



Chapter 1

The Discovery

You can learn a lot from dead people. You just have to know where to look. Like my grandma's house, for example. It's just a small one-story house, but the back hall has a skinny staircase that goes up to a large pointed attic. And the only window up there is round and sort of beveled and looks out over the front yard like a weird monster eye. It's pretty creepy. Most people think attics are fun, but most people don't have to clean them.

"Grandma's whole life is up here, Fi," Mom said, clutching a ragged wad of tissue.

How many lives did she have? I trudged through the jungle of boxes, lamps, and old furniture trying not to breathe in too deep. The whole place smelled like wet newspapers. I tripped on a faded plastic reindeer and fell against an old record player, scraping my elbow. Guess I was being punished for that last thought.

It'd just been a day since Grandma's funeral. We flew all the way across the country to attend, just Mom and Dad and me. I barely knew Grandma. She sent me presents on my birthday and at Christmas, but I'd only seen her twice in my whole life. Once, when I was four, she flew to California to visit us. I barely remember that. I did see some pictures though. Then I saw her again three years ago, when my Uncle Richard died in

a car crash. This was only my second visit to Twin Springs and, thank goodness, my last. Seems we just traveled here for funerals, and Grandma was the last of Mom's family.

"So what now?" I asked Mom as I licked my fingers and tried to paste the scratched peels of white skin back on my arm. "Garage sale? eBay? Bonfire?"

"I don't know," she said, sniffing. "I think an antiques dealer would be interested in a lot of this stuff. We could probably raise enough money to help pay for the funeral."

I swung a broken telescope aside and squeezed my way through to a table full of old adding machines. "Oooh—can I have one of these?"

"Oh, Fi, why do you want one of those broken-down things? Look around. I'm sure you can find something more useful to take home."

I doubt it! "Why are there so many of these?" I fingered the ornate design on the side of a large gold cash register.

"Grandpa repaired business machines for a living," she said. "Guess those were the ones beyond repair. And, of course, Grandma saved everything."

No joke. The place was a major fire hazard.

The cash register keys curved up like long monster claws. I pushed down on the No Sale button. *Chink*. The bell had lost its ring, but the drawer popped open, poking me in the belly. "Umph!" The divided tray inside held flakes of grime and some dead bugs. I picked up the tray to look underneath. Heck, there could have been

some money stuffed under there that no one thought to look for. I thought I'd hit the jackpot when I saw a yellowish sealed envelope lying there. I ripped it open quick.

"An anniversary card," I said, opening it to see a circle of faded pink roses. "Listen to this. I think it's a note from Grandpa."

Happy Anniversary, Millie! For better or worse.

Love, Dan

October 11, 1945

♀¹/₂ ♂

P. S. To be on the safe side, I've found a new hiding place.

"What do you think it means?"

"Who knows," Mom said, pecking through a hatbox full of old pictures. "Probably some place they went to get away from bill collectors."

Hmmm...I doubt it. "Were Grandma and Grandpa always broke?" I asked, although this dumpy old house should have answered that question.

"Well, Grandpa always said he wished we'd been born rich instead of so darn pretty." She winked at me, and a silver tear escaped her eye.

"I don't think that's what this message means," I said. "I think Grandpa *hid* something somewhere."

"If he did, I'm sure Grandma uncovered it years ago."

I looked down at the ripped envelope. "But the card wasn't open. Why would he write out an anniversary card and not give it to her?"

Mom gave a slight shrug. "Knowing Grandpa, he

probably forgot. Went out and bought her a scarf or something.”

“So do you think there could be something hidden around here?”

“No, but if there is we’ll find it by Sunday,” she said, still digging.

I checked around for more notes or clues or forgotten money. But other than being a bug mortuary, the cash register was empty. I was about to look through some more of the machines when I heard Mom sigh.

“This is amazing,” Mom said, holding up a thick, brown photo. “Fiona, come look.”

I squeezed my way back and plucked the photo from her fingers. “Mom, is that you?” I asked, looking down at an image of myself.

“No. It’s Grandma.”

Mom was right. It *was* amazing. I felt like a time traveler—my face in a photo from a different era. I knew it had to be Grandma wearing that baggy dress and lace collar, but the pointed nose, almond-shaped eyes, and thin lips were mine. Of course, I wouldn’t be caught dead with that pixie hairstyle.

Mom must have read my mind. “You’ve got her auburn hair, too,” she said, reaching over my shoulder and lightly touching the features in the photo, “and the same rusty brown eyes.”

“Even the gold flecks?”

“Even the gold flecks.”

“Cool.” I handed the picture back to Mom, wishing I’d had a fresh tissue to hand her, too.

“Well,” she said with a loud snuffle, “standing around like this isn’t getting anything accomplished. Let’s get started.”

I looked at the ocean of junk. “Where?”

About noon, we headed through the splendorous town of Twin Springs (population 3,027) to meet Dad at the local hamburger place. Twin Springs is the kind of town that could die of old age. Everybody has gray hair and wrinkles. Even the dogs. You don’t *walk* down the streets, you hobble. So we hobbled into Big Jerry’s Burger Joint for lunch. No sign of Big Jerry, but Dad was waiting.

He’d been at Mr. Hinkle’s law office all morning taking care of Grandma’s will. I couldn’t imagine anyone inheriting that garbage. We sat down at a red-checkered table while a waitress named Lucille, crusty white apron and all, plopped water glasses down in front of us. She was the youngest person I’d seen in Twin Springs, but she still looked older than Mom and Dad. She hid it with lots of black eye pencil and bronze powder. After taking our order, she slid the pencil behind her ear—just like in the movies. As she walked away, I couldn’t help but notice that her large bottom bounced like a seesaw.

I turned to Dad. “What do you think about this?” I shoved the anniversary card in his face.

“Pewwwww!” he said, holding his nose. “I think it smells like you dug it out of a doghouse.”

“Not the smell! What do you think those little symbols are on the note?”

He studied it for a moment, blinking like a computer. I could literally see his mind computing the data, but it turned up with an error message. “If I had to guess, I’d say they look like planetary signs. You know, the symbols that astronomers use.”

“I don’t have to guess,” Mom chimed in. “Those are most definitely planetary symbols. I’ve seen them all my life.”

“Get outta here,” I said, not believing Mom could actually be involved with something as cool as astronomy.

“Grandpa was always peeping through some old telescope. Heck, he spent all his spare time charting constellations. We had a library packed full of astronomy books. I used to pull them down and look through them when I was a kid. That is, when I didn’t get caught. Your grandmother was real fussy about things being out of place.”

I tried to imagine a time when my mother was little and curious—sneaking in and looking through Grandpa’s books. What a different life it must have been for her back then, living in this teeny town. Not at all like Sacramento.

“So which planets are these?” I asked, hoping those secret visits to Grandpa’s library had made her an expert.

“That’s a really good question,” she said. “But unfortunately, I don’t have a really good answer. You’ll have to look it up.”

Look it up? Sheesh! She sounded like Mrs. Reidel, the school librarian. “Do you think that maybe

Grandma saved any of Grandpa's books?"

Mom gave me a look.

"Yeah, that *was* a dumb question."

"Speaking of Grandma's stuff," Dad told Mom, "Mr. Hinkle said once we clear out the house, he'll have a cleaning crew come in, then put it up for sale. The house is so old and in such need of repair, he's not very optimistic about it fetching a good price. But it'll finally be out of our hands, and we can get back to our own lives."

I liked that idea.

But Mom suddenly had a distant look. She gazed past me for a moment, then looked down. "I grew up in that house," she said to the tablecloth.

I guess reality had finally set in. Grandpa died before I was born, Uncle Richard a few years ago, and now Grandma's funeral marked the end of the Markham family. She had no reason to return. Ever.

"I should have called more," she sobbed. "I should have written, visited. I should have made an effort to get along with her. I'll never get a chance to make it up to her now." She lowered her head and broke into a fresh glob of tears.

"It works both ways," Dad said, handing her a paper napkin to wipe her eyes and nose.

I suddenly felt like an intruder. I thought we rarely saw or heard from Grandma because she lived so far away. After all, she was old and could barely travel. And of course, we didn't have time to visit anyway. We have busy lives in California. I mean, really, everyone's busy in California. Well...except the bronze people hanging

out at the beach. But Mom had never mentioned that she didn't get along with Grandma. At least not to me. This was a heck of a way to find out.

Lucille came bounding back with our food. Her fat, meaty arms held everything at once.

Mom brushed the wisps of chestnut hair off her face and sat up straight. The red streaks in her eyes were a cruel contrast to her usual baby blues. I'd seen her cry before, like at Uncle Richard's funeral, but this was different. These tears didn't look like sadness. They looked like guilt. I guess there's a lot hidden here in Twin Springs. I glanced back down at Grandpa's note. *A lot.*

What in the world had Grandpa hidden? And could I uncover it by the time we left for the airport on Sunday? Four days should be enough time, as long as Mom didn't keep me forever busy sorting through junk and hauling out trash.

For someone who had dreaded a week in Twin Springs, I suddenly had a whole new outlook. I don't know what Grandpa hid or where he hid it, but I was willing to bet it was *not* in the attic.

