

Gigi's Guardian

(Ghost Diaries 1)

By Michèle McGrath

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Written in English (UK)

ISBN: 978-1-909411-25-8

Published by Mauve Square Publishing.

To my beautiful daughters,

Alexandra and Victoria,

with love.

Day Two, Heaven.

(I can't believe I'm writing this!)

"Welcome to Heaven, Ariane." Brenda, the Registrar, smiled at me and held out her hand.

"Thank you. Is it true then, I'm here?" I still felt shocked. I hadn't believed Nanna when she told me.

Brenda giggled. "You certainly are."

"Nothing's the way I imagined." I gazed round at the small white tables, with their striped sunshades. We were sitting in the middle of a green lawn which stretched away to the far horizon. I could see several magnificent stands of trees, with delicate streams flowing between them.

Brenda giggled again. She was large and blond and bubbly. "Most people expect marble and Greek columns," she said, "but we think this is much friendlier. Would you like a glass of nectar? This is the '93 vintage from Paradise River, one of their best." She handed me a drink that was cold, crisp and tasted of honey.

"Is it like this for everyone?"

"No, this is only the English version. There are loads of others; whatever is most appropriate for the new arrival."

Brenda was writing my details in her brass-bound book with a green quill pen. The wind blew gently round us, carrying the scent of summer flowers and newly-mown grass. The striped awning flapped above our heads. She asked me questions about myself, my family and my former life. They were easy to answer and I relaxed. I was starting to feel sleepy when her next question jerked me upright.

"What sort of work would you like to do, Ariane?"

"Work? What on Earth are you talking about?"

"We're not on Earth, remember." She grinned. "Many of us do some kind of activity here. Having a job is interesting and keeps you in a routine, although not everyone agrees with me. I always ask people their preference right away. Then I can keep it in mind for the future."

"I see. Well, what choice do I have?" I asked hesitantly.

"Mmm." She flipped back a couple of pages. "What were you in your previous life?"

"I worked for Lancashire Careers Service." A funny thought struck me. "I spent my time helping other people find jobs and now I've no idea what I want to do myself."

She reached over and patted my hand. "Never mind, no need to rush, none at all. Many people are happier if they know their existence isn't finished and they can still do fascinating things. But you don't need to decide anything immediately, if you don't want to. I just wanted to find out if you had a burning ambition, but you could take several decades to choose. Some do, while others get started

straight away. Einstein, for example, took five years before he decided to haunt a French Restaurant in San Francisco. He says it amuses him when he drops something into the soup and people jump. Everyone takes a while to get used to things here, but you'll soon settle down."

"Tell me about the types of jobs please." I smiled inwardly, as I realised I had just reverted to type, asking for more information.

"You can choose from several departments. 'Contemplation, Adoration and Philosophy', called C.A.P for short, appeals to most of the deep thinkers. We've got Sartre and Voltaire and Thomas Paine arguing in the forum at the moment. They were quite astonished, when they arrived, to find themselves here. Don't think any of them expected an after-life at all. Now they have endless debates with Thomas Aquinas and Confucius amongst others. Fascinating – they all chatter away in their own languages yet everybody understands exactly what they are saying! You should go to the Visitors' Gallery and listen."

"C.A.P. sounds extremely noisy to me and not like a job at all."

"It is, but I enjoy listening, once in a while. You could call it either a job or an activity, I suppose, not that it matters. The people in there seem to stay for a long time. However, we're getting sidetracked. Don't choose C.A.P. unless you like endless arguments."

"I don't!" I almost shouted.

"You sound emphatic."

"I am."

"Didn't think debating would suit you. You look a hands-on, practical sort of person to me, rather than an abstract thinker."

"How did you guess? We've only just met."

"I've had plenty of practice sizing people up and I had a good teacher: Sherlock Holmes."

"I thought he was fictional?"

"That's the story Conan Doyle made up. Poor Sherlock existed all right. He had to change his name afterwards, to avoid the embarrassment. He never forgave Conan Doyle, until he got here. When they decided to bury the hatchet, we had quite a party. Pity you missed the fun, but you can go back and enjoy an instant replay if you want to. We often hold reruns of special events. I've been several times and I always cry at the end." Brenda wiped away a tear.

"Tell me about my other options," I said to distract her.

"Well, there's R. & G., for 'Registry and Greeting'. They help the new people when they come to us. Your grandmother's one of those, as you know."

I smiled. "Yes, she told me yesterday." Everything had been incredibly strange. One minute I had been on the operating table and then everything changed. There was all this rainbow light and

Nanna was hugging me tight. Rory was jumping up beside her, barking and wagging his tail. "Nanna said she likes to meet the newcomers, even if they are a bit upset at the time."

"She's one of our best Greeters. I don't know how she does the job. Personally, I prefer to deal with people who are over the first shock, that's why I'm in the Registry section. Not everyone likes it, because of all the paperwork, but you never know who you'll meet next. Yesterday, for example, I spoke to a judge, a Native American Medicine Man, a Russian gangster, several Turkish teachers who'd been caught in an earthquake and a saxophonist. He was rather handsome." Brenda gave another of her infectious chuckles, making her blond curls bob.

She took a large swig from her glass and poured us both a refill from the sparkling crystal jug. "This stuff's wonderful. You can drink as much as you like and never get a headache. On Earth I was almost teetotal; I absolutely hated hangovers." She laughed and then, as if she suddenly remembered what we were supposed to be doing, she became serious again. "Guardians take care of the living, when they are about to make special decisions in their lives or are in danger."

"As in Guardian Angels?"

"'Guardian Angel' is the old fashioned name for them, but we don't use the phrase any more, since it's misleading. Most Guardians aren't angels at all. Some of them are right old reprobates. You wonder, in fact, how they ever got here. Proper angels quite enjoy the job, as a change from their usual messenger duties, but anyone can do it. It's a bit lonely, depending on who you get assigned to."

"I imagine that would make a difference."

"A lot of Guardians complain because their clients don't listen to them. Many people don't hear us, even if we are shouting right in their ear. Children respond best, but they are the hardest to work with. They keep getting into dangerous mischief, so you need to be on your toes all the time."

"What happened to my guardian angel yesterday? Sleeping on the job?"

"Of course not. You made the decision to go ahead with the minor operation quite freely, didn't you?"

"I never thought I'd die though!" There was so much I had wanted to do. My wedding dress was hanging in my wardrobe and I would never wear it now. I'd wanted children - Michael's children. Michael, oh God, Michael!

"Why did I have to die?" I shouted at Brenda. "I wanted to live!"

"Most people do. I'm really sorry, but I don't know why, only that now was your time to come here. Perhaps you have some special task to perform, something you can't do in the real world."

I snorted. "A likely story!"

"You will find out someday and you had quite a pleasant journey, didn't you?" she asked timidly. "Your Guardian was holding your hand, until your grandmother had you safe."

"What's his name? I've got one or two things to say to the dozy blighter."

"Her name is Sasha, but she's not here at the moment."

"Avoiding me?"

"No, she's having a well earned rest. Looking after you wasn't all joy you know."

I couldn't help smiling then, despite my anger. My mother often used to say those identical words to me.

Brenda picked up on my emotional change immediately. "I know it's not fair and I am truly sorry, but there's nothing anyone can do. You will feel better, eventually. Everyone does in time. Please believe me."

"I suppose you're right," I growled, making a mental note to talk severely to my former guardian, if I ever got the chance.

"Shall we continue, then?"

I nodded.

"The H.P. section is fun. Stands for 'Haunts and Poltergeists'. Tends to appeal to those who complain about their previous lives. Others just enjoy making mischief. Many people have a warped sense of humour they couldn't express before."

"Like Einstein, you mean?"

"He's a good example, but he also enjoys the company and he says the cooking's excellent at 'C'est la Vie'. The name amuses him as well, so that's a bonus."

"I thought spirits like us don't eat or drink."

"Heavens, no!" Brenda looked positively shocked. "We don't need food or water to exist, of course, either here or when we go back to Earth. But we still enjoy all the things we used to. Can you imagine Paradise with no chocolate or good wine? I can't. Cheers." She drained her glass. "You do like chocolate, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

Brenda waved a negligent hand and a huge box of chocolates appeared on the table, tied up with stripy pink ribbons. Brenda opened the lid.

"They're my favourites," I cried.

"Of course." She sounded complacent, as if this feat was nothing special. "Where was I?"

"Haunts."

"Oh yes, then we have 'Familiars'. They work with Mediums."

"I don't believe in fortune-telling, personally."

"My dear, you missed one of life's great treats!"

"If I had believed, I wouldn't have gone to see one of them. I never wanted to find out what was going to happen to me. At least I wasn't frightened about dying an early death!"

"That's a good point, but the people who go to mediums don't agree with you. They want to know if they'll ever find the man of their dreams or whether they'll be rich. Those sort of things."

"Do you mean mediums really tell them what's going to happen? I thought they only made wild guesses and were lucky occasionally." I wondered about my operation. If I'd gone to a medium, perhaps I could have avoided it and stayed with Michael.

"Oh, no. Familiars are aware of the truth, but sometimes it's wiser for them not to give all the details to the Medium, so the client can't be told."

"Why not?"

"Depends."

"On what?" I was feeling annoyed again.

"Their rules are strict. Only those who train as familiars know precisely how much they are allowed to reveal. The training's difficult and not everybody passes the final examinations. They do a lot of research into ethics. For example, they can't tell people next week's Lottery numbers or the winner of the Grand National. Not done at all."

"Isn't that trivial, compared to life and death issues?"

"Not always and not for everybody. I never took the training, so I'm not the one to answer those sorts of questions. I can send you to one of the trainers, if you want?"

She cocked a quizzical eyebrow at me but I shook my head. "No thanks. Go on, please."

"A Familiar's life isn't easy," she continued. "They need to bring the spirits belonging to a particular client to the séance at the right moment. Some don't want to come. I remember one man, who got hauled away to speak to his granddaughter. He was winning at poker and he wasn't happy. The Familiar's ears were burning with all the names he called her. Would you like the job, do you think?"

"I'm not sure. What are the other choices?"

"A whole department deals with 'Reincarnation', helping those of us who want to be born again."

"Do a lot of people go back?"

"Some do, but most of us want to stay put. We're astonished to be here at all or even that this place exists, especially the scientists among us."

"I certainly am." We both laughed.

"I can't imagine wanting to start all over again, but Reincarnation is too deep a subject for me. Ask one of the Gurus if you want to find out more. There are several resting here at the moment. Personally, if I get bored, I just change my type of work and try something else," Brenda told me.

"You must have had some unusual jobs," I prompted her.

"The funniest job I ever had was Guardian to a rock star. The antics he got up to would make your hair curl." Brenda patted her own tight curls. "That position didn't last long, though. He's our Musical Director now. He jazzes up the hymns and lately he's taken to writing arias, bit of a change from Heavy Metal. Looking after him was great fun while it lasted."

"Everything sounds so incredible - far too much for me to take in at the moment." My head was beginning to throb. Not a headache exactly - more the feeling that I ought to have a headache.

"I'm not surprised. Why not think things over for now? Take the information home and read about the options. There are loads more we haven't discussed. Remember, you can always change your occupation if you don't like it. No jobs for life here – especially not for eternal life!" Brenda passed me a large sack bulging with books, shook my hand briskly and walked away.

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"I'm home," I called, dropping the sack with a loud thud.

Nanna had told me to come back here, after I had seen the Registrar. "You can decide where you really want to live when you're more settled," she said as she kissed me goodbye. "You've enough to adjust to at the moment."

Everything was the same as I remembered from my childhood. I walked through the door with an intense feeling of relief. Amidst so much that was new, I was deeply grateful to find surroundings I recognised.

"Hi, Nanna." I went over and kissed her.

"Are you frazzled? You were a long time, but I thought you would be, knowing Brenda."

"She's quite something, isn't she?"

Nanna laughed and led me out into the garden to a table and chairs set beside a rippling stream.

"This is new. You only had a lily pond in Leyland," I exclaimed.

"I always wanted running water, though."

Tea and some of Nanna's coconut biscuits appeared as if by magic. I settled back into the cushions, enjoying the familiar comforts.

"Hello!" A tall man was walking across the lawn towards us. The late evening sun made a halo of his long fair hair. I didn't recognise him at first; he had changed so much. Of course, I never saw him as a younger man or Nanna either for that matter. She'd told me earlier that she'd chosen to be thirty again, the age when she was happiest in her life. Nanna jumped up and went over to him. He kissed her.

"Look who's here," she said, turning to me.

"Granddad!" I flew into his arms and gave him the biggest hug. I had missed him for so long. "Oh! You look wonderful!" I remembered how frail he had been the last time we'd been together.

"I'm fit again and you're all grown up!"

"It's been years since you saw me."

"Far too long. I take a peek at everyone from time to time, but I'm glad you're here with us now."

"You two have a chat while I get dinner ready," Nanna said and hurried off to the kitchen.

"Where were you when I arrived?" I tucked my hand through his arm, as we made our way into the dining room.

"Fishing. At least my client was and I couldn't leave him. We were right in the middle of a storm. My job was to make sure he didn't get drowned. He's one of the key negotiators in a Disarmament Treaty in the real world. If he went over the side, years of work would be lost."

"Exciting?"

"Terrifying, actually, or would have been if I'd been alive. I hung on by my fingertips to the rigging, while I threw a net over him and lashed him down. He kept rolling all over the place and I had to make everything seem as if he got tangled up by accident. Fortunately I can't get seasick any more. If I could, I'd never have volunteered to take care of a man with such an awful hobby."

"Yes, you were never the best of sailors." I laughed, remembering several memorable trips across the Irish Sea.

A wonderful scent filled the air and Nanna came in pushing a large trolley.

"Oh, Nanna!" My mouth started to water.

"I've made all your favourites, now you are in a fit state to enjoy them. You were completely zonked last night."

"Give the girl a chance; she'd only just got here," Granddad scolded her. Nanna heaped my plate high with her famous steak pie and roast potatoes.

"I can't eat all that!"

"Yes you can. No one diets in Heaven, you know."

She was right; I even managed two portions of her special chocolate mousse. Afterwards I helped her to clear the table, as I used to do at home. When we got into the kitchen, though, all she did was wave her hand.

"No need to wash up. We only do the chores we want to do here. I cook because I love cooking. The tedious stuff, like washing up and cleaning happens automatically. I just imagine shiny new plates and sparkling surfaces and they appear."

"Marvellous." I patted my stomach. "But I'm glad you still love to cook."

"I can't resist. The ingredients are so fresh and I can get everything I want. All the famous chefs give me tips."

She pulled down a large book and flipped through the pages. Famous name followed famous name and recipe followed recipe. "I'm working my way through them. Now go and get your coat on, we've got a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"You'll find out."

Granddad was waiting in the hall and we went out into the street. People streamed towards a tall glass building, which shimmered with light. I blinked hard. I was sure the building hadn't been there when I returned to the house and where had all these people come from?

"What's that?" I pointed to the building.

"The Concert Hall."

"We're going to a concert?" I asked in surprise. I knew they both liked music, but they'd never gone to concerts on Earth, because Granddad couldn't walk far in those days. He seemed to be having no difficulty now.

"The Concert. You haven't seen anything to beat this one. We call it the Celestial Variety Show."

"Like the Royal Variety Show?"

"So much better. Lots of entertainment happens all the time of course, but, occasionally, the famous artists put on a special performance. Every culture has their own version and I'm developing a taste for sitar music. Wonderful - once you get your ear in. We wouldn't want you to miss the show, especially since this is your first one."

"What's on?"

"We've got so many performers, they draw lots. You're never sure who you'll get, but everyone's excellent, of course, as you'd expect. Last month Lawrence Olivier and Sarah Bernhardt played scenes from Othello. Shakespeare was the director, so the play was acted the way he actually intended it to be, although I did see him tearing his hair at one point. Tommy Cooper told jokes which made even the angels laugh and they can be a glum lot at times. The finale was Elvis Presley. He hasn't been on for a few years. He's been having a rest, doing other things, but he brought the house down."

"Sounds wonderful."

The doors opened. We entered a shining glass box which rose up into the air, at the side of a huge stage. Other boxes were rising besides ours. The place was enormous, but everyone had an excellent view.

"There must be thousands here."

"Millions," corrected Granddad.

"Even so, many people mustn't be able to get in."

"The whole thing's duplicated. Very clever. We have concert halls and theatres everywhere. You can always find one nearby, wherever you are. The acts perform in all the theatres at the same time."

"Holographs," I giggled, "like in Star Trek."

"Hush, they're starting," Nanna said.

An orchestra filed onto the stage to rapturous applause. A small cue screen on our box read 'The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra 1923'. They swept us into the second half of the last night of the Proms. I lost track of the acts, but a few stand out in my memory: 'The Warsaw Concerto', Buddy Holly, and a group of dancers from Ancient Egypt who had been favourites of Ramses II.

"That was marvellous," I said, as we walked home in the starlight. It was lovely to be with my grandparents again. I had missed them both so much. Yet I still felt as if my world had fallen apart. I had an odd feeling of apprehension too, as if something was about to happen to me soon. Something unpleasant, which I would not be able to avoid.

Day Three, Heaven.

"Ariane, where are you?" A familiar voice woke me up from a deep sleep.

"Pam!" My favourite aunt threw herself onto the bed and gave me a hug.

"Whatever are you doing here at your age? I always told you to be careful." She wagged her finger at me, like she used to do when I'd been naughty.

"Look at who's talking! I never got wiped out on a motorbike!"

Pam laughed. "Cheeky! But what did happen to you?"

"It wasn't my fault, honest. The surgeon made a mistake and I died on the operating table."

"Your poor family! Such a terrible shock for them."

"I hope they're okay. I wish I knew how they all were."

"We can find out later. Get up now, lazybones."

"Where's Nanna and Granddad?"

"There was a big pile up on the M6 and Nanna ran off to greet the newcomers. Granddad's diplomat is getting into trouble again and he had to go too. I'm in between jobs at the moment, so I offered to take care of you. Get dressed. We've got fresh coffee and maple syrup pancakes waiting for us. Nanna was baking again when she took the emergency call."

After breakfast, we walked out into a crisp autumn day, with dry leaves crackling under our shoes.

"How odd." I looked around me. "Yesterday was like summer."

"Oh don't worry about the weather. The seasons do all sorts of strange things here. Somebody in the Met Office obviously fancied a change. Occasionally they go mad and send us four different types of weather in the same day - sun, fog, sleet and hail. We had a Canadian in charge a while back. He loved skiing, so we had snow for ages when he took over. There was almost a rebellion. Here we are. This is the first place I wanted to show you."

A white wall stretched into the distance. Hanging on the wall were pictures, rows and rows of wonderful paintings. "You always loved art, didn't you?" Pam asked. "This is one of my favourite places. I come here to be peaceful."

A small bench rose out of the ground as we approached. I sank down into its deep purple cushions. Pam pressed a button and everything started to glide past us. All the famous artists had their work displayed - paintings from the earliest times to the modern day. Many had been destroyed in the real world and others must have been painted since the artist arrived in Heaven; they had a translucence I had never seen on Earth.

"I'm drunk with all this," I told her. "How beautiful they are!"

"I think so too. Certainly this is the most comfortable way of visiting an art gallery I've ever known. You can go into the paintings if you want to and meet the people who inspired the artists. I particularly enjoy Monet's garden. No wonder he painted the same scene so often. Now, for a complete change, I'm going to take you to the Mall."

"The Mall?"

"The Americans named it originally and the name stuck. It's a meeting place cum shopping centre. This way."

I don't know what I expected to find in Heaven, but certainly it wasn't a shopping centre. The Mall was laid out in loops: one built of elegant white marble; another like a medieval city, with narrow winding alleyways. Everything anybody could want was advertised for sale, but the price was always the same – free. A shopaholic's dream. Several people passed us by, pushing huge floating trolleys piled high with goods. They all had wide smiles and dreamy-looking eyes.

"They're new here." Pam giggled. "Newcomers can't believe they're allowed to take away everything they want instantly. So they load themselves up until they can hardly move. The feeling wears off after a while, when they accept the fact that they really are in paradise."

We wandered along, looking in shop windows until the smell of coffee stopped us in our tracks.

"Coffee?" Pam suggested. "This is another of my favourite places, The Cosy Nook. Dreadful name, isn't it?"

Pam led me into the large fragrant cafe. The aromas of baking bread and espresso made my mouth water. The place seemed to be full, yet we found a table without any trouble and keyed our order into the pad. I settled for my usual pre-holiday treat – Danish pastries and an Americano.

"Good heavens, President Kennedy is sitting over there," I exclaimed, recognising a familiar face.

"Would you like to meet him?"

"Can I?" My eyes went wide with amazement.

"Of course. He's used to strangers coming over to shake his hand. He told me he'd miss it if it didn't happen."

So, unbelievably, I found myself shaking hands with the former President of the United States. He hasn't lost any of his charm. He asked me about myself and he seemed genuinely interested in my answers; he certainly hasn't stopped being a politician!

"Wow!" I kept repeating for a long while afterwards. Pam just laughed at me.

"Takes a bit of getting used to, doesn't it?"

"I never imagined I would meet someone like him without a security man in sight!"

Pam grinned. "No one needs security here or police or soldiers. The people, who enjoyed that type of work in their previous life, play war games or host murder mystery parties. The clues they think up are amazing. We'll go to one when we get time."

I kept looking around, spotting all the celebrities. Some musicians sat in one corner and film stars in another. I recognised Buddy Holly, Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland. One group wore hula shirts, as if they had just come off the beach and left their surfboards outside. Most of them seemed quite elderly, though, with white hair and long flowing beards.

"Who are those people?" I pointed to the group.

"We call them 'The Dead Poets Society', like in the film, because they are." Pam giggled. "Shakespeare's the one with the longest beard and the small man in the kilt, is Robert Burns. Doesn't go with his hula shirt, does it? Would you like to meet them as well?"

"Another day, perhaps." I felt utterly overwhelmed.

We left the coffee shop and strolled towards a tall pillar with mirrored sides.

"I want to find out how your family are getting on." Pam led me up to the abstract shape and touched a small panel set into the side.

"How can we do that?"

"Watch me," she said as she entered a code. "This is a portal or opening into the real world. It shows you what is happening, although you cannot go through it and you cannot be seen. Do you ever remember a feeling as if someone was looking at you but, when you turned round, no one was there?" I nodded. "That was when one of us was watching."

"That's creepy!"

"The first people who came here were very unhappy, not knowing anything about those they left behind. So these devices were invented. You are allowed one viewing a day."

A mirror cleared and we saw Mum and Dad sitting on the sofa at home. They had photograph albums piled all round them. Mum was crying and Dad had his arms around her. My sister said "Do you remember...?" and told the story about us falling overboard from the dinghy. They were smiling through their tears and I smiled with them. That Turkish holiday had been so much fun.

"Good." Pam nodded. "They're grieving for you, but they're also remembering the happy times you had together. The worst bit is accepting the fact you're really gone. Some people never do. Your parents and Fiona will be all right."

"I wish I could talk to them, tell them I'm here and not to worry."

"We'd all like to do so. If people found out about this place, they might stop doing the things they ought to do. Imagine. No one would fight disease. No one would bother to struggle for anything any more. What would be the point? Everyone needs to live out their lives in their own fashion. That's why we can never tell them."

"You're right, of course. We'd all act differently if we knew." I wondered if I would, though. I regretted very little in my life. Nothing tragic happened to me, until the operation. I didn't do anything dreadful and I hadn't needed to be heroic. Another thought struck me. "Did you say we can have one viewing a day?"

Pam nodded.

"You mean one each or one in total?"

"One each, but you're allowed to watch someone else's, if they let you."

Great! Just what I wanted to hear! Then I made my big mistake. "Can you show me how to do this, please? I want to see Michael. I miss him so much."

"Are you sure?" Pam's voice was full of sympathy. "It might make you feel worse, you know. He can't be very happy at the moment."

"I'm certain," I said with absolute confidence. She showed me how to enter the code and explained that I had to form a picture of Michael in my mind. Excitement throbbed deep inside me, as I imagined him the last time I saw him, beside my hospital bed. Perhaps, if I did this every day, I might learn to cope, while I waited for him to join me.

The screen cleared and we looked into Michael's bedroom, but the scene was dramatically different from the one I had been so fondly imagining. Michael wasn't crying distraught tears over losing me. Mandy lay stretched out under the sheet beside him and they had obviously just finished making love. My best friend was in bed with my boyfriend!

"I feel so guilty," Mandy said.

"You should, you bitch!" I screamed, wishing with all my heart that she could hear me.

"Ariane would want us to be happy," Michael told her, stroking her cheek, tenderly.

"No I don't!"

"Life goes on. If she was here now, she'd tell us so," Michael murmured.

"I was so scared she'd find out about us. I never wanted to hurt her."

Michael took her hand, the way he used to take mine. Then he said, "I wanted to tell her too, but she was so wrapped up planning in the wedding. How could I say that it was all off and I didn't love her any more?"

"Oh my God!" I shouted at the screen. "You're actually glad I'm dead, you shallow heartless creep." I started to cry and Pam put her arms round me. "I loved him," I sobbed. My voice ached as I uttered the words. "Mandy too. We've been friends ever since primary school. Why would she do this to me?"

"I'm sorry, darling."

"Nanna said nobody would hurt me in Heaven, and I believed her! She's never lied to me before."

"People in the real world can hurt you, if you let them. You're still involved at the moment. I forgot about that when you sounded so certain."

"Don't blame yourself. You didn't tell Michael and Mandy to go to bed together. Once I knew about the portal, I'd have used it, sooner or later!" My voice ended in a wail.

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"It's a shame, darling." Nanna fed me chocolate and white wine, the family cure for everything. "You can never tell about people."

"I thought he truly loved me." I couldn't stop crying. The floor was littered with wet tissues. Rory laid his head in my lap, trying to make me feel better.

"He probably did once," Pam said, "but some people move on quicker than others. If you had lived, you would have found out about Mandy eventually and been miserable."

I hated the thought of Michael loving someone else and he had even been cheating on me while we were still together! No way could he ever have loved me as much as I loved him. I was a piece of rubbish which he had used and then discarded.

"He didn't deserve a wonderful girl like you," Granddad said, bristling with anger. "Better you found out the kind of man he is and stop grieving over him. He's not worth your tears."

"We'd been together for nearly three years." My mind flooded with images. "I thought we were happy." I had never known Michael at all.

"If he was here, I'd tell him a thing or two," Granddad said.

"You big softie." I hugged him, smiling in spite of my tears, as I remembered him sorting out some bullies on the swings, when I was three. "I can fight my own battles now, you know."

"Atta girl!"

"More chocolate?" Pam offered. She hammered away, breaking up a huge slab that almost filled the table, but I shook my head.

"I think I'm chocolated-out."

"Never."

"I've had enough anyway for now. I feel a bit better for talking to all of you." I did, in a strange, weepy sort of way. Chocolate and sympathy had taken the edge off my shock. I still hurt, but, as my tears dried, my temper was rising.

"I'd like to haunt them! Do terrible things to them at the most embarrassing moments. Teach them not to forget about me."

Pam smiled. "I agree, but that's something you're not allowed to do, otherwise there'd be total mayhem. I know, because I wanted to haunt my old boss. Do you remember Karol the Bitch?"

"Yes. She was really horrid to you, wasn't she?"

Pam nodded. "I tried to be a Haunt to give her a hard time in return. Brenda saw through me, though, and packed me off to do something quite different. Good therapy, as it happened. I got so involved, I forgot all about Karol and the problems she caused me."

"You could do that too." Nanna glanced at me sharply. "If you stay here now, you'll keep peeking at Michael and Mandy and making yourself ill. Get a job and learn to forget."

"I don't want to forget," I protested and I didn't. The hurt was too raw and I couldn't believe anything would take away the horrible images in my mind.

"Of course you don't at the moment, but you will in the end."

"Nanna's giving you good advice," Granddad added. "Think about it?"

"What would I do?" I asked listlessly. I didn't want any more discussion. I was exhausted.

"Why not read those books Brenda gave you?"

"I will, but I'm so tired my eyes are closing. Would you mind if I went to bed?"

"Of course not. You'll be better after a sleep."

I went up to my room, but I could not fall asleep. My thoughts chased round in circles. Images of Michael and me, Mandy and me, and Michael and Mandy followed each other, never ceasing. I tried everything to break out of the spiral, but nothing worked. Eventually, I abandoned my bed, crept downstairs and found the bag of books that Brenda had given me. I started to read.

Day Four, Heaven.

"I've decided."

Brenda was sitting in the same place, drinking her wine and writing in one of her books. "Already? Goodness you're quick. Are you quite sure?" She seemed startled, but I nodded firmly.

"I'm one of those people who would rather get started immediately. I've only been dead a few days and the love of my life just got together with my best friend. He's not missing me as much as I'm missing him."

"That's awful, but you wouldn't want him to die though, just to be with you, would you?" Brenda looked at me with a frown.

"I might, to keep him out of her clutches! But really, I need to stop thinking about them and move on. My aunt, Pam, suggested I start work and I'm beginning to think she's right. Doing something new might make me forget."

"I'm sorry things turned out like this for you." Brenda sounded upset. "My own demise was much less exciting and I never had to deal with that particular problem. Going away might be the right thing in the circumstances, if we start you off with something interesting. If you don't like it, you can always change. You must give notice, of course, so we can get a replacement, but people arrive all the time and we never take long. What have you decided to do?"

"I'd like to be a Guardian, please," I said as firmly as I could. I was still shaking inside from all the emotion. My self-confidence had vanished and I was unsure how I would cope. Yet anything was better than moping around, with nothing to do except torture myself. Nanna and Pam were correct.

Brenda nodded. "I thought you might; you're the right type of person to be a Guardian and it's not so different from what you did before."

"Is that important?"

"Yes. It rarely works if people opt for a complete change in their first job. Imagine Nero as a Greeter, tenderly helping the deceased to pass over. He only lasted a day and we took ages to sort everything out. Some of his clients were paralysed with terror and couldn't speak. Are you positive you want to do this right now?"

"I am. I'd be so depressed if I stayed here, I'd make others unhappy around me."

"No one should be miserable in Heaven." Brenda gave an elaborate shudder. She pulled a large red book towards her with 'Guardians' stamped in gothic letters on the front. The first page had a list of names under the heading 'Urgent'.

"Now, do you have a time period in mind?"

I stared at her, feeling startled. "No. I thought it had to be the present, 2012."

She peered up at me over her glasses. "Oh no, that would never do at all. The world would be in a far worse mess if we couldn't send people back to sort out mistakes. Of course, we are not permitted to tamper with certain problems. Pity, I sometimes think."

"What kind of things is a Guardian allowed to do?"

"All sorts. She can prevent things happening; or people marrying the wrong person; or making bad decisions. Some of our most successful Guardians have changed the world. Flavia managed a series of accidents, so St Paul journeyed to Damascus instead of collecting taxes in Alexandria. She got several gold stars for that one. They're sparkling in Cassiopeia. Then Napoleon didn't invade England. His Guardian was standing beside him on the seashore, when he made the decision. Eustace was naughty and gave Napoleon a mental push at the right moment. Of course, he was a British spy during the Cold War, so he was used to taking risks."

"I always wanted to make world history but I didn't think I'd do so when I was dead!"

Brenda chuckled. "You never know, do you? Let's see." She ran her finger down the list. "Several Guardians want a change as soon as possible. Do you fancy Ancient Greece? No? A riot in Brazil needs stopping? How about Cyprus, looking after a new prophet? Personally I'd go for Greece if I were you. Think of all the sunshine and those bronzed bodies in short tunics, to say nothing of the ambrosia!"

I had a sudden vision of Brenda, who isn't slim, skipping around in a flimsy tunic. The thought made me blink.

"What do you think? Are you a warm weather person, or do you prefer the cold and grim?"

"I like sunshine but..."

"I know what you're going to say..." she interrupted me, "you want to do something worthwhile. Well, the prophet's important and so is the riot. Or there's my real favourite, which is bound to cheer you up."

"What's that?"

"I'd take the job myself, but I promised I'd stay here for a few decades because my assistant needs more training. An American president is about to be elected. He's dishy and he's fascinating to be with. An assassin's out to get him and it'd be your job to ensure he doesn't succeed. Think of all the wonderful dresses you could wear at the White House."

"I'm a bit off dishy men at the moment." I tried to keep the anger out of my voice. I'm not sure I succeeded, because she looked hurt. "I couldn't cope with anything like that right now. Hits too near home. None of those choices appeal to me." I hesitated. I wanted to be Michael's Guardian or Mandy's. No harm in asking, was there? Maybe Pam was mistaken.

"I'd like to look after a specific person."

"Michael, for example?" Brenda asked immediately and shook her head. "Most people ask that question and the answer is 'no'. I'm sorry but you wouldn't be objective and put the client's best

interest first. No one could. Think how you'd feel if he married your friend and they had children. You couldn't do your job properly. We have an unbreakable rule. Your client must be a stranger."

"Anyone will do then. You choose." I had to fight back my tears.

Brenda was watching me closely and her eyes watered in sympathy. "Everyone wants to be with those they love or hate, but, believe me; this is for the best. You would be looking backwards instead of forwards. When you meet Michael again, you won't be the same and neither will he. Everyone will have had different experiences. You might have met someone else, or decided to give up emotion for good, which makes life so much easier. You'll meet both of them again and you can tell them your feelings then, if you still want to."

How silly of me not to realise we would all be together someday. Perhaps I might not try to murder them, although, at this moment, I strongly doubted my self-control.

"Do you have a favourite period in History, or a place you want to work in?" Brenda interrupted my thoughts. "You can go anywhere, you know."

I thought hard for a moment or two. Then I had a sudden memory. I was sitting with my mother, while the rain was pouring down outside, looking at her old photographs. They had been taken in parks, at rock festivals and in street markets. I loved the pictures and the stories she told me.

"This might sound silly, but Mum lived in London during the Swinging Sixties. She was nineteen and she had a wonderful time."

"Yes. Such a colourful period, but the ban extends to mothers too, you know."

"If half the things she told me are true, I don't want to find out about the other half." I smiled at the thought.

"Very wise." Brenda pointed to a name on the page. "This girl might suit you. She's a little younger than you are and she's living in a workers' hostel in Euston Road in 1967. She needs to make an important choice in the next six months. If she doesn't, a vital medical discovery won't be made. This is an urgent case. Her present Guardian is needed to sort out a ship's captain, who is going to poison half of Alaska. What do you think?"

"Sounds interesting." At least I would have a chance to find out if the Sixties were as much fun as I'd imagined. "I'll do it. What's her name?"

"Gigi, short for Birgitta. Her father is Norwegian. Her mother comes from Antigua, so she's a bit of a mixture. Sign here please."

Brenda handed me the quill pen and I wrote 'Ariane' awkwardly in the column marked 'Guardians'.

"Why on Earth do you use a quill?" I surveyed the large blot at the end of my name with annoyance. "Wouldn't an ordinary pen be better?"

"This is another of the things we haven't changed yet. The Records Department is so stuffy," Brenda told me. "Now..." She handed me a chit. "Take this to Costume and they'll kit you out. Then you have to go to Angels Central for your Action Pack." She rose and held out her hand. "Have a wonderful

time and don't worry. Your first assignment is always exciting and terrifying at the same time, but I'm certain you'll do a good job and have fun. Best of luck."