



Chapter 1

Neon lights reflected on the wet macadam parking lot. She studied a scuffmark on her suede boot. *I just bought these. Where did I get this scratch?* She thought with irritation. *Was it there when I bought them?*

“I had a real nice time tonight,” he said with a hopeful smile, eager to carry the night onto the next phase.

Looking upward, she feigned a smile for her date. “Me too.”

A grin appeared on his boyish face. "Well, it doesn't have to end. We can have a nice time at my place."

He was a nice-looking guy, obviously took care of himself and his body, but sadly he didn't incite fiery passion, not on the third date anyway. "Sorry. I need to get up early tomorrow," she replied which was the truth, although for good sex she would always make an exception over a good night's sleep. She had, however, been here before, meaningless and desperate sex for the singles. A few hours of bliss, usually ended up making her feel worse.

Her date shrugged. "Okay, whatever. I'll see you later then?"

"Sure," she replied and as she made her way toward her car she wondered if it was true. Would she see him again? Did she care? She didn't. He didn't inspire romance in her. He was a take-it-or-leave-it kind of guy. If the opportunity presented itself, she may go out with him again, maybe even sleep with him, but as he stated himself, whatever.

"Whatever," thirty-year-old Nicky Schaeffer repeated to herself as she took a quick glance at her eyes in the rearview mirror. Her mascara started to flake, leaving behind a few small chips under her eyes. She brushed the mascara dust from her face, started her car, and drove through the dark, rain-drenched streets of South Portland, Oregon.

It was a dark night. The clouds covered any light from the stars and the moon. It was these times she felt especially lost. There was nothing to guide her and nothing to give her existential meaning. As the wipers glided across the window with the dull meditative sound of a metronome, she replayed the date over in her head wondering if she should have gone home with him.

Headlights of oncoming cars blurred through the dewy mist, bringing her back to the task of driving. Springtime had come to Oregon, but the sun had not yet made its way through the staunch Northwestern overcast abyss. She knew to give it time. It was only late April. The sun and the stars never made their grand appearance until July anyway.

She arrived home to a small, yet quaint ranch house. A single woman, a homeowner with a burgeoning career, she was soaring into independent feminism, whether she liked it or not. Too much independence, too much self-gained success could be seen as a negative to men whom wanted to date her, support her, take care of her, and maybe even own her, or at least that was what she thought.

Opening the door, she arrived to her sanctuary from the world. Her entire life – past and present – existed here, yet nothing else. As a single woman, she wanted no pets, especially a cat. A single woman with a cat, she just said no.

Nicky made her way through her house, undressing in each room – her shoes, jacket and sweater in the living room, her tee shirt and jeans in the bedroom, and finally her underwear in the bathroom. She made the water especially hot to spark the numbness from her heart, mind, and even her soul. Yep, she was feeling something now as the water scalded her skin.

After pulling on a ratty pair of sweats, she poured a glass of wine and took a seat in her enclosed patio. The rain poured harder. So, kind for it to wait until she got home. Now she had the time to truly appreciate its somberness, and with it came the gentle tapping of the rose bushes against her window. Other than the rain, nothing soothed more than the sound of nature making its gentle awareness known. It gave her a sense of solidarity and connectedness to the world.

She sipped her wine and picked up a copy of *Willamette Week*. Flipping to the last pages she scoured the classifieds and advertisements for something she could do as a single woman. “Where are all the men?” she asked as if the paper would have the answer. Paint and sip. *No, that’s a women-bonding activity.* Cooking class. *That’s a possibility.* Pottery class. *That’s so “Ghost.”*

Her eyes landed on a strange advertisement for “Systema Self-Defense.” “Huh,” she sighed curiously as she lingered over the words. “What single woman doesn’t need self-defense? If I can’t

find a guy to hook up with, maybe I can find one to fight.” She reached for a magic marker and circled the advertisement.

A beep on her cellphone interrupted her thoughts. After a quick sip of wine, she lifted her phone to find a text from her date, well more so a picture of his penis. She read his brief message: See what you’re missing. She chuckled, gulped down her wine, and deleted his message. “Whatever,” she muttered and tossed her phone back down on the table.

With that disruption, she rose and headed to the bedroom, where she settled down to sleep, hoping to wash away any memory of her date’s member. After an hour of tossing and turning, she finally fell asleep, her mind swiftly sailing down the river of dreams.



She collapsed into a foot of snow, waving her arms like an angel ascending to heaven. Above, the snow rained down from a white abyss. Serenity came over her until the snow froze, encasing her in a glass coffin. She screamed, struggling to break through, hoping someone would come to her rescue. Wolves howled drowning out her cries. From her snowy grave she saw their yellow eyes piercing through the white out. She was stuck.



Nicky sat upright from the bed, sitting upright and free from any bondage. A shroud of silence surrounded her. Tonight, exhausted and not

wanting to waste any time analyzing the dream, as she did so many times in her life, she dropped back down onto the pillow, closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

The next morning, she rose from her bed and peeked through her blinds - a typical Oregon day - bursts of sunshine through a mostly cloudy sky. She loved these types of days the most when the sun rained down in unexpected showers of light illuminating what most of the time was a grey day. It always gave a momentary glimpse of purpose and pleasure and then it went back to overcast where her doldrums often lingered.

Isn't that life? She thought as she dressed for the day, her normal work attire fashionably casual in jeans, sweater and boots. She slicked her hair back into a messy ponytail, applied a scant bit of makeup, and then it was on to the kitchen to prepare her mobile breakfast - smoothie and a granola bar.

While most complained of their commute, Nicky enjoyed it. She set her smoothie in the cup holder; her Bluetooth bud placed in her ear where Alexi Murdoch streamed from Spotify. She put her Toyota Prius in gear and drove through the winding turns of Hillsdale to the highway and off to the countryside to the antique shop she owned with her lifelong BFF.

She and Angie Marie Johnson had been friends since middle school when they shared a

love for investigating haunted houses, or what they thought were haunted – strange thumps, murky shadows and the ever-present *energy, which* they convinced themselves were spirits living in the dwellings.

As adults, Nicky and Angie found themselves successful antique dealers, often considering themselves raiders of the dead. They took turns scavenging flea markets, garage sales and their all-time-favorite: estate sales where the deceased's belongings were sold at bargain prices, most of which was crap – colored glass vases, tarnished candleholders and picture frames, worn clothing and tattered books, just to name a few. Occasionally, they came across a jewel, an item the family didn't know was precious.

She arrived at their shop, *Belle of the Ball Antique Store*, in South Portland before her partner Angie. Nicky had no real responsibility in the morning, only to look decent enough to be presentable in the real world. Angie, on the other hand, had a husband and three children to contend with each morning, so the ongoing deal was for Nicky to open the store in the morning.

She unlocked the door to the shop and stepped inside seeing the party remnants of last night's spirits – a porcelain dish shattered on the floor. "Martin and Mira, not again! Even after death you two can't get along!" she scolded aloud to an elderly couple that passed away in the 1950s. Died

just a few months apart and their worldly and unworldly bickering still sparked passion.

After sweeping up the mess, she went upstairs to retrieve items which fell off the shelves and clothing draped awkwardly from hangers. Several of the antique children's toys were found near the book sections. "Micky, when are you going to learn to pick up after yourself!" she scolded to a three-year-old mischievous boy who passed two years ago of Leukemia.

The bell dinged with the opening of the door downstairs, followed by the howl of a pack of wild children - three of them ranging from age a hedonistic four-year-old who liked to strip off his clothes, his older smart-mouth older brother age nine and the six-year-old who just wanted to keep peace. All belonged to her partner. Nicky headed downstairs to greet Angie.

Angie gave her an exasperated expression. "Babysitter called in sick. I thought I could set the wild ones outside in the back to play."

"No problem. Maybe they can tire out Micky upstairs."

"He is one rascally spirit." Angie opened the cash register getting ready for business. "How was the date last night?"

Nicky laughed.

"That bad?"

"The date itself was kinda nice. It was the photo text of his," she glanced at Angie's children

and whispered, "penis that sort of ended any possible connection."

"Why?" Angie asked.

Nicky chuckled. "Why? What day-in-age do we live in where men think sending pictures of their genitals will inspire romance?"

Angie shrugged. "Peacocks display their feathers; our human men show their cocks."

"Ha!" Nicky burst out an ironic laugh. "Anyway, I'm beyond men going straight for my pants. Why not try to reach my heart, my mind, or my soul before going straight for my vagina. It's annoying."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I mean, how did Dave woo you? Was it, 'Hey, I had a nice time tonight, here's a picture of my dick, do you want to have sex?'"

"No. It took Dave a year to get the nerve to ask me out, let alone get into my pants. That took another three months in which I nearly had to guide him there. And now look at us, three wily brats."

"See. He admired you from a far. He loved you for more than just having a vagina. Why can't I find that? Why do I just end up with sloppy seconds?"

"Tiresome thirds?"

"Maaaay-be." Nicky sighed leaning on the counter and watching Angie's children run around the shop. "Where are all the 'ones'? You found

yours. Where's mine? I mean, where the hell is he? I wish there was a karmic dating site that linked soul mates."

"Probably streaming through woman to woman wondering where is his one true love."

"Great, my soul mate is a player."

"Ha, ha, no. Playing is a lonely life and gets old quick. He's out there. Could be anyone. The strange irony in life is you probably know him, or came across him somewhere." She paused in the conversation to yell at her children. "Settle down or I'm going to put you in the closet!"

"You wouldn't do that, mom. That would be child abuse," her oldest son replied smartly.

Angie shook her head. "Kids know too much today. Oh, by the way, that estate sale in Nob Hill. Can you go today? I was gonna go, but last thing I need is my kids running havoc in some recently departed soul's cherished possessions."

"Yeah, sure. It'll be a good distraction from the fact I have no love life."

"Buck up, he's out there. You need to practice positive affirmations instead of wallowing in negativity. He's out there waiting and wanting you, but not when you're being a Negative Nelly."

"Whatever," Nicky replied with a lifeless shrug.



After the store was up and running and Angie had managed to tame her wild ones,

including the spirits within the shop, Nicky headed off to the Nob Hill section of Northwest Portland. As with any merchant, she was always on the lookout for more products, but instead of buying from new vendors, she sought out pre-owned articles. At times she couldn't believe the need for so much mass production when so many products already existed – furniture, clothes and all kinds of home goods. Some days, she felt like a champion for the environment when recycling what was once someone's treasure into another person's prize.

Entering the Nob Hill neighborhood and eventually coming to her destination, a blue-painted Victorian-style townhouse, she circled the blocks several times until finding a parking space. When she finally arrived, neighbors poured in and out of the house. It was a sign the site had some good stuff.

The first order of business when scouring the market or estate sales was to sense the energy of the room. The last thing she and Angie wanted was any artifacts with negative energy. If the spirit still attached itself to an item, they wanted to make sure it was pleasant one. Cleansing for a new customer was always easier with a positive vibe. Today's estate sale had little, if any attachment, a good sign the spirit was ready to move on to their next adventure.

The entire contents of the house were shoved in the front rooms – a parlor with a

fireplace, a long dining room and an adjacent room with a large bay window, which led to the backyard. It was a marvelous display of items from early in the previous century to modern day. There was almost one hundred years of historic merchandise waiting to be sold.

Nicky had the urge to call Angie, but instead found herself caught in the splendor of antiquities. She perused old clothing dating back to the 1920s, antique frames with black and white photos still remaining.

“Are you looking for anything particular?” a friendly female voice asked.

“Treasure.” She extended her hand. “Nicky Schaeffer. I’m from *Belle of the Ball Antique Shop*.”

The woman shook her hand. “Yes, I’ve been in the store several times. Great stuff you have. If something suits you, let me know. I’m Natalia Stanislav.”

“Can you tell me about the house and the family?”

“It’s been in my family for about a century. My grandmother, Gertrude, finally passed away at ninety-one. She refused to give up the house, refused to leave.” She shuttered and glanced upward. “And if you asked me, she still hasn’t.”

Nicky followed Natalia’s gaze upward, imagining a cranky ghost lingering just at the edge of the stairway watching the world rifle through her worldly possessions. “I swear I can feel her.”

“Yeah, Grandma Gertie is still here,” Natalia said, seeing more customers arrive. “Let me know if you have any questions. I have to greet other guests.”

“Sure.” Nicky didn’t have many questions for Natalia, but had many for the ghost Gertrude. She felt the old spirit’s presence guiding her. She passed by the 1950s and 1960s china settings, past the 1940s fashionable apparel, back through the front parlor, through the dining room area where the table was covered in piles of curtains, bedspreads and quilts. The adjacent room called her. Here a galore of picture frames and paintings hung on the wall and canvases lay against the wall.

She stepped up to the photos, studying the faces of years gone by. The paintings spanned various subjects and techniques – from the typical scenery to the pop art. A beam of sunlight, breaking through the clouds beckoned her to an open door which led to a small unkempt backyard, bordered by rose and begonia bushes and a few plots of Irises.

Nicky glanced upward and through the upstairs window and saw the apparition of an old woman. A smile broke across the spirit’s face as she waved in Nicky’s direction. She glanced over her shoulder realizing she was the only one there. Not sure what to do, she waved back to the ghost. When the spirit nodded downward. Her heart thumped and her spine shivered. “Shit.”

Following the spirit's gaze, she noticed several canvases piled against the cellar door. She pulled back the first canvas to find a painting of the back of a woman looking through a window. The painting style was classical impressionist with a daring use of color. The view from the window was nothing but bright yellow sunshine raining inside the window.

She gazed up at the sky, witnessing the showers of sun pouring through the clouds. "Yes, I notice it too," she said to the painting as if the artist could hear her critique.

Lifting the painting, she studied it for some time, trying to imagine what the woman in the painting saw through the window. What was she looking at, or waiting for? In fact, several of the paintings shared the same theme - a window looking out unto a landscape. One especially sad painting showed the woman's cheek and palm pressed against the window seemingly tracing the branches of a tree. As the questions mounted in her mind, Nicky had a harder time putting the painting down. Clinging tighter to the edge of the canvas, she closed her eyes as if she could feel the answers to her questions.



Upon hearing the soft sound of the music, she opened the window with wrinkled hands and looked outside, seeing the family's blue 1963 Chevy Impala parked outside. As the music, "Somewhere My Love"

played, her heart plummeted into deep despair. She could hardly stand to listen, but she could not bring herself to close the window and shut out the sound, so she stood listening as her heart died, as it had so many times before.



The vision and the feeling flashed through Nicky's mind and heart. The sadness that invaded her heart surprised her. *All that from one painting. Man, this painter is good.*

"Did you find something you like?" Natalia asked from the back door.

Nicky slowly removed her gaze from the painting. "Ah," she sighed, trying to get the words out. "These paintings are mesmerizing. Who painted them?"

"Oh, that whole stack belonged to my great, great aunt Kira. I never knew her. All I know is she immigrated to the States with my great-grandparents in 1919."

"Where did they come from?" Nicky asked unable to relinquish her grasp on the painting.

"Siberia," Natalia replied with a laugh. "Not so much of a surprise, I guess. If you have the chance to leave Siberia, who wouldn't?"

"What do you know about her?"

Natalia shrugged. "Not much. Hold on. Let me get my mother. She may know more." She stepped back inside the house. "Ma! Ma!"

A smile crossed Nicky's face, hearing Natalia scream as she wandered through the house.

Soon a white-haired woman around the age of seventy appeared. She bore a staunch, rugged, yet a salt-of-the-Earth appearance. "May I help you?"

"Yes." Nicky displayed the paintings to the woman. "I'm interested in these paintings. Can you tell me about the woman who painted them?" She glanced at the signature painted below - K.K.

"Oh wow. I thought these were long gone. They belong to my great aunt, Kira Karimov. K.K." The woman broke a mischievous grin. "Wacky woman she was a spinster. She moved to the States from Siberia with my grandparents." Her gaze traveled upward. "She lived in the attic, made it her apartment and studio. She would yell at us as we ran around touching her paintings and paint. It was as if we were touching something sacred. Eventually, she locked the attic so we couldn't get up there anymore. Yes, great Aunt Kira was an eccentric bird." She studied the paintings. "Strange."

Nicky's heart swelled with compassion for the spinster painter. "Well, I really do love her work. How much do you want for the paintings?"

The woman laughed. "Honey, you'd be doing us a favor by taking them off our hands. It would be one less trip to the dumpster."

Natalia smiled, embarrassed by her mother's bluntness. "You're welcome to the

paintings. I'm sure Aunt Kira would love to know her work inspired someone."

Nicky clenched a painting and wondered over the strokes of paint. "Yes, I sense she would."

Natalia lightly tapped her on the shoulder. "I'll have my husband come around and load them in your car. Please feel free to look around. If you find more, we can have them delivered to your shop."

"That would be great." Feeling defeated, Nicky wandered through the house picking up an item - here and there - candle holders, tablecloths, picture frames and a few small pieces of furniture.

As she walked around to the front of the house toward her car, she noticed the real estate sign on the front yard. She looked upward at the second-floor window for the spirit, who at this time didn't show herself, but now it was the attic that sparked her curiosity. *I wonder if the spinster Kira Karimov is still here.*



Her car loaded with paintings and knick-knacks from the sale, Nicky returned to *Belle of the Ball* and excitedly jump out of her car. "Ang! Angie!" She ran inside. "Angie, you gotta check this out!"

Angie came around from the cash wrap. "Was it good?"

“Gold mine.” She opened the trunk of her car. “I got these paintings.” Angie’s dull response was hardly what Nicky hoped. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. They are okay. Good, but not Renoir or Monet.” She smiled hopefully at Nicky. “Maybe there’s a Renoir underneath the paint. I know someone who could strip the paint and see if there’s something underneath. We might be able to reuse the canvas.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Nicky admired the painting. “I love them. They speak to me.” She filtered through the paintings and pulled out another. “Look at this one. She has her hand and cheek pressed against the window touching a branch on the other side of the pane. It’s like she’s communicating with nature.”

“Do you want to sell these paintings, or do you want to keep them, because you seem very attached?”

“I dunno. I can hang them up at home, I guess.”

“How many do you have there?” Angie counted the canvases in Nicky’s back seat. “About a dozen. Geez, you’re going to hang all these up in your house?”

“May-be.”

“Who is she? Is she famous?”

“Kira Karimov. She was a Siberian immigrant.”

“Siberia?” Angie questioned with a laugh.
“Well, we know why she immigrated.”

“Because she loves rain?”

“You’re hilarious.” Angie inspected Nicky’s car. “What else did you get?”

“Just a few knick-knacks and stuff. The family will be making a drop off of larger items later this afternoon or tomorrow. By the way, the house is up for sale.”

“Most are during an estate sale.”

“It’s haunted. A spirit led me to these paintings. I saw her.”

Angie’s expression illuminated. “Haunted you say? Is it her, the painter?”

“No. I don’t think so. She was the woman who recently died, Grandma Gertie. I saw her in the upstairs room and she nodded to me in the direction of the paintings.”

Angie grabbed Nicky’s shoulders. “Are you serious? Maybe we can buy the house and have another location for *Belle of the Ball*.”

“I was thinking it would be for me. I could live there.”

“You already have a house.”

“I can move.”

“Okay, chill out. I’ll come with you. I’m dying to check it out...and the ghost,” Angie replied.



By the end of the day, Nicky returned home and rested the paintings against the wall of her living room, figuring where to hang each one. However, instead of hanging the paintings, she poured herself a glass of chardonnay and sat on the floor before studying the detail of each one.

Oddly, the artist never depicted herself fully in any of the paintings, only showing the side of her face and her hands. Yet every painting had the perspective through a window, two windows, one had the view of hills west of Portland, the other side showed downtown and Mt. Hood. It was if the woman never left the attic.

“Poor woman. Did anyone ever appreciate you and your work? Seems such a shame to invest so much in a passion, only to become garbage for your family.” Nicky folded her legs in front of her, took another sip of wine and closed her eyes.



She could hear the lively big band music playing from the first floor. Three flights up, the muted sounds of swing music sounded heavenly. As long as it wasn't blaring in her ear, she enjoyed the music others partied to. Turning her attention to the open window, she witnessed the sun setting over Mt. Hood. Just as she was about to dab her paintbrush onto the palette, a finch bounced onto the window ledge.

“Hello sweetheart. I haven't seen you in a bit. I missed you, love. What have you been up to?” Mixing colors of red and ochre she blended onto the canvas. “Yes.

I know you've been around, but you haven't stopped to see me lately. Checking out all the chicks?" she asked, chuckling at her own joke.

The finch chirped and hopped around the ledge.

"Yes. I know." Pausing in her painting, she stopped to appreciate her private world. A warm breeze lofted through the window with the scent of mowed grass and roses. Her friendly fringillidae visitor and muted sounds of chatter and swing music below. Here she sat, in her own private utopia.



A warm sensation tingled through Nicky, as well as doom in her heart. She had felt such a connection to the painting, she wondered if it foretold of her fate. *Am I to die alone a spinster?* She opened her eyes landing upon a painting depicting a sunset over Portland. "How can anyone not love this? Your paintings belong in a museum, not in a dumpster. You deserve to be remembered not forgotten." She leaned forward toward the paintings, as the wine now providing a buzzing effect. "I will remember you."

