody there?" But there was no answer. She tried to pick up her pace, but sharp pains pierced her chest and she fell to the ground.

Slowly she rose, struggling to catch her breath and gain control over her breathing. Covered again in sand, Bryce plunged into the water to rinse. As she trudged through the undulating surf back to the sandy shore she noticed a woman in a long white nightgown a few feet from her. The heart-shaped ring

she wore on a chain around her neck glowed in the moonlight. Dripping, Bryce took a step towards her, “I was just washing the sand off,” she explained as she cleared her throat, “I fell and . . .,” Before Bryce could get the rest of the words out the mysterious woman turned and headed for the old lighthouse. She appeared to float above the sandy surface as the breeze caught a hold of the flowing material. “Excuse me, did you hear a . . .” Without a word, the woman drifted further away, disappearing in to the building. “How odd,” Bryce muttered as she trailed the stranger.

Inside she climbed the winding flights of stairs towards the top. When she reached the top of the tower Bryce entered the room, but the woman was nowhere. Bryce noticed a wooden cradle. Her heart quickened as she approached it. Inside was an infant wrapped in a blanket. Puzzled, she ran to the window, frantically searching for the woman. In the darkness she could see the figure standing on rocks below the lighthouse. Bryce pounded on the window to get her attention, but the woman vanished as if she were swallowed by the blackness of the night. Bryce stood in disbelief, not knowing what to think.

She turned back to the child, and gently scooped her up into her arms. Underneath the bundled baby, she noticed a folded newspaper clipping. She picked it up and began unfolding it, but before it was completely unfolded a sudden chill grazed her back as if something in a hurry had passed her. She began shaking from the sudden change in temperature. Confused, she quickly spun around in time to see a shadow pass across the back wall. Nervously, she pulled the baby tight to her chest, turned again to the door and called out, “Is anybody there?” There was no answer. *Calm down, Bryce you’re imagining things*, she told herself. The wind howled; the wooded stairs creaked and moaned, intensifying her fear. Quickly, she backed out of the room and ran for the stairs; the crumpled article clutched tight in her fist. Her heart pounded as she scrambled down the staircase. Outside the wind whipped up tremendous waves that crashed onto the shore as black clouds rolled across the sky. She stumbled and faltered; the sand was like a thousand constricting hands tugging and pulling at her ankles.

Bryce ran into the house and placed the baby in the overstuffed chair then ran into the bedroom. “Tom. Get up,” she demanded as she frantically shook him. “Wake up. I heard a cry . . . there was this lady! Tom, a baby! She was on the rocks . . . she’s gone—saw a shadow . . . the wind . . . God, I was scared!” Bryce barely paused to catch her breath before she shook him again and then, anxiously paced the floor, “Did you hear a word I said? Get up. I--I didn’t even read the clipping.”

Rubbing his eyes, Tom pulled himself up to a sitting position, then reached for his glasses on the night stand, “What in God’s name are you rambling on about? Bryce,” he said, looking at the alarm clock, “it’s only 2 a.m.” Bryce continued to pull on his arm. “Just a minute, Bryce, let me tie this,” he demanded, as he struggled to get his robe closed around his waist. “Couldn’t this wait til the morning? Will you let go?” he said, finally pulling his arm from her grip.

“Just hurry up. You’ve got to see her!” Bryce stated as she rushed out of the bedroom.

“Who?”

“The baby,” she said, slightly annoyed. “Haven’t you been listening?”

Tom stopped in the door frame and called after her, “How in the Hell can anyone make sense of any of this gibberish!” Getting no response, he continued “You’re rattling on like a train out of control, on a track going nowhere. What baby?”

“Well, if you would listen once in awhile, you’d know!” she snapped.

Tom spotted the bundle in his chair. “Where did she come from?” Bryce quickly unraveled the events of the night. “Is the baby this women’s? Tom inquired.

“I don’t know. Like I said, she disappeared.”

“And she never said anything?” he questioned her.

“Not a word. It seems a little crazy. But that’s not all, I found this,” Bryce informed him as she held out the crumpled, yellowed newspaper clipping. “I haven’t look at it yet.”

“This whole thing sounds crazy, Bryce,” Tom repeated as began reading the headline. “‘Man gets life +80 yrs without parole for double murder.’ How odd. Why would--”

“Read more,” Bryce insisted.

“What’s the matter? Do you know about this case?”

“No, how could I? I’m not sure. Maybe . . . read the article,” she urged.

Tom continued reading the details of the story out loud. When he got through the murder scene description, Bryce gasped.

Tom ran to her side, “All right, this has gone too far! No more! What’s going on?”

“Does . . . it mention anything about a girl . . . in the barn?”

“I don’t know? Why would you ask that?”

“Just read.” She sat down on the couch as Tom read the rest of the story.

“How did you know about the girl in the barn, Bryce?”

“I was there, I saw it happen . . . in my dream, that is. I knew the girl was going to hide there in the barn—almost like I had been there before—but that’s impossible, I’ve never been to Wisconsin.”

“What?” Are you sure you didn’t read this article? I don’t find any of this funny, Bryce.”

“I swear, I didn’t make any of this up!”

“Why would this be in the baby’s cradle and what was she doing in the old lighthouse? Bryce, we need to call the police; this baby has to belong to somebody.”

That night the coastlines of the Carolinas were pounded by heavy rains and hurricane winds that left total devastation behind for most. The beach was littered with seashells, roofing shingles, tree branches and leaves. The soil was waterlogged, and plants were uprooted, but luckily, their town of Caswell Beach on the coast of North Carolina was spared from the worst part of the storm.

The police officer had arrived by late morning, after the weather had calmed. After taking their statements, he departed with the child. Tom and Bryce headed to the bedroom, desperate to reclaim the lost sleep from the previous night's events.

Burr—ing! Tom jumped as the silence was shattered by the ringing of the phone.

"I'll get it," Bryce said groggily, as she headed out of the room. "Hello?"

"Hello, is Bryce there?"

"This is . . ." Bryce said as she tried to recognize the crackling voice.

"Hi, this is Joyce . . . you know . . . your parent's neighbor."

"Oh. How are you?"

"I'm fine . . . thanks."

"So . . . what can I do for you?" Bryce questioned her, "Is everything okay?"

"Your parents . . ."

"What about my parents? Will you be watching over their house while they're on vacation?" she said yawning.

"Their house? No . . . dear there was a . . ."

"A what?" Bryce asked in frustration.

"A storm . . .," the older woman sadly announced.

"Who is it, Bryce?" Tom called out from the other room.

"Excuse me a minute," she said to the elderly woman. "Joyce," she called back to Tom, "my parent's neighbor, something about a storm."

Tom reached for the remote to check out the news when he heard a loud noise, "What was that?" he called to Bryce as he headed into the room, "Bryce what's the matter?" She was on the floor staring blankly at the receiver in her hand. "For God sakes, Bryce, what is it?"

"My parents . . . they're gone!"

"What, did they leave early for their cruise? I thought that wasn't til next week?" he asked, confused.

"No! They're gone . . . last night . . . there was a storm—," she managed.

"A storm? So where did they go?"

"They're dead! A hurricane!" she began crying hysterically as Tom wrapped his arms around her. Tom held her for a long time before he managed to whisper softly, "I'm so . . . sorry."

The day after the funeral, Bryce sat on her bed with a briefcase that had been found in her mother's hands. Her breathing became shallow, and each second on the clock ticked in unison with her heartbeat as she lifted the brass clasp on the leather case, *What is so important in here that you would risk*

your life for it? Inside were many papers and documents. Bryce flipped through the pile of papers, briefly glancing at each until she came across a newspaper clipping;

Clare Irene Johannes, age 31 became the bride of Ray William Henderson, age 34 today, May 14. The couple exchanged their nuptial vows in a small garden ceremony just outside of Portage. The newlyweds plan to spend their honeymoon in North Carolina and then continue their residence here in Wisconsin.

“Wisconsin? They never told me they lived there,” she said, surprised. “Tom. Come here.” She rustled through the papers again, “Uh, where is it? Here we go,” she pulled her parents’ marriage certificate from the pile “‘Place of residence, Portage, Wisconsin.’ That’s odd.”

“What’s odd?” Tom asked her as he entered the room.

“Look at this,” she said as she handed him the document. “My parents lived in Wisconsin.”

“Really? Hey, weren’t you born in ’66?”

“Yah, why?”

“Well it says here that your parents were married on May 14th—”

“So, I—”

“1966 . . . three months after you were born.”

“That can’t be! My mom never mentioned that . . . why would she keep that a secret?”

“Why don’t you call your uncle and ask him when and why your parents moved here from Wisconsin? He should know,” Tom suggested, as he handed her the cordless phone. Bryce took the phone from him and headed for her address book in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Tom continued to sort through the papers. He skimmed through a few before he noticed a certificate from the hospital with a set of footprints on, ‘In recognition of one of life’s most memorable moments . . .’ it read. “How cute, her feet were so tiny.” He continued reading, “‘Brietta Bryce Thomas was born to Samuel and Maryanne Thomas at 11:53 p.m. on Monday the Fourteenth day of February 1966.’ Bryce . . .”

“Tom, you’ll never guess who that was—”

“Sit down, Bryce, there is something I need to show you.”

“Okay,” she replied, a little perplexed at his seriousness. “But first, I talked to my uncle. He wasn’t much help, but he did say we moved here a couple of months after I turned six. I figured it out; that would have been about ’72. Anyway, that was the social worker who just called a minute ago, apparently no infants are missing statewide. The baby needs to be placed in a foster home until available for adoption. She wants to know if we want her. Sooo . . . what do you say?”

“Did you say 1972?”

“Yah, but—”

“Bryce, that *was* the year those murders happened!”

“Well, maybe that’s why we moved.”

“What did you do with that article? Do you remember the guy’s name?”

“Sam, I think. Why?”

“Just go get it, please.” Tom placed the hospital certificate he had been hiding behind his back into the case. Then he slowly reread the wedding announcement.

“Samuel Thomas,” Bryce announced as she returned to the room. “Tom, what’s the matter? You look as white as a ghost!”

Tom read from the paper he was holding, ““Witness to the couple’s vows were Maryanne Thomas and Samuel Thomas of Ada, Wisconsin.””

“Oh my God, they were my parent’s friends?” She cried in horror.

“It gets worse,” Tom told her as he tried to help her to the bed. “I found this in the briefcase when you were on the phone.” He handed her the hospital birth announcement. “Remember how you said that ‘in your dream’ you felt a sense *deja vu*?”

“Yah, I had a strange feeling I’d been there before.”

“Read the name on the this paper,” he urged her.

She scanned the words, her mouth forming each sound in slow motion. “It can’t be!”

“From what I can gather,” Tom began calmly, “the murdered woman’s maiden name was Johannes. That was your mother’s maiden name, I mean Clare . . . you know what I mean. Maryanne, your biological mother, and Clare were sisters, and the little girl that Samuel Thomas, your birth father, murdered on February 29, 1972 would be your twin sister, Brianna Thomas.”

“Why would she keep this a secret? Why not tell me when I became an adult?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure she had her reasons. Is there anything you can remember?”

Bryce thought for a moment, “No,” she cried in frustration. “Why them and not me?”

“Think real hard. You said you couldn’t make out the faces in the portrait, maybe there are some pictures in here that might help jog your memory.” Tom dug through the remaining papers. “Nothing! Not a single pict—wait, what’s this?”

“What?”

“Here in the corner, the lining’s lifted up,” Tom ripped the lining all the way back to reveal a small, thin packet, “Do you want me to open it or do you want to?” Bryce motioned him to go ahead. He opened the flap and withdrew a letter, two cameo necklaces with the initials B.T. engraved on the back and a photograph that had one corner torn off it. Tom began reading the letter to her;

My dearest sister,

I wish I could be sending you better news today, but sadly I can not. Our suspicions of Sam are true, I'm afraid. Two nights ago, as usual, he came in late from his drinking, stumbling and cursing throughout the house. I pretended to be asleep and waited for the house to grow quiet, as I knew it would. I about jumped out of my skin when I heard the scraping sound of his shoes drag past our door and fade as they rounded the corner to the girl's room. I couldn't bear to stay put. But I knew, Clare, I had to this time. No more excuses or lame explanations. He had to be stopped! It didn't take long before I heard the sound of dragging footsteps pass by my door again, in the other direction. As soon as I heard the door to the spare room click closed, I sprang out of bed and flew down the stairs—I swear I don't even remember touching a single step. He never heard me. I flung open the door and there he stood, pants around his ankles with our baby, who was still sound asleep . . . I've never felt so repulsed. How could he!!! What kind of sick man is he? He got so . . . ugly! I fear the worst! I was lucky this time; the bruises and swelling will heal soon, but what's next? I want you to know that if anything should happen to me, please take care of my girls—I do love them so. I have instructed them to hide in the barn—you know the place. For now Sam has been detained, but that won't last. As soon as I get things taken care of here I plan on leaving. I pray it is not too late . . . until then all my love, Maryanne.

"It's dated February 27, 1972. I'm so sorry, Bryce," Tom said as he drew her in close to him and held her tight. "Clare, your mother. . . aunt never had a chance to react. She probably never got the letter until after the fact . . . how awful."

Bryce dried her eyes enough to glance at the photo. "This is the same one from my dream, Tom," she managed to say before the tears began to flow uncontrollably again. "That night Brianna and I were watching TV and he came in. He looked strange. He yelled at us to get to bed, but our mom said it wasn't time yet. They began arguing, so we turned up the volume on the TV. Then, something crashed to the floor in the kitchen. Brianna called out to our mom to see if she was okay. When there was no answer she got up to go check. The next thing I knew, he was standing in the doorway yelling at Brianna for spilling popcorn on the floor. I tried to tell him it was me, but he grabbed her by the back of the hair. She cried and tried to fight him off, but he hit her really hard—I just stood there and did nothing!"

"You were only six. There was nothing you could do." Tom tried his best to comfort her. He handed her the box of tissues from the nightstand.

She wiped her tears before continuing, "He came after me next. He kept telling me he wouldn't hurt me. He called me Brietta and told me that I was his favorite." She paused to reflect on what Tom had just read to her, "All these years . . . I never knew. And to think, I survived 'cause of . . . Why?"

“I don’t know, Bryce. I don’t know. Come on, let’s put this stuff away, you’ve had all you can take for one night.” Tom cleared off the bed, “Lie down and I’ll go put some water on for tea, okay?”

“Yah. Sure, that would be fine,” she mumbled. Bryce stared at the ceiling for a long time, “What does this all have to do with that woman? What have I missed?” She sat up, looking for the photo as Tom returned with a hot cup of tea. “It’s your Sweet Dreams stuff; it should help you relax.” He handed it to her, “What are you looking for?”

“That photo. I wanted to look at it again.” Tom handed her the photo; she stared at it for several minutes. Like a detective, she examined every inch as if it were the one clue that would solve the crime, the key to unlocking the mystery. “Oh my God,” she gasped. The teacup crashed to the floor, splattering hot tea everywhere.

“What the Hel— Bryce you’re shaking like you saw a ghost!”

“I did . . . my mother’s.”