

Brianna Michaels unexpectedly receives a surprising phone call which sets into motion the struggle for control of a family estate. Her emotional journey leads to the discovery of shocking family secrets which changes the course of her life.

FAMILY SECRETS

By Beth Diane Havens

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FAMILY SECRETS



BETH DIANE HAVENS

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Chapter 1:

The Phone Call

“Ellie’s dead.”

“What?”

“Ellie died. I just got off the phone with Aunt Bea.”

“What happened?”

“Heart attack.”

I held the phone away from my mouth. “Kevin”, I called to my husband. “Ellie’s dead!” “What?” he called back. I motioned for him to come listen in while I put my phone on speaker.

“Why did Aunt Bea call you but not me?” I asked my sister Karen.

“She asked me to call you. Said she didn’t have your phone number.”

Snobby and pretentious Aunt Bea. She had my number. Pretty and intelligent, and in no uncertain terms she let you know it. Married a wealthy businessman, had two children of her own,

lived a comfortably luxurious life. She filled her time involved in the elite “art scene”, with no apparent talent of her own. The baby sister to my father, Fred Bernard, who died ten years earlier from his third and final bout with cancer. Still a relatively young man at the time, mid 60’s, who could never kick the cigarette habit. Bea worshiped her older brother, but for the life of me I could never understand why. My dad, who abandoned his wife and two young children to run off to Mexico with his secretary, divorced our mom, and married wife #2. Leaving our mom to go back to work, barely able to put food on the table and keep a roof over our heads. His second marriage was doomed to failure from the start, ending in divorce in less than a year. We never even met her.

“When did Ellie die?”

“I think Bea said about a week ago.”

“And we’re just finding out about this now?”

“Well, she kept leaving me messages at work, but I was too busy to talk to her. Besides, I can’t stand her anyway.”

“Neither can I.”

“Would you believe she tried to get me to buy some art pieces?”

“I’m not surprised. So, what happened?”

“Seems that Ellie’s boyfriend found her unresponsive and called paramedics. EMT tried to revive her but she was pronounced dead when they arrived at the hospital.”

“Ellie had a boyfriend?”

“Somebody named Elmer.”

“Elmer?”

“Yeah, funny name, right? Bea said Elmer didn’t know who to contact so he went ahead and had her buried in the plot next to dad. Elmer claimed that he found her phone number afterwards and called her then. She wasn’t sure she believed him.”

Dad’s third wife Ellie (Eleanor was her birth name but she much preferred Ellie), petite, bleached-blond hair, perfect makeup, had been a dedicated career woman, underwriter for a major life insurance company, for decades before she and dad retired to upstate New York. After dad passed, I called Ellie

from time-to-time, but it always seemed to be a one-way street. Our conversations were brief. Ellie never had all that much to say, except for the time when she confessed that she took a driving class and got her license. She'd always depended upon dad to drive, never needing a car when she worked in the city, but living in the country was a different story. Over time, I called less often, but we still regularly exchanged holiday and birthday cards. Karen didn't have any contact with her at all.

"So where do we go from here, Brianna?" Karen wanted to know, impatience in her tone.

"I think I recall dad saying something to me before he died about them having Wills. But he never got around to sending me a copy. I'll call Bea and get this Elmer's phone number and ask what he knows."

"Sounds good to me. I've gotta go. Keep me informed."

We were always so different, me and Karen. She with the straight silky honey-blond hair, hazel eyes, slim figure, a social butterfly. Never took anything too seriously. Somehow managed to disappear when chores needed to be done. Math came naturally to her, so she pursued her accounting degree

and worked her way into the investment world. I, on the other hand, had curly dark-brown frizzy hair, dark brown eyes, stocky build, a book worm. Mom often told me I took things too seriously, but I was the dependable one, who was always home when she needed something done: laundry, cleaning, cooking, mowing. Reading and writing were my strengths, so I pursued Journalism, worked at several newspapers over the years, ultimately landed with a publishing company as an editor, much preferring the solitude of that position.

Kevin Michaels and I met in our senior year at college through mutual friends. He was an engineering and computer science major, smart and witty in a quiet way, medium build, curly dark hair, with pools of dark brown eyes. We instantly fit together like two peas in a pod. We pursued our careers while raising two sons, moved several times for job opportunities, cheered on and traveled with our sons for ice hockey tournaments through high school and college, took family trips for hiking, camping, kayaking, and skiing adventures. More recently we celebrated their marriages and births of their own children. Over 40 years later, Kevin and I still marvel at how we managed

to ride the crazy ups and downs of our lives together. Our bond grown stronger than ever.

Karen eventually became a shrewd Wall Street whiz, stayed cheerfully single, seeking out and traveling within the New York “trendy” scene. Karen was always crazy about my boys, enjoyed showering them with gifts at birthdays and holidays, happy not to have any of her own. I love her dearly. But how easily over the years she has continued to pass the baton of family responsibilities to me. Willingly or not, I have always accepted them. Now another baton was passed, one that I unenthusiastically knew would be left for me to manage. I called Bea’s number. She answered immediately.

“Hello dearie! How are you?”

“I’m fine Aunt Bea.”

“I am doing exceptionally well! I’m running another art gallery in town, one with the most exquisite pieces produced by a wonderfully talented young group of up-and-coming artists. Karen might be interested in purchasing a piece.”

“So, I understand that Ellie died?”

“Well yes, Ellie died suddenly. So sad. She and I had been in touch frequently, especially after Freddie died. She was reluctant to talk about this boyfriend of hers, some local-yokel. I think she was embarrassed to tell me that she was dating someone. Perhaps she thought I would be upset that she had moved on after your father died. After all, Freddie was irreplaceable. She never seemed really happy again.”

I rolled my eyes but needed to keep the conversation going and figure out my next steps. Kevin quietly chuckled.

“I know that dad told me they each had a Will. Do you know anything about that?”

“I don’t know anything about their Wills. Did you know your cousin Joshua got a fantastic offer for a VP position from a big hedge fund firm in California? He’ll do very well there!”

“That’s great Aunt Bea. Do you have a phone number for this Elmer? Perhaps he can help me.”

“Yes, here’s his number.” She read it off to me. “He called me a few days after Ellie’s funeral. He claimed he didn’t know if there was any family to contact, so he went ahead with a basic

funeral and burial. Said he found my name and phone number tacked to Ellie's fridge. He wants to be reimbursed for the funeral and burial expenses, but I told him I have nothing to do with that."

"Thanks Aunt Bea. I will call him now."

"Goodbye dearie. Speak to your sister about purchasing some artwork."

After I hung up, I turned to Kevin. "Wow, this is really strange."

Kevin shook his head. "I guess we'll have to figure out what's next."

I took a deep breath and called Elmer's number. Kevin continued to listen in.

"Hello, Elmer? This is Brianna Michaels, Fred Bernard's daughter."

There was a slight hesitation on the other end. "Oh, um, yes, this is Elmer."

"I'm calling about Ellie. Bea gave me your phone number."

"Yes, I did call her."

“Well, I figured I would get in touch with you. To find out what happened.”

Elmer explained what happened the night Ellie died. He was with her when she sat up in the middle of the night, sweating profusely, clutching her chest, ghostly pale. Elmer wanted to call for an ambulance, but she refused. She said she looked a mess, her hair undone, no makeup on, didn't want anyone to see her that way. Vain Ellie to the bitter end, I thought.

“I went to get her a glass of water. When I returned, she was passed out on the bed. That's when I called for an ambulance. The EMT guys did their best to revive her, rushed her to the hospital, but she was pronounced dead upon arrival. Massive coronary.”

“How awful. I'm sorry you had to deal with that.”

Elmer blew out a shaky breath. “It was a shock.”

“How long have you known Ellie?”

“Oh, a number of years,” Elmer guardedly replied.

“Did you know my father?” I pressed.

More hesitation. "Yes, I knew him too."

"Did Ellie or my dad ever mention me and my sister Karen?"

"I believe he did mention you. Ellie didn't say much. Sometimes she mentioned her sister-in-law, Bea."

"How was the funeral?"

"A few of her friends showed up for the service. It was short, and then she was buried. Right next to your father."

"My husband and I can head upstate tomorrow morning. Do you have a key to the house?"

"Yes. I've been bringing in her mail whenever I can get over there. I live on the other side of town. You'll find it all on the kitchen table."

"Thanks Elmer. I understand that you paid the funeral expenses?"

"Yes, I took care of it."

"As soon as I can get things organized, I'll look into reimbursing you."

“That would be very helpful and greatly appreciated.”

“One more question Elmer. Do you have any idea where Ellie may have placed her Will?”

“A will? I don’t know anything about a will.” Elmer paused.

“But I do know that she has a safety deposit box at her bank, and the key is on her key chain. Ellie was very secretive about a lot of things.”

Chapter 2:

The Keys

“Wow, I’d almost forgotten how beautiful the Catskills look this time of year!” I excitedly observed.

We were on the road driving north from Virginia to the small upstate New York town where my dad and Ellie had lived, leaving home at dawn since it would be a long five-hour drive. The purple redbuds, the pink & white dogwoods, and tender white flowers of the cherry trees were in full glorious bloom. It was always exciting to view the rebirth of the oaks and birch and sugar maples in their colorful golds and greens after a long dull winter. It suddenly made the drive less tedious.

We made arrangements with our employers to take some emergency personal time due to family circumstances, and contacted our sons to fill them in on what had transpired so far. They remembered Ellie as grandpa’s wife, not particularly warm or cuddly, but sorry nonetheless of her passing. I went over in my mind the phone conversation I had made, immediately after my conversation with Elmer, with the one

and only local attorney's office I could find listed in their small town of Stonebridge Falls. Since I had never dealt with handling an estate before, I desperately needed some legal advice. Gerald Anthony's paralegal, Carol Benson, guided me through the initial phase.

"We knew of your father and his wife. The attorney who occupied this office before Mr. Anthony would have set up their Wills, but he has since passed. There were no copies kept in this office, and the originals would have been given to your father and Ellie. Let me know if you find the Wills in their house, then we can proceed from there. Please remember though that legally you may not remove any items from the house at this time."

Before we left home, I gathered together personal documents that Carol advised would be important to bring with me. My birth and marriage certificates which indicated my maiden and married names to prove my relationship with my father; his death certificate which specified Ellie's name as spouse. We also quickly packed several days' worth of clothing since we had no idea how long it would take to resolve this issue.

I had arranged with Elmer to meet up with us at Ellie's property. Fortunately, we encountered no delays and arrived right on time. We drove up the long and winding graveled driveway, past rows of fir trees that dad had planted many years ago as seedlings and were now 20 feet tall. Elmer was already there waiting for us. A tall lanky man, weathered face. Perhaps mid 70's. He wore faded blue overalls with a plaid shirt, sleeves rolled up, heavy soiled work boots, and a weathered cap covering gray hair. We introduced ourselves as we shook hands. His were rough and calloused. Kevin wandered off to survey the grounds.

Elmer handed me a chain with four keys on it: one each for the house, the shed, the car, and the safe deposit box. I fully recognized the responsibility and burden that passed to me with that simple act. He also gave me a receipt for the funeral expenses. He pointed out that the receipt had his full name and address on it so I would know where to send the check. I barely glanced at it. Just folded it up and slid it into my bag. I'd look at it later. I sincerely thanked him for all that he'd done and promised him yet again that he'll be reimbursed as soon as possible. I reminded him that I first needed to find the Wills.

Elmer smiled although his eyes betrayed doubt. I'm not sure he really believed me. After all, he didn't even know me.

"Ellie never seemed to be too concerned about paperwork or details. Good luck with your search." Elmer tipped his hat, wished us well, and drove off in his pickup truck.

I caught up with Kevin. "Elmer seems like a nice enough fella," he remarked. "I suppose so," I shrugged. Kevin scanned the property. "I always liked this place," he sighed.

We helped dad and Ellie move there twenty years ago. They looked forward to enjoying many years of peaceful retirement. We and the boys visited with them a number of times the first ten years they lived there. Kevin and dad always found some kind of outdoor project to work on together. We took the boys canoeing on the lake in the summer, ice skating in the winter, treated them to the candy store in town, and were awed by the magnificent beauty of the colorful autumn foliage. Dad and I had an off-and-on relationship throughout the years. Over time, dad and I quietly made peace with the past. I was reluctant at first, but decided it was mostly for the sake of the

boys, so they could have a relationship with their only grandfather.

The property initially looked pretty much the same as we had remembered it ten years earlier, the last time we were there for dad's funeral. But at closer scrutiny, the trees were now much taller, the shrubs larger, and the overgrown wisteria lay heavy on the backyard arbor. The house was still blue but faded, the white trim a bit dingy. The large front and back lawns had recently been cut so I assumed Ellie had hired a lawn service after dad passed. She wasn't the kind who ever got her hands dirty. Might ruin her well-manicured long fingernails. The faux wishing well in the front lawn still displayed my dad's American flag that he'd had since his days in the Navy during WWII. I already knew that flag was coming home with me.

The rear deck and railing, a bit weathered, stood strong. The oversized shed farther back in the property was a dual-purpose building which matched the color and style of the ranch house. Kevin used the shed key to let us in. Half was used for storage of a rider mower, tools, and a workshop. The other half was dad's "retreat" room where there was a lounge chair and

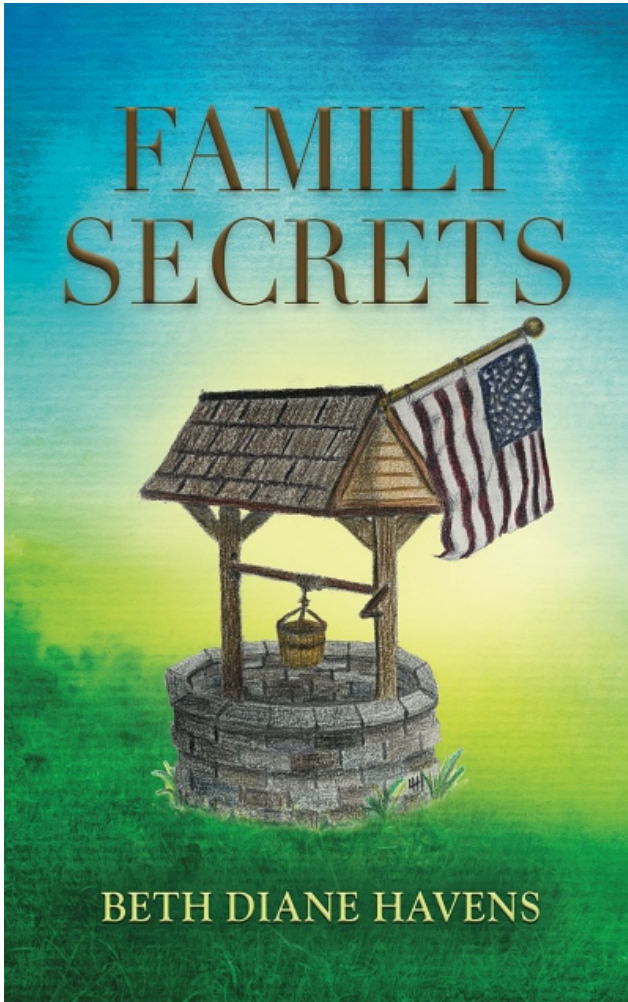
television, both thick with dust. "It's obvious that no one has been in here for quite some time," I noted. Kevin nodded his agreement. There was a side door which led to the small attached porch. Dad used to sit in his rocker on that porch and enjoy the serenity of his surroundings. We walked back around to the front of the house and up the front steps.

"Okay, here goes." With a bit of trepidation, I inserted the house key into the front door lock, took a deep breath, and turned the lock. It was a simple ranch home: living room, kitchen, dining room, two bedrooms, and two bathrooms. Stairs led down into a finished basement. The entryway led directly into the living room. Definitely Ellie's taste. Plastic-covered flowery cushions on formal Queen Anne styled cherry oak furniture, at least two foot high heavily footed lamp pedestals with large beaded silk shades. On the wall over the couch hung an apparently dated oil painting of Ellie wearing formal attire complete with fur stole. Dining room furniture with a glass-fronted cabinet was of the same style. Everything heavy and dark.

“It appears that nothing in this house has been changed since the day they moved in.” I murmured as I glanced around. It was as if it was wrapped in a time warp. Same wall hangings and wallpaper that were now faded and outdated. Being there, seeing the house in this condition, was both depressing and eerie.

“What a shame that your dad’s nature photos are completely bleached out from the sun. They were really beautiful once.” Kevin uttered as he viewed the framed photos on the hallway walls.

In the dining room, a sliding door led outside to the deck, half of which had a screened enclosure. A double rocker, two iron chairs, a couple of glass-topped tables. Modest and worn flowery cushions. We decided to set up the lunch we brought in our cooler on the outside deck’s picnic table where the sun shone bright and warm. We could relax for a little while, enjoy the countryside scenery, as we sat quietly taking it all in. This respite would not last long as we had to quickly begin our search for the Wills and any other documents that could help get us started.



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