

## Prologue

**E**xcited...that's how he felt and terrified, confused, nauseated...so many emotions and sensations coursing through his body. Rusty stopped and took a deep breath, sweat beading on his brow. There was so much to be done and the days to the grand opening growing shorter. Rusty blushed with shame. In his office located in the lower depths of the museum, he had just yelled at his assistant Leanne, a woman with clipped hair as efficient looking as she was at her job. Lashing out wasn't like him but the pressure had built. The release was akin to a whaler's hearty, "Thar she blows."

"I'm having a conniption fit," Rusty had cried.

"That's redundant," Leanne had replied calmly.

"Now I'm redundant," he had shrieked miserably.

Rusty was medium height, had wavy reddish hair and light blue eyes. His ex-wife, for she was that now, had once told him he looked like Kevin Costner. He had shaken his head at such a comparison mainly because he had no idea who Kevin Costner was. She had pointed out the actor to him one evening in their Seattle home when Costner's Oscar winning movie, *Dances with Wolves*, aired on television. Rusty couldn't see the resemblance but it seemed to please her and sex that night was better than ever.

Rusty was no longer living in Washington State. He was a recent transplant to Simi Valley, California, having accepted a job as the curator of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Set atop a mountain, the charming Spanish mission style building had a panoramic view of rolling mountains, distant farmlands, and blue haze of ocean 30 miles away.

He was at the facility now standing in the small lobby between the gift shop on his left and a pocket gallery on his right. This was not the main entrance to the museum with a spacious lobby and marble walls etched with names of donors rather a lobby to the special exhibit gallery.

Next to the pocket gallery was an arched opening where visitors would exit after a tour of the museum. Before passing under the archway, one would encounter a cozy room with cushioned benches and a video screen. The video that played was a four-minute wrap up of President Reagan's life with snippets of his years as an actor, as governor of California, and of his speech that aided in the bringing down of the Berlin Wall. One of Rusty's favorite clips on the video was President Reagan reading a letter he received while he was in the hospital recovering from the assassination attempt that almost ended his life. Demonstrating his strong will and determination, the President walked out of the hospital 12 days later. He had even joked to his frantic wife about the near fatal event saying, "Honey, I forgot to duck."

A month after the incident, members of the House of Representatives and the Senate assembled in the congressional chamber. After the sergeant-at-arms announced, "Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States" to the gathering, President Reagan walked into the chamber to wild and heartfelt cheers and a standing ovation. The President took the podium, acknowledging the cheers with a modest blush on his face. Always finding the humor in any situation, he then read the letter as part of his speech. The letter was from a second-grade student who had written to the President when he was in the hospital. The boy wrote that he hoped the President

would recover soon or he might have to make a speech in his pajamas. The assemblage laughed, relieved that the President had indeed recovered and was back at work with his usual good cheer.

Rusty's mood was anything but cheerful. He was fretting over the task at hand...his baby, his show, his vision. He was staring at the white double doors that opened to the special exhibit gallery that housed his new project. His panic rose. Breathe, he told himself. He had worked like a demon to bring all the artifacts together for the exhibit. In that lie the problem, they had not all arrived, and the installation was not completed. Breathe again. It was only Friday; he reminded himself. You still have time to pull it together for the Monday opening.

The upheaval that had led to this moment went through his mind in a flash. He had been on the job for three months and, admittedly, was still getting his bearings. It was a big undertaking, more demanding than he had anticipated. The previous curator, Nelson Orlando, had been his roommate at college years before. Professionally, they had stayed connected through the years. Nelson had overseen the installation of the *Titanic* exhibit that had closed two months ago. He had recommended Rusty as his replacement and Rusty had flown from Washington to California for the interview. The divorce had upended his world and, although he didn't want to admit it, he was perfectly on track for a mid-life crisis. His mind had swirled trying to figure out what he had done wrong. To please her, he had given up a job he loved as curator of a quaint western museum for a high paying tech job. He had given up his artistic ambitions that he had trained for in college with a master's degree in art, history, and museum studies. Then she complained that he didn't have time for her. The high-tech job was demanding, and he was working long hours. It was true. He couldn't please her no matter what he did.

Rusty felt himself wilting inside his wool tweed suit. He loosened his periwinkle blue tie he perceived as choking him. He couldn't remember when he had eaten last. Did he have breakfast?

Yes, he must have on the run. He now questioned his decision to take the job, but truthfully, the job offer was like a lighthouse beacon to a ship in a foggy sea. Cecilia Babcock, the Presidential Library's Executive Director, had interviewed him, her unflinching brown eyes boring into him. She must be in her late sixties now, he had thought at the time, but age had not diminished her forthright demeanor. Anyone looking into those stern eyes wanted to please her. Rusty couldn't remember what he had said during the interview. He must have said all the right things. That, along with his degree, work experience and recommendation from Nelson, gave him the green light. A week later, he was pinning a tag with the Presidential Library logo, his name, and a geeky looking photograph of himself on his jacket lapel. As much as he hated the picture, he hated the display of his full name...Henry Rutherford Ruskowski. The name Henry was bad enough but middle name Rutherford? The only other Rutherford anybody knew was Rutherford B. Hayes who served as the 19th President of the United States from 1877 to 1881. Rusty loved history and knew President Hayes got a bad rap because of his name, he felt the same. Luckily, his hair color and last name gave him plenty of ammunition to claim "Rusty" as a nickname.

He had left the Seattle house to his ex-wife so that his nine-year-old son would have a stable home. Rusty had made sure, at the boy's birth, that he would have a sensible name...John. Rusty's only regret, on moving to California, was that he wouldn't be able to see John as often as he wanted.

As curator, Rusty was responsible for the museum proper. Fortunately to his mind as far as workload, his duties did not include the Air Force One pavilion featuring the mighty Boeing 707 airplane with United States of America blazed across the white and silver livery. However, he was also responsible for special exhibits that were temporary lasting several months before another one opened. The exhibits were on assorted subjects such as the lost cities of Egypt, the destruction of Pompeii, the Mongolian Emperor Genghis

Khan and, most recently, the eye-catching exhibit of the doomed ship *Titanic*.

Nelson had left before the *Titanic* exhibit closed and it had been Rusty's job to see that the closing went smoothly. His task was returning the relics to their lenders, a delicate undertaking given that many were the precious belongings of those involved with the tragedy and now owned by a family member.

In 1912, on her maiden voyage, the so-called "unsinkable" luxury liner sank after striking an iceberg. Indeed, the unimaginable happened. The ship sank into the icy waters, the tragedy compounded by human error when, in the ensuing panic, lifeboats were not used to capacity. Since that time, explorers had sought to find the wreckage on the bottom of the ocean. Robert Ballard, a modern-day deep-sea explorer, would be the person to answer the question of the ship's location. Remarkably, the quest had a connection to President Ronald Reagan. The presentation in the special exhibit gallery, if possible, strove to have some sort of connection with the President. In 1985, when Reagan was in office, the U.S. Navy engaged Ballard and his team to find two small nuclear-powered submarines that had sunk years earlier in the North Atlantic. Ballard was able to find the subs and then expand his search. Within the general area where the subs sank, Ballard found the Holy Grail of the ocean.

Now, it was Rusty's turn to mount an exhibit of historical importance to interest museum goers. Additionally, he hoped, dazzle and amaze them. Nelson had not only presented items on display, but he had also created a *story*, the unfolding of the quest to find the *Titanic* and personalized those affected by the tragedy.

On the upper level of the exhibit had been artifacts of the survivors such as diaries, letters, and personal items. There were no actual relics from the lost ship following a law signed by President Reagan in 1986, inadvertently another connection to the exhibit. The R.M.S. *Titanic* Maritime Memorial Act prohibited removing,

injuring, or selling *Titanic* property to ensure that no one disturbed items on the sunken ship or items scattered on the ocean floor.

Yet there were relevant items on display such as the only known complete set of boarding tickets unused by a passenger who had missed the boat. Rusty found particularly poignant sheet music of *Narcissus* that belonged to Wallace Hartley, the *Titanic*'s bandleader. He had refused to stop playing even as the ship began to sink.

Nelson had incorporated sets and costumes from director James Cameron's 1997 movie *Titanic*. On the lower level was a stateroom with period furniture that gave the visitor the feel of what it was like to inhabit such a luxury room. Rusty had especially liked the part of the exhibit that looked as if it were underwater by an ingenious use of lighting. This display featured an exact replica of a debris field from the ship...dishes, spoons, vases, bowls, binoculars, jewelry...on the sandy ocean floor.

Rusty's exhibit and Nelson's exhibit shared a common theme as both centered on a magnificent ship assaulted by treacherous icebergs. Woefully, the *Titanic*'s collision with an iceberg caused a catastrophic injury to the ship's hull that doomed her to a watery grave. The ship in Rusty's tale miraculously, impossibly, escaped icy destruction. His new exhibit would be testament to the ship's tenacity and perhaps will to survive. While the ship survived, Rusty thought grimly, many onboard did not and were lost in a frozen wasteland.

As he mulled things over, Rusty's artistic juices were tingling. He wanted to paint the picture of this incredible tale with all its passion, longing, and loss. He wanted to impress the public with his creation and, most sincerely as his boss, Ms. Babcock. She was a woman not easily impressed he could tell. Years before, she had been on staff in the Reagan White House and then involved in the creation of the museum working with the President in selecting the artifacts on display. She was a friend of Mrs. Reagan whom she had telephoned once a week after President Reagan passed in 2004. How

does one impress a woman with such a résumé Rusty wondered? He could easily find himself abruptly unemployed.

His canvas for the historical masterpiece would be the National Treasure Gallery and the Mary Jane Wick Gallery, the formal names of the special exhibit rooms. The 10,000 square foot gallery was newly renovated from a temporary space with a tarp roof (that Nelson had told him flapped like a mainsail when the valley winds blew) to a permanent room made of steel beams and mortar.

As he stood there worrying and wondering from inside the white double doors, he heard the whine of power saws and pounding of hammers. The workers were busy building the installations. The flats and walls were finally going up like a stage show. Still, with so many working parts, the task was daunting. He had labored to borrow from many prestigious museums and finicky collectors the artifacts that would tell the tale. Unlike the *Titanic* collection whose artifacts were not from the sunken ship, these were the genuine articles belonging to the person and to the ship. It gave Rusty a shiver just thinking about it; each item was a precious time capsule of the past. He wanted his show to be spectacular, a tour de force. He had a few tricks up his sleeve to make the presentation awesome.

The *Titanic* exhibit had been a huge success and generated record attendance. Rusty aimed to top that. He had a sensational story, one with danger, pride, desire, destruction and even murder. Headlines at the time of the incident read, *it was one of the most miraculous voyages ever to take place*. Rusty thought it true, for this story involved the voyage of a ghost ship trapped by icebergs in a region of uncompromising cold.

## Chapter 1

*Friday October 29 (morning)*

*Searing heat. The dust, the color of yellow puke, plumed obscuring her view. The flapping sound of the rotors pounded. Yet even with the volume, she could hear the cries of the men. Shouts. Wails. And the ever-present rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire. She was at the controls. The UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter descending. She couldn't see where she was landing and prayed it wasn't on top of a wounded soldier or a structure, one in jagged ruins after hit by mortar shells. Then she felt the hard thud as the helicopter hit the ground. Not a smooth landing by any means but a landing none the same and on solid ground, that was a blessing. The medic onboard was shouting out the open hatch. The dust kicked up by the rotors subsided somewhat enabling her to see through the drifts the soldiers manning a low wall. They were firing at some unseen enemy, from her point of view, far in the distance. Suddenly, as they always are, an explosion nearby shook the helicopter. There was incoming fire. The Taliban or ISIS or another hateful group were aiming at the Americans and their Afghan comrades. It always amazed her that the enemy, often seen as threadbare beggars, was raining down such destruction with mortar shells and firepower. The soldiers on the wall were running toward her helicopter, she saw them through the drifts of yellow sand. She was sweating profusely, her breathing in gasps. The sand whirled around, cooked by the heat of the day. She prayed the insidious dust wouldn't find its way into the engine disabling it for sure.*

*The soldiers were carrying a wounded man, blood gushing from his left leg. The medic pulled the wounded soldier inside and, using a strap, cut off the blood to stop the bleeding. She saw in a flash the other soldiers scramble inside the helicopter. She worried that the added weight would prevent the helicopter from rising. She moved the controls for lift off. Shakily, the helicopter rose, teetering. Once again, the dust and sand obscured her view. Then, an explosion - the sound all-consuming. The fire and heat engulfed the helicopter and then a last gasp before blackout.*

Whitney Toner bolted up from bed. She was in a cold sweat. She had that dream again, why always that dream? She took several deep breaths and told herself that it wasn't real. It didn't happen that way. It was true that she had been the pilot of a Black Hawk and participated in a NATO-led mission called *Resolute Support* launched in January 2015 to provide assistance for the Afghan security forces. All that sounded reasonable on paper, but things get messy in war. She was on a mission to take out the enemy in the volatile Kharwar district. She was at the controls to rescue a patrol pinned down by the Taliban. The Americans and their comrades had climbed onboard even Private First-Class Eugene Bull, who had suffered a grievous leg wound, had been loaded onboard by his fellow soldiers. Later, the field doctors had amputated his leg, but he had survived. *They all had survived.* The helicopter had lifted into the sky amid a volley of machine gun fire. She had seen the sky, the bright blue sky. The helicopter had lifted higher and higher. She had rescued the soldiers and landed safely at home base. Every soldier on that mission had survived that day. Then why did her dream, her nightmare, always end with the helicopter exploding and everyone onboard, including her, killed?

Whitney shook her head, she didn't know. Her mother said that she was suffering from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. Whitney didn't want to hear such nonsense. She most certainly didn't have an "acronym" syndrome. There was no reason to have nightmares, she told herself. She was out of the Army now. She had

put in her four years. She had done her duty as a helicopter pilot. She had risen in rank and then she had ended it with an honorable discharge. She hadn't reenlisted. It was over. She was home now, in California. She was home, staying with her mother. Okay, that was a problem, but it was temporary. She would get her own place as soon as she figured out what she wanted to do next.

Maybe that was the problem. She didn't know what she wanted to do with her life. She had sought out adventure when she joined the Army. She had always been a tenacious child growing up...into sports, hiking, and swimming...you name it; if it had a challenge, she did it. The Army was a big challenge and, assigned to serve in Afghanistan, bigger yet. Whitney didn't have any regrets. She had risen to the challenge and done her duty. She hadn't flinched or played the "woman" card when things got tough, as in "I can't do it because I'm female." Just the opposite had been her mantra..."I can do it *because* I'm a woman." Now it was over...over, she reminded herself.

Whitney threw off the bedcovers and stood up, feeling dizzy. Maybe she was coming down with something. The flu was going around. That was probably it. That was the reason she was having nightmares. She shuffled across the room into the bathroom looking into the mirror. That was a mistake. She was wearing an Army T-shirt and checkered pajama bottoms. She thought to herself that she should buy something feminine...a frilly negligée.

Whitney laughed at herself. She never pictured herself in lacy nightwear. Maybe she should explore her feminine side, not that she had manly mannerisms, although she did tend to speak directly, coyness wasn't her thing. She had had a backbone before the Army and military training only added to her resolve. Then why was she looking at her reflection seeing a face with sad eyes and a trembling chin? It was an attractive face when properly washed and scrubbed. She had more of her father's Italian genes (a strong face with high cheekbones and olive skin) than her mother's Irish ones with delicate features and fair complexion she mused. Not only that

Whitney was tall and slender. Her mother was petite and, at age sixty-one, plump in the middle. Whitney always had worn her lush hair short; her mother had long waist length hair, once reddish brown, now turned silver. Her eyes were blue. Whitney's eyes were brown. Many times, her mother had joked that she had taken the wrong baby home from the hospital because of the difference in their physical characteristics. Then Whitney would laugh. Her mother would see that smile, the same smile she had and know that Whitney was indeed her daughter...beloved and cherished.

Whitney peeled off her clothes and took a cold shower. The tingling cold revived her and made her feel better. After toweling off, she dressed in comfortable jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. Her mother had told her that she looked like a lumberjack in the outfit. Whitney didn't see what was wrong with that. Her mother preferred feminine looking outfits. Well, she wasn't like her mother who mostly dressed in lavender and pink. The style in clothes wasn't the only thing that differentiated mother and daughter. Whitney was athletic while her mother was artistic, not that an artist can't be athletic, Whitney considered, but it was a different lifestyle. Her mother painted pictures using oil paints. She wrote books for children that she illustrated and novels for adults. Whitney envied her mother's talent, a talent that she hadn't inherited. Her talent was in the ability to smack a soccer ball, swim a fast lap or climb one of the nearby boulder-dotted mountains surrounding the valley, with ease. Each to her own, she sighed, as she closed the door on her room, the same room she had grown up in as a child. Whitney didn't know if staying in her childhood room was a step forward or backward. In a way, she felt like she was back at the beginning, never having ventured out into the world. She reminded herself that the room deal was only temporary. She suppressed a flash from her nightmare. Flashbacks! Proof, she supposed, that she had ventured out into the world. What she was going to do next was the question. Well, she did have a job...starting that night.

A temporary job until...yes, *until you figure out*...she cut off her thought. She didn't want to hear herself telling herself that again.

Whitney tripped lightly down the stairway. As she neared the bottom, she smelled the enticing aroma of freshly brewed coffee. She walked through the living room populated with once stylish furniture into the kitchen finding her mother sitting at the cozy island with a mug of coffee in her hand, her favorite mug with the inscription, *Artists Do It with Panache*.

Her mother, Annabelle Toner, started in without missing a beat. "I'm on my third cup. I'm so nervous with all that's going on today. I really shouldn't drink coffee at all. It goes right through me. I'm gonna be tinkling all day long."

"Good morning, mother, nice to see you, too," said Whitney as she crossed to the counter where coffee warmed in a glass pot.

Bright morning light was coming through the large window above the sink that looked over the backyard, surprisingly green after the bone-dry spell. Apparently, an autumn rain during the night had worked botanical magic. If Whitney were fanciful, she might imagine her mother with sunlight on her silvery hair and sitting on the tall stool looking like a fairy perched on a mushroom.

"Well, I was just saying I'm nervous."

"It's all going to be fine."

"Easy for you to say," Annabelle said to her daughter. She then added with a sigh, "No, you're right. It's going to be fine."

Whitney turned with a mock surprised look. "I'm right! Can we have that engraved on a mug?"

"Don't get too sassy, my girl. It's a one-time thing," Annabelle said pertly. "You're right in that why should I worry. I really have nothing to do with it anymore. I did my part. I wrote the show and now it's up to the actors to pull it off."

"I'm sure they will," said Whitney, turning back to the counter to pour the coffee.

"I'm sure they will, too. They're all wonderful actors and not only that; they love doing the show."

“Educational and fun so said the newspaper ads, ads paid for by the library no doubt.”

Annabelle smiled. “Yes, my show presented at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Pretty neat, huh, for an aging artist?”

“Pretty neat,” said Whitney, looking over her shoulder.

“I’m bringing doughnuts for the docents today,” said Annabelle. “It’s not my turn to bring in the refreshments, but I wanted to celebrate the opening of the show. Have one. They’re by the fridge.”

Whitney looked over at two bright pink boxes resting on the counter by the refrigerator. “Don’t tempt me,” she said.

Whitney leaned against the counter taking a sip of the hot brew that tasted wonderful. Just what she needed.

Her mother glanced over. “You could use a little weight. You’re as skinny as a rail.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Lean and mean, I like to think.”

“Well, I’ll give you the lean, but I don’t think you’re mean.”

Whitney smiled. She was proud of her mother’s achievements. Annabelle had pulled off what one might characterize as the crown jewel of her modest artistic career. A show at the Presidential Library put her in the national spotlight. Oh, not in a big way, not like events at the library such as hosting the 2015 Presidential debate where 16 candidates for the Republican nomination duked it out standing in front of Air Force One. The debate’s host, CNN, had built a platform from the first floor of the pavilion to the third floor on level with the airplane. It was an engineering marvel of rigging, lights, and cameras as far as Annabelle was concerned. Amazingly, it had gone up in two days and taken down in two days after.

The library hosted many national events such as lectures from noted speakers in politics and education, seminars on serious topics and book signings. The facility was a busy place, aided by four hundred volunteers, assigned stations in the museum proper and in the AFO pavilion. Annabelle was a docent there and gave tours to schoolchildren. Each docent selected a morning or afternoon shift to

volunteer. In addition, a docent could sub on any shift and help with special events. Annabelle was on the Friday morning shift.

“Are you taking the day off?” Whitney asked her mother.

“I thought about it, but I might as well go in and do something useful instead of sitting here getting all nerved up waiting for tonight. Like I said, my job is done. The show opens tonight. Rusty and Jessica are in charge now.”

Whitney knew that Rusty was the new curator at the library, but she had not met him. Jessica was her mother’s associate and a producer and director at the local cultural arts center.

On that serene morning, as mother and daughter sipped coffee, each drifted in thought. Whitney was thinking of the errands she needed to run, food she liked, exercising...any topic that didn’t involve that dream or the paramount question...what was she doing with her life?

Annabelle was thinking back on her artistic journey. Jessica had been involved in this part of it. The frizzy haired woman of Jewish heritage had boundless energy and seemed to have multiple theater productions going on at the same time. How she kept up with all of it mystified Annabelle. The two women had a long working relationship, as they were the co-creators of the *Ghost Tour at Strathearn Park*, an annual event at Halloween. The ghost tour had run for 20 years on the three weekends before Halloween in a unique park with original structures from the pioneer era. Such buildings included the late 1800’s Strathearn family house built on the land that was now the park. A quaint striped pole barbershop and a charming white clapboard church were both icons in the community and saved from destruction when moved to the park. During the tour, a docent from the local Historical Society would take the “flight” (a group of 25-30 attendees) to each of the thirteen sites around the park to meet a ghost.

The ghosts represented pioneers, swindlers, early Spanish settlers and the original inhabitants, the Chumash. As a playwright, Annabelle had written the scenes for the ghosts throughout the

years. Each ghost told the audience about his or her life, a blend of humor and historical facts. For a sleepy community, many oddball characters had lived in Simi Valley named after *Simiiyi*, the Chumash word for wispy white clouds. One such character was Krishna Venta, a self-proclaimed prophet and leader of a mysterious cult in the 1950's known as the "Fountain of the World." His "spiritual" community was in Box Canyon on the outskirts of the city. Venta claimed he was from a planet called Neophrates and lived on the Earth for over two hundred thousand years. It was possible that Venta came from another planet; his ideas were certainly out of this world. Unfortunately, for Venta, his body blasted out of this world in an explosion set off by his disgruntled male followers for "enlightening" their wives. The blast was so powerful it leveled the cult's compound and blew the firefighters, sleeping in a fire station across the road, out of bed.

After a twenty-year run, the show ended much to the sorrow of the community and those involved with the production.

Now Annabelle had moved on to another project billed as *A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM – WHEN THE GHOSTS OF THE PAST COME TO LIFE!*

The event featured prominent historical figures among them Thomas Jefferson, Abigail and John Adams, Harriet Tubman, and George Washington; fifteen ghosts in various rooms within the museum proper.

Annabelle had first presented the project in a proposal to curator Nelson Orlando. He loved the idea and championed it to the senior staff, but it had taken two years for Executive Director Babcock to give the "go-ahead."

After all the rehearsals with the actors, the gathering of costumes and re-writes on Annabelle's part, it was finally happening.

Tonight, was opening night!

"What's wrong?" Annabelle asked Whitney. Whitney looked pensive as she stared into space. "You look tired," she added.

"I'm just contemplating...should I eat a doughnut or not?"

“That’s not all,” said Annabelle insistently.

“Jelly or glazed?”

“No, it’s something else.”

Whitney shrugged. “What else?”

“You know I’m psychic. I can always tell when something isn’t right.”

“I know. You’re annoying.”

Her remark failed to deter Annabelle. “Is it that dream again?”

“I’m sorry I told you about it in the first place,” said Whitney vexed.

“You won’t admit that you have PT...”

Whitney cut her off. “Would you stop,” she cried. “I’m perfectly fine. I have my own show tonight, remember?”

“I’m shocked you would call it a show.”

“I start a new job tonight so that should end any worry.”

“You carrying around a .45 that makes me worry.”

“It’s part of the job, mom. It’s not as if I don’t know how to use a weapon. I’m licensed with all the bells and whistles.”

Annabelle put down her mug, getting red faced. “I know you are. I’m proud of your service in the Army you know that. Despite being in a state of fright for four years anticipating that horrible knock on the door...”

Whitney could hear the words herself, the mantra spoken by the Casualty Notification Officers sent to inform the family. *On the behalf of the Secretary of Defense, I extend to you and your family my deepest sympathy in your great loss.* The words had gone unspoken in her case but not for others...not for others.

“It nearly gave me a heart attack like your father,” cried Annabelle continuing her tirade.

Whitney’s father had died of a heart attack ten years ago. He never missed a sports event when Whitney played even if it meant closing his local home and garden business to attend.

Whitney said sarcastically, “Okay, mom, it’s my opening night. Security guard at the Presidential Library. Whoopee.”

“Whoopee!” her mother repeated more enthusiastically. “It’s a good job and, who knows, it may lead to something else, bigger and better.”

“I just want to get through one night and your ghost tour,” said Whitney. She drained her cup. “There’s going to be a lot of people there.”

Annabelle perked up. “You think so? The library did advertise, but just in the *Acorn*. I hope we get a good crowd maybe a hundred or so. I have no idea. If no one shows, it’s gonna be a flop.”

“People love ghosts, people love Halloween, you’ve said so yourself about a billion times.”

“Well, I love Halloween,” said Annabelle brightly. “It’s the time of year when ghosts come out to play.”

“You’ve got ghosts playing at the library tonight,” said Whitney teasingly.

“Yes, I do,” said Annabelle standing. “Oh, crap, look at the time.” She was looking at the Felix the Cat clock, the cat’s eyes shifting back and forth to the ticks.

Just like her mother to have such a whimsical clock, Whitney told herself. The kooky clock had been there on the wall since her childhood. Funny, how you remember things. When she was in Afghanistan and thought of home, she always saw that clock in her mind’s eye.

“I’ve got to get dressed for docent duty,” said Annabelle, crossing to her daughter. She took her by the shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, mom,” Whitney said tiresomely. “I wish you would stop asking.”

Annabelle smiled. “Yes, all right. I’ll stop...for now.”

“I’ll see you later,” said Whitney, shaking her head.

Annabelle crossed the room going into the living room and called through the archway. “Have a chocolate covered raspberry-filled donut.”

“I prefer a plain glazed,” Whitney called after her.

“You never listen to your mother,” called Annabelle.

“That’s right.”

“I love you anyway.”

“I love you anyway, too.”

After her mother went up the stairs, Whitney opened one pink box, making the selection. She took the chocolate jelly-filled treat, biting into it. Her mother was right; it was delicious. Then why wasn’t she enjoying it? Why were tears rolling down her face?