

*Nineteen year old, Victoria finds herself taken from 2016 and place in 1889 due to a family curse. She struggles to break the curse, and falls in love with a foreman from a near-by ranch.*

## **Love Kills a Curse**

By S. Benjdar

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# Love Kills A Curse



S. Benjdar

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## Chapter 1: Victoria 2016

*There's that man again.* Victoria slammed on her brakes, sliding across the intersection. Darn, when did that light turn red. Rattled, she jumped at every beep and honk that zoomed by.

Taking in a deep breath and blowing it out, she calmed herself, pressing the gas pedal, she pulled over to the side of the street and parked. Then checked on Chewy-Who, her German Shepherd, in the passenger seat. The hair on his back stood straight, but he seemed fine.

“Thank goodness no one hit us,” she said to him.

He licked her face, wagged his tail, then settled, curling himself in the back seat.

She named the man “The Virginian” after a cowboy in a western TV show from the early 1960s. Her mother loved the show, and Victoria found it entertaining, besides the guys were cute. Although her Virginian looked slightly different, they resemble each other quite a bit. Okay, their hats and vests were the same, and both wore a wide smile with a head full of dark hair.

These events didn't bother her, since she'd seen strange visions all her life, and it surprised her that no one else saw ghost-like figures. Her parents believe in God, so she never shared the details of her visions with them. Victoria felt alright with her visions since they were positive, and no one ever got hurt.

A handful of times, she tried to share them with her friends, but they dropped her friendship, thinking her crazy. They claimed she made up the hallucinations for attention and didn't want to be a part of this kind of silliness. Her parents figured they were imaginary friends, and she'd outgrow it. After a while, she stopped telling people about her gift.

Today, the Virginian appeared on the hood of her car as if he were the ornament. He winked at her, tipping his hat, looking charming as always, when smoke formed by his hand, it gobbled him up piece by piece, whisking his body parts away.

Her visions of ghost always pointed to a change in her life. Most occurred as soon as she saw them, but this time it was different. This one kept appearing with no changes. Was he a ghost-lover coming alive from her families past?

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“Mom, Dad, I'm leaving for Clearwater, Wyoming, tomorrow morning,” Victoria said, standing by the archway leading into the living room, untangling a knot in her hair.

Chewy-Who sat beside her, giving his support while her parents rested on the sage-colored sofa facing the T.V.

“No, you're not,” Dad said, removing his reading glasses, rubbing his eyes, and ran his hand through his thick brown hair. He studied her as if she were four-years-old again.

On Victoria's nineteenth birthday last month, her dad took her out to lunch where he told her about a home they owned in Wyoming.

She researched the culture learning what she could since her great-great-great-grandfather, Wilbert Werner, built the house in 1874. What an adventure that would be, and she often daydreamed of living there on her own.

“Why not? I’m an adult. Besides, you’d let Jack go.”

Dad put a marker in his book with a stern expression on his face. He straightened the blue T-shirt and didn’t seem relaxed anymore. Normally, he wore a white button-down shirt with a tie and black pants—his uniform as chief of surgery at Tri-Care hospital.

“Your brother is twenty-one, and a boy,” Her father said, twirling his readers, a habit of his since he started wearing them.

“Can’t stop me, Dad.” She used her ‘don’t tell me what to do’, tone which sometimes worked.

“Daughter, I trust you, but not everyone else. You know of the house, but not about what happened to your Aunt Mary Jane, other than she’s missing. She left for that house in 1956 when I was a kid. I figured she ran away because my parents disliked her boyfriend, Leroy, for having the wrong-colored skin. You know how your grandparents are. Since she’s twenty years older than me, she was like a mom.” Dad swung his glasses. “I still miss her.”

Victoria joined her father on the sofa. “I get it, Dad, but if Mary Jane is still out there, I may find her. Maybe she’s been hiding. You yourself said she didn’t get along with Grandma and Grandpa.”

“My folks reported her as a missing person years ago. Ten years after the report, the police located Leroy in a rehab

institution. Due to an overdose, he'd suffered brain damage. Leroy couldn't tell us where Mary Jane was." Dad wiped his eyes.

"Ben," Mom said, smiling, which always warmed the grumpiest hearts. "She's telling us she's leaving with or without our permission." Mom ran her fingers through Victoria's hair, taking the last bit of knot with them. "Who knows? She might find out what happened to your sister."

*Right on, Mom.*

"I can't stop you, but..." Dad said, dropping his glasses on the coffee table. "Be careful. I don't want a phone call from a hospital saying you'd did something stupid. And don't return with new pets."

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June 4, 2016. Victoria and Chewy-Who arrived in Clearwater late in the afternoon. The home was located outside a small town on a dirt road with a huge grassy yard surrounded by trees. A ramshackle barn stood a few yards from the house. Its gates swung in the wind and the roof appeared as though an elephant sat on top of it. Tumbleweeds blew across the dirt driveway, and the house shutters banged against the windows.

She phoned her mother to let her know she'd reached Clearwater. Then opened the car door, anticipating her new chapter filled with adult freedoms.

Chewy-Who jumped out of the Versa with his nose twitching, wanting to explore every fresh scents.

The house was a two-story cabin with an attached smaller section to the left. A strong, sturdy building with straight clean

lines against the horizon. She had pictured it with crumbling walls and empty holes where doors should have hung. The place looked in reasonably good shape.

Lace curtains with a purple ribbon weaved through the bottom, flapping hello from an open window upstairs. A fresh coat of paint covered the home, but a broken table poked through the porch railing, and a rocker with no seat leaned against the wall. A hole filled with yellowed grass, peeking out, was where a missing step once sat, giving the home an eerie look, like someone tried fixing it up, but never finished.

A sense of abandonment loomed over the house, sending shivers down Victoria's spine. Panic rose from her heart and settled in her throat. She shook herself, hoping to dislodge the odd feeling in her stomach. Was this a warning or excitement? Even with these physical signs of danger, she felt at peace. The place needed tender loving care and she could give it that.

"We should move in. I'm handy with tools." She glanced at her car. "Chewy-Who? Where did you go?"

Chewy-Who never stayed in one place long enough unless leash. Victoria searched the backyard through the cluster of pine trees with enormous stones, but no dog. Then, spotted him by an outhouse sneezing from a snout full of smells.

Relieved, she scrambled on top of a boulder to get a better view of the snow-capped peaks. She smiled, removing her hair tie, loosening her long, thick curls, and hugged herself, then jumped off the rock. She was home.

The sky rumbled; a dark cloud rolled in from the west carried the smell of rain. "Chewy-Who, we're in for a storm."

She looked for him, but he was missing again.

“Chewy-Who, come!”

Victoria checked the outhouse, and he wasn't there. Where did he disappear to? Chewy-Who understood her tones, such as joy and fright. He always came when she called. A knot formed in her belly. What if he messed with a rattlesnake?

“Chewy-Who!” She ran toward the barn with the wind blowing against her back. When she saw a dog's tail swaying from the corner, she raced in and was hit with the smell of old manure. Gagging, she planned to get her dog out as soon as possible.

When a face appeared in the rafters, she hesitated. An old woman with grayish skin and a long-pointed nose glared back at her. Her boney finger tore at a small hole in the velvet darkness, reaching down with pinching her fingernails as Victoria instinctively ducked, even though she knew it was only a vision.

The hair turned red and swirled around the apparition's head like ribbons floating behind a young girl. Warm brown eyes spoke of life, but if you looked closer, death stared back. Victoria's visions never scared her like this one.

The barn moaned as the ceiling split in half and dust fell on their shoulders.

She grabbed Chewy-Who's collar and rushed toward what little light came through the door. A deep cracking blotted out every other sound. Time stopped, a single powerful smack, and the crossbeam let loose. She screamed, dropping to the floor, and covered Chewy-Who with her body.

A loud crash ending in a deafening silence until her dog sneezed and she coughed. Blinking dirt from her eyes, she found herself in the middle of the barn.

“That was close. Chewy-Who, don’t you ever do that again,” she said, rubbing his ear. Inside she was grateful he was still alive.

Brushing sawdust from her pants, “It’s time to get some answers. Something’s weird about this place.” She looked at the wreckage. “I hope the home is in better shape.”

Despite the fear in her belly, Victoria sensed a pull from her soul to go deeper, but she worried if she followed this tug too far, she wouldn’t find her way out.

The wind picked up, rustling the leaves, and blowing twigs across the yard. A light rain pattered the ground and Victoria shivered, unsure if from the weather or the foreboding emotion in the pit of her stomach.

She and Chewy-Who walked to the house and on the porch, skipping the missing step. The front door blew open with a bang. A gloomy entryway filled with dust particles whirling like gnats under a streetlamp, giving her the creeps. She couldn’t see inside, but noticed fingers of smoke swirling out to gather her in.

She wiggled her foot into the dark entrance, then pulled it free. It felt as if she’d dipped it into a bowl of Jell-O. She checked for a gooey mess but found none.

Chewy-Who sniffed at the blackness draped over the entrance and whined. He danced around the doorway, putting his front paw in, then yanked it back.

“You first.”

*S. Benjdar*

He sat yipping at the blank doorway as smoky fingers swirled around his front legs. When Chewy-Who turned to sink his teeth into it, he disappeared.

Time stopped. Victoria plunged in after him.

# **Victoria**

## **Chapter 2**

**June 4, 2016**

A gray fog hung like a curtain, blocking any light coming from the home. The storm begun, and she didn't want to wait on the porch, moreover she had to find her dog.

She pushed through the Jell-O substance and found Chewy-Who sitting beside her with his tail tucked under his butt. Victoria couldn't move forward; they were stuck reliving the moment of stepping into the house. Panic spread into her spine. The creepy sensation reminded her of a story she once read where a vampire ended up locked in his coffin, conscious of his fate, but unable to do anything about it. Not even death would release his soul.

Trapped in her own casket.

A powerful smell of sweet lilac wafted over her. The scent took her back to her childhood days when her mother filled their home with the flower. Her shoulders relaxed and the tension in her chest loosened as she recalled those pleasant moments. If being stuck meant she'd tailspin through time forever, at least Chewy-Who was with her.

Victoria waited for the next onslaught of sensations when a sharp growl startled her. A rainbow of colors burst against the black background like a firework display before disappearing into the muddy gray mist.

Chewy-Who yipped and brushed his snout against her leg. She squatted, giving him a hug to assure herself.

The blackness changed into a pale blue. In the distance, a speck appeared and grew into an enormous wolf's face, racing toward her. Yellowish-brown eyes, a nose turned upward. She saw a scar across his muzzle.

Victoria learned about these types of wolves from *The Wolf Almanac* her mother kept in her study. She loved the animal for their loyalty and compassion. The nature of a warrior wolf was to protect his mate for life. Days after reading the book, one came to her in a dream. Victoria named him Dakota.

He was here now and moving closer, filling the sky with his presence. Pressure squeezed against her body as his image passed through her. She covered her face. Chewy-Who lay beside her, panting. A light, penetrating between her fingers as air sucked into her lungs, they slid into the light and dropped onto the floor.

Chewy-Who picked up a hand-woven rug and shook it, spreading dust onto the already scuzzy wood flooring.

Sunshine and green grass gleamed at Victoria through the front door. Where was the storm?

She stood in the doorway, waved her hand in the opening, and found only warm air. The gloomy clouds disappeared. "I've seen strange things, but this...." She stared at Chewy-Who.

Searching for her car but not seeing it, she felt on edge, like a sense of bugs crawling over her skin. Didn't she leave it by the barn?

Chewy-Who trembled next to her until he spotted a tumbleweed blowing by the rocks and raced off to chase it. She hesitated, then stepped onto the porch, but when the steps leading into the yard swam before her, she fell against the railing, and crawled back to the entrance.

Victoria rubbed her temples, then poked her head out the door, “Chewy-Who, Mommy feels better in here.”

After Chewy-Who entered the home, the front door banged closed behind him. Victoria turned the knob, and it spun in her hand. “I guess this handle’s broken. We’ll fix it, but not now.” She hugged Chewy-Who. “Besides, it’s okay. We want to stay.” At least, she thought she did.

The house held an odd atmosphere, a sense of unbalance, like it demanded her to stay, but in what way? The heavy air inside pulled on her as if she wore a wet pair of clothes, dragging her into something she may regret.

Chewy-Who put his cold nose into her palm, signaling he was ready to search for dead mice. His presence lightened the mood and curiosity took over her attitude. Victoria couldn’t wait to find treasures.

The living room had floral-patterned armchairs and a matching sofa facing the massive stone fireplace that took up the entire back wall. “We could stick a gigantic tree into that, and it would burn for weeks.”

She wandered into the kitchen. A pine table and six straight-backed chairs occupied the center of the room, while an antique wood-burning stove squatted in the corner. “Just like in the Western novels I used to read! I doubt it functions, though.” She passed her finger along its top, coming away with

a blend of grease and ash. “No matter, it could benefit from a proper cleaning.”

As she rummaged through a glass cabinet, Victoria spotted white teacups with purple lilacs painted around the rims. She wondered who they belonged to. Her father told her they owned the house. Paid off generations ago. She hoped Aunt Mary Jane didn’t live here, so she could take the cups to her mother as a birthday gift.

Chewy-Who stuck his nose into a room behind the kitchen and she followed him into a narrower chamber with a toilet tank nestled against the ceiling and a pipe dropping into its bowl, settling at the bottom. Everything looked functional, and for her bladder’s sake, she hoped it was.

Walking with Chewy-Who, they enter an office, where she sat behind a massive mahogany desk and pretended to be the boss of her veterinarian clinic.

Her dog pawed at the rear of a wooden filing cabinet. She squeezed in next to him, inspected the floor and noted little brown balls of poo. “Well, we have a few mice.” She wiggled her way out when a solid black figure caught her eye. The Virginian.

He relaxed on top of the desk with one foot on the rug. He grinned, pointing to the top drawer, then dissolved.

The drawer was stuck, so Victoria pulled hard, loosening it enough to popped out with a platinum ring, dropping to the floor. She picked it up and inspected it further. A diamond center with rubies surrounded it. She set it on the recliner’s arm and wondered who wore it. Since the home had been in her family forever, she hoped it came from royalty.

Chewy-Who wandered off, but she hesitated to follow him, instead she focused on the jewel. Upon picking it up again, warmth rushed through her body while she gripped it, and the sensation caused the hair on her neck to rise. Victoria had a premonition it belonged to her, but when she tried it on, it was too big. “I’ll keep you safe in my pocket for now.”

A window slammed shut from somewhere upstairs, jolting her back to the present. Since the window with the lace curtain was open, she figured that was it.

After completing their tour of the downstairs, they headed upstairs. Two closed doors were on the left and the curtain blew in the window. If it wasn’t closed, what had she heard? At first, she felt spooked, then played it off as her imagination was too big for itself.

In the first bedroom was a king-sized bed, a nightstand, and a wardrobe. Tucked in the corner stood a miniature wood-burning stove, opposite of it a velvet green chair. Victoria hated the feel of velvet. It always gave her the jibes. Purple flowered wallpaper complimented the lace curtains with a closed window. Since it was closed, Victoria assumed the window had been open, relieving her mind of doom. She approached the second room. It was the same.

They ambled back to the first bedroom, and she laid across the bed. “Come on Chewy-Who, join me.”

He put his two front paws on the blanket and stepped up, like climbing a ladder. “You’re a silly boy, but I love you. Guess what? I want to live here. Dad, Mom, and I can fix the place. I’ll get a job in town.” She smoothed his ears and nuzzled his face.

Chewy-Who licked her hand, yelping twice his approval.

Taking her phone from her pocket, she realized the ring had disappeared. She checked around the area but turned up empty-handed. The lengthy drive, the incident in the barn, and the sun creeping below the horizon all added to her fatigue. “We’ll find it later.” She yawned, laying her head against the pillow. Chewy-Who snuggled his snout under her leg.

He fell asleep with a mild snore flapping his jowls. Victoria stifled another yawn and could barely keep her eyelids open. The room swung, rocking her like a child. A hint of lavender drifted her way and lulled her into a deeper sense of tranquility. The air seemed to encompass her as though wrapping her in a blanket. Warmth tugged on her, then dragged her into its embrace.

“Wolf!” A woman screamed.

Chewy-Who growled as he and Victoria scrambled out of bed. An obese, older lady stood on top of a chair in the corner. She wore a black turtleneck sweater with dark yoga pants and held a battered acoustic guitar like a rifle.

“Who are you?” she wailed.

# Victoria

## Chapter 3: June 1898

Victoria faced the woman. Her heart pounded in her chest.

A lady in her late seventies stood in front of her with shoulder-length charcoal-colored hair and thick bangs hanging over her eyebrows. Her clothes were too big, and the color black did nothing to slim her appearance. A bright red stain lined her lips, and blue eye shadow caked her eyelids.

“Please stop freaking out,” Victoria said.

“The wolf?” the old lady asked, as if her statement made everything crystal clear. She pointed her folk guitar at Victoria as she stepped down from the chair.

“Chewy-Who is a dog, and he’s friendly, unless he feels threatened.”

Her dog growled under his breath. “Hush, Chewy-Who” She wrapped her fingers over his snout.

The old lady lowered the instrument. “Why are you at my home?”

Victoria sat on the bed. “This property belongs to my father. It’s been in our family for a hundred and twenty years. What’s your story?”

“What a zonk on the head.” The lady stole one last look at her before leaving the room and thundering down the stairs.

“Chewy-Who, what is zonked? Sounds like something Shaggy from Scooby-Doo would say.” She smiled, remembering those silly old cartoons on Saturday mornings.

Chewy-Who woof his agreement.

“Do you think she might be Mary Jane? And how’d she get into the bedroom, anyway?”

Victoria turned to follow when Chewy-Who tail brushed against the rose-colored curtain, causing it to billow.

“Wait.” She paused, fingering the drapery. “Wasn’t this antique lace?”

Chewy-Who cocked his ears, tilted his head, but said nothing.

Have you seen my cell phone? I might need to call Dad,” she said, searching the bed and nightstand with no results. “I bet that crazy woman took it while I was sleeping.”

Banging noises and swearing floated up from the downstairs. Victoria followed the sounds and entered the living room where an orange bomb exploded. A bright peach sofa and two chairs with black and tangerine spots the size of pancakes rested where the overstuffed floral ones used to be. A silver-topped table sprinkled with carrot-colored blobs sat in front of the fireplace.

“Is this some-kind of virtual world?” she asked. The colors clashed with each other, turning her stomach. She’d need to leave soon or she would throw up. Besides, what happened to the beautiful furniture from earlier?

Sobs from her left drew her attention towards the kitchen.

Victoria hesitated at the entrance. Everything was pink! From the stove, cabinets, to the refrigerator. The floor a white

brick, looking more like it belonged on a wall somewhere. This wasn't the same house. It felt different, like wearing the wrong-sized coat.

Testing the floor, she tapped it with her foot, making sure it was real before venturing in, then sat at the dinner table.

The lady joined her, drew a deep breath, and blew her nose into a tissue. "Who are you?"

"Victoria," she said, pointing at her dog. "And he's Chewy-Who. Who are you? And please give me my phone back."

The old woman wiped a tear from her cheek. "If you're referring to a telephone, there aren't any." Fresh tears drew black streaks down her face.

Victoria found it odd that anyone today wouldn't have a cell. Maybe this lady didn't have the money, but you could pick up a cheap one at your local drug store. "This property belongs to my family, my great, great, great grandfather Wilbert—"

"Werner," the lady finished, then balled another Kleenex in her fist, dabbing around her eyes.

Victoria shifted in her seat, causing the pink plastic to crinkle. "You haven't told me your name? And if you don't mind my phone." She held her hand out again. "Where is it?"

The old woman smiled through her fingers. "I'm Mary Jane." Her chair scraped the floor as she stood, wiping a hand against her pants, then held it out. "Nice to meet you."

Hesitating, Victoria then leaned over and shook it. The woman didn't look like her aunt, but she realized the pictures she saw were of a younger girl and becoming older changed a person.

“There are no telephones here. Yours will reappear, but it won’t work. What’s your time?”

“What do you mean? It’s around 4 pm. Or are you asking what’s up with me? My life is here.” Victoria shrugged her misunderstanding.

Mary Jane frowned.

“If you’re Mary Jane, then where have you been? Dad’s been so worried.”

Mary Jane sat down, pulling another tissue from the box on the table. “Yes, focus your audio.”

*Focus your audio?* she thought. *What does that mean?*

“I’m confused, so let’s start with you,” Victoria said, staring at a sniffing Mary Jane. “Why haven’t you contacted anyone? At least let the family know you’re okay?”

Wiping a tear with her fingertip, “I can’t tell you because I’m afraid. If I acknowledge the truth, then what will happen?” She covered her face with a tissue, then removed it. “You realize I am twenty years older than my little brother.” She smiled. “He loved me the best out of the entire family. Mother and Father didn’t like me as much as my sweet Ben did.” She choked-up and wiped her nose. “I miss him the most.”

Her Aunt threw the used tissue on the floor.

Victoria glared at her, then grabbed a clean Kleenex to pick it up with.

“Oh, Tootsie, leave it. The house will take care of it later.”

Victoria shrugged. Nothing made sense. Could this be Mary Jane, if so, why was she hiding? She was sure her grandparents would accept her aunt back into the family.

“Why does this place look like 1950?”

Mary Jane burst into a fresh batch of tears. She swallowed her sobs. “What’s the date? Don’t ask why, just answer me,” she said, pleading.

“June 4, 2016.”

Her aunt bowed her head. “Already?” Her fist hit the table. She stood, then paced between the stove and refrigerator.

Victoria fidgeted in her seat. “What are you trying to tell me?” she asked. “Are we stuck somewhere? Lost in time, perhaps?”

Mary Jane sat down. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t handle this right now,” she sobbed. “Tomorrow, I’ll be dead. My year is up.” Her forehead rested against the table while her body shook from hiccups.

Her aunt was out of her mind. If Mary Jane been stuck here by herself, then she might’ve lost sight of what’s real. Victoria saw no reason for her aunt to die the next day. She was old but looked in good health. And she’d been gone a lot longer than a year. Perhaps after a solid night’s rest she could convince Mary Jane to leave with her. Dad probably knew of an excellent psychiatrist.

Mary Jane walked to the counter and played with the curtains. She was having a hard time staying still. Victoria supposed that if she thought she’d be dead tomorrow, she’d be antsy as well.

“I realize you don’t understand, but I’m having one fat-colorful journey,” her aunt said, turning to face her.

“All I know is, I was guided here by my visions.”

Mary Jane let out a sharp laugh. “Of course you feel that way. I have visions too. That’s the house curse. Makes you want to come to it, especially if your last name is Werner.”

The idea the house brought her here didn’t seem wrong, but it didn’t imply it was right either. “Then tell me why,” Victoria said, patting the pink plastic cushion next to her.

Mary Jane pulled out the chair and dropped into it. “It was June 4, 1956, for me. Elizabeth, it was June 4, 1896, but she didn’t time travel. And now you, June 4, 2016.”

“Who’s Elizabeth? I get there is a 60-year pattern, but... Oh, just tell me what it means.”

Mary Jane brushed her bangs. “Elizabeth was first, me second, and you’re the next girl, because I’m dying tomorrow.” She twisted a ring on her left hand. The one Victoria found in the office that disappeared. She wondered if it affected Mary Jane as it did her, but her aunt wasn’t comforted by it.

“Dying, how?”

Mary Jane got up and knocked the chair over, caught it, then walked to the bread box near the sink. She moved the pale rose-colored curtain aside once again.

“What is so important out there?” She joined Mary Jane at the window. “Is that the barn?” The building stood strong, with hay peeking out from the upper doors.

Tumbleweeds danced across the yard with a hazy brown mist covering everything. The roof was also perfectly intact. Other things, though, were gone. Like the road and her car.

“Sure, Toots. What ya think it was, a garage?”

“No. But the barn had collapsed on Chewy-Who and me earlier today. And now it has miraculously rebuilt itself. How is that possible?”

“It’s off the cob.” Mary Jane said. “You smoke?” She handed Victoria a joint, which she allowed to slip through her fingers into the sink.

“No, thanks. Marijuana kills brain cells and I enjoy mine.”

Mary Jane shrugged, fishing the joint out, and lit it. She held the weed in front of Victoria’s face, saying, “This will jog my memory.”

She coughed and waved the smoke away. “You want to sit?”

“That’s a fab idea.”

“And please don’t blow that stuff my way.”

Mary Jane filled her lungs with smoke, turned her head, and blew it over her shoulder.

“Will this do?” She walked over to the table and sat.

“Yes, that works.”

Mary Jane used the tip of her joint to burn off the split ends in her hair. “Noodle it out. Like I told you, no telephones, but we have television and the current shows. In the office, there are many books you can read, but since you can’t leave the house, you’ll have plenty of time before the next girl arrives.”

“Try telling me the facts and please stop using slang. I’m confused enough,” Victoria said, staring at Mary Jane as a knot coiled in the pit of her gut.

The chair crinkled as her aunt moved to its edge. “You sure are stuffy. Why are you upset? I’m the one dying tonight, and you have a full year to figure it out.” She sighed. “But if there’s

an opportunity to break this curse, I should tell you what I've learned. Be patient. I'm gathering my brain particles together." She frowned. "Do you realize I'm twenty years old this year? And that was 12 months ago."

"You're a woman in her seventies," Victoria said.

"My age is part of the curse, but not the whole thing." Mary Jane stood and pulled another long drag. "It begins with Leroy. My parents hated him. In fact—" She lifted her finger to make a point. "We went to Wyoming after my daddy told me about this place." She beamed and snapped her fingers a few times. "Leroy heard about the beat generation from his older brother, Thomas. We were," she bent her two fingers into quotation marks, "the hipsters looking for the ultimate enlightenment."

Mary Jane folded her arms. "We thought we could fix the house up and live here. We'd have our friend's jungle up with us, like a genuine family." She rested her elbows on the back of the chair.

"Before I got trapped here, I experienced an eerie vision. A shadow figure without a face, blood-red eyes glaring at me. Scared the shit out of me. It drew closer and last night," she put her hand in front of her eyes, "Face to face. I'd hoped this house would take the horror I saw coming and throw it away. The home drew me, ever since I first learned about it. Like you, but now I know it intends to kill me, and it'll do the same to you."

"I'm not planning on dying here, nor will I let you," Victoria said.

Mary Jane blew smoke toward the cabinets and ignored Victoria's outburst. "Anyway, we entered this house and Leroy

left without me, but not by my doing. The homestead trapped me. Leroy wandered to the barn as I went upstairs for a nap on the bed.”

She turned to face Victoria. “When I woke up, Elizabeth was sitting in the chair. Elizabeth said the witch’s daughter, Sara, told her of the curse. A gruesome fate.”

“She was the first?”

“No, Sara. Follow along, Toots.”

“I am. So Sara’s a child of a witch, but what about Elizabeth? And how did I become part of it?”

Mary Jane peered at the stove. Victoria figured she was collecting her thoughts. “Sara told Elizabeth she’d become sick because of the curse. I learned Sara wanted Wilbert, but he wanted nothing to do with her. Guess Sara’s mom scared him off, so he turned Sara down and wedded Margret. Elizabeth is our great grandfather’s daughter. That makes her one of our long-lost aunts.”

“Where is the problem? I’m sure Sara moved on and married a different man. Right?” Mary Jane’s smoke swirled around Victoria’s face. She choked.

“Sorry.” Mary Jane waved at the cloud. “But you’d be wrong. Sara was pregnant with Wilbert’s child. He claimed he’d marry her but didn’t. Sara was upset.” Mary Jane flicked the lint from her sweater. “You realize you’re in 1898?”

“What? — What are you talking about?” Victoria rose, slapping the table. “You better come clean, because I’m done with your fantasies. No way are we in 1898.” The Virginian appeared in the corner of the kitchen with his hand held out

like he was inviting her to stay. She ignored him. This was all wrong!

Victoria faced Mary Jane. “You’ve been pulling my leg ever since I woke up.” She stomped to the door and opened it. “I’m leaving and reporting you to the police for trespassing.” She took a step forward. The back porch wobble as she collapsed to her knees, trying to catch her breath, when soft hands yanked her inside, closing the door with a quiet click.

“Sorry, but I told ya you couldn’t leave.”

Victoria stepped into the kitchen, her knees shaky. She settled in the chair.

“The house doesn’t care if you believe or not, it won’t let you go.” Mary Jane hesitated,

“It’s not fair. I thought I’d have my entire life ahead of me.”

Victoria squeezed her aunt’s hand. Mary Jane was right. It didn’t matter now what she demanded. Even though the house trapped her, this era called to her. It required her help. “Tell me the rest?”

Mary Jane nodded. “Elizabeth said Sara told her she’d be sick and stuck inside the house until she died a year later, at seventy-nine. The home would age her sixty years within 12 months.”

Despair settled on Victoria like a heavy cloak. Sixty years in one? And what about her dog? How could she watch Chewy-Who grow old? If he didn’t, who’d take care of him? She grabbed a Kleenex from the box and dabbed her eyes and nibbled her lower lip to keep it from quivering.

Mary Jane took another hit. “The house allowed me to escape once to bury Elizabeth in the graveyard two miles west,

where you'll lay me." She crushed her joint in the ashtray and moved to the window, where she pulled the curtains aside to watch the sunset. "Are you hungry?" She opened the refrigerator, removed a coke, and grabbed the potato chips from the counter. "There are donuts, too." She pointed at the white box on the stove.

"Wait, if we're in 1898, how do you have electrical appliances? Where did you buy the food?"

Mary Jane opened a drawer, withdrew a bottle opener, and popped the soda. "The house."

She figured Mary Jane was too high to give a decent answer. Her stomach rumbled, so she pulled a pack of saltines and a can of tuna from the cupboard. She found an electric can opener sitting on the counter by the sink. For dessert, she chose a chocolate donut.

Around a mouth full of chips, Mary Jane said, "You might as well take the bigger bedroom. Your things are there." She licked the salt from her fingers, then crinkled the bag and threw it on the floor.

"When did you unpack my clothes? They were in my car, which is no longer parked outside." Victoria stacked her dishes in the sink.

"Oh, I didn't. The house did. This shack takes excellent care of you until it kills you."

# Victoria

## Chapter 4: June 1898

Victoria entered the bedroom and found her clothes in the drawers and closet, not only what she'd packed, but her entire closet from home, too. Purses, shoes, jewelry, everything she owned. The strange visions led to this moment. She believed every puzzle eventually fit together, and she'd find the pieces to this one.

Chewy-Who stretched out on the floor, chewing his stuffed squirrel toy. His food and water bowls sat next to the window, and his leash hung on the coat rack. "Looks like the house is taking care of you, too." She ruffled his fur and felt thankful she had him. If Mary Jane was right, soon she'd need someone to cry on.

The idea a curse sending her to 1898 seemed beyond anything she could imagine. She put on her PJ bottoms and a sweatshirt, hoping these acts of normalcy would relax the knot in her neck.

"Tomorrow, we'll walk into town and locate someone with a phone. I don't care how dizzy I become—I'm leaving this house. I bet Mary Jane spent more time getting high than trying to find a way out." She paused, thinking her aunt wasn't that dumb. Victoria wondered why'd Mary Jane had given in so soon.

An hour later, a knock woke her from a light sleep. It was Mary Jane. “Do you want to watch Alfred Hitchcock’s Presents?”

She sat up, trying to place the name and asked, “Is he the fat bald guy that does mysteries, or is it horror shows?”

“You could say both. Hurry, the show starts any minute. My last night, and I’d like to enjoy it,” she said.

Victoria listened to the steps creak as Mary Jane departed. “Why deny her the pleasure of our company? Come on, Chewy-Who.”

They entered the living room where an old-fashioned black-and-white TV sat. The screen showed a white background, and a black line drawing a profile of a man.

A bowl of popcorn sat on the coffee table with her aunts hand in it.

“This is the one where Mr. Blanchard has a secret.” Mary Jane had changed into a bright pink nightgown with silver lace on the sleeves, which was a pleasant surprise from her earlier black outfit.

“Sounds like you’ve seen this episode before?” Victoria said as she sat.

“Yes, the programs repeat themselves throughout your year here and you can watch all the time. You’ll love this one.”

She smiled at Mary Jane. “I hope so.” What else could she say? Her aunt had accepted the fact she was dying tonight and she’d play into her aunt’s disillusionment for the time being. Besides, Mary Jane’s grin spoke loudly, and that was all Victoria needed to know.

She saw a lot of herself in the major character, Babs. A nosey neighbor with an overactive imagination. Was Victoria trapped in 1898, or was it her own hallucination? Mary Jane's home look like 1956 on the inside and yet, it was the late 1800s outside. This puzzled Victoria.

"Hey, why—,"

"Hush." Mary Jane glanced at her. A quick spark lit up another joint.

Victoria settled into the sofa, staring at the black and white shadows on the screen, fearing the unknown they represented. Chewy-Who lay next to her as she waited for Mary Jane's complete attention.

When the episode finished; Mary Jane turned down the volume. "What were you saying?"

"I was speculating about the curse and its function."

Mary Jane sighed. "You'll either wash it out, which I hope you do, or die trying. Someone has to jungle out this Werner family disaster." She brushed at her nightgown, then forced a smile. "What stuff do you watch?"

Victoria paused in braiding her hair. "The Walking Dead and Stranger Things."

"Stranger Things? That show sounds interesting. What's that about?"

"An upside down world where kids find themselves trapped because of government experiments."

"That echoes of a horror flick that I wouldn't watch," Mary Jane said, playing with the ring. "Put this wedding band on tomorrow morning and the house will replace..., where were

you from? Oh yeah, 2016, it'll reset itself." She wrapped an orange knitted blanket around her shoulders.

"Set what?" Victoria asked as she grabbed a handful of popcorn, stuffing it into her mouth.

Mary Jane threw up her arms. "The house! I keep telling you and yet you don't focus your audio." She tapped each item off her fingers. "Appliances, furniture, toilets, all change for you by the house itself. Mind you, the layout remains the same, but it'll update everything else, while the outside stays in 1898." She glanced at an empty area above Victoria's head. "Anyway, that's what happened to me. It was 1897. That's all I know, so stop asking me."

"Okay," Victoria said, petting Chewy-Who's head, giving her time before announcing,

"I'm going into town tomorrow and sending a message to my mother. I assume the township has a post office, and I'd like to speak with Sara." She grabbed another handful of popcorn.

"It won't work. Outside is in the 1800s. Your parents aren't born, neither are mine. And don't mess with Sara. She's pure — Evil."

"Darn it, Mary Jane. I refuse to let your pessimistic attitude drag me down. I intend to find the way out."

She paced in front of the TV. Chewy-Who jumped off the sofa, keeping stride with her.

Mary Jane shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I never found a solution."

"Did you try?"

Mary Jane opened a wooden box on the table, pulled out a joint, and pinched it between her fingers. “I wasted two months of my precious year trying to escape this house, and another few fighting off my depression. I tired of throwing up each time I left. The only thing that kept me sane was this stuff,” she held up her weed, “books, and TV. Most people spend their lives doing this, anyway.”

“Chewy-Who, our guest has abandoned us, and decided not to speak any more truths. Let's go to bed.”

“My family wasn't interested in the changing world and I was a rebel who caused problems,” Mary Jane said. “But my parents hated first. Leroy was a black boy, and they couldn't handle a daughter who stepped outside the norm. Your Dad,” Mary Jane stared into the fire pit. “Was the only family member who loved me and took an interest in Leroy. Ben played along with us as we sang our songs and danced in my room. So innocent, bless his heart.

“Once I got stuck in this house. Not one townsfolk visited me. So, I gave in. I didn't care anymore.” Mary Jane tightened the blanket across her shoulders.

“A woman stood near the barn every Friday night. She reminded me of a ghost, dressed in white and appeared to fade into the darkness. Not once did she talk to me, even when I hollered. I stopped looking after a while. If she was Sara, she never talked to me like she did to Elizabeth. I figured it was because Sara and Elizabeth sort of grew up together. Me? I was just a strange girl from another era.”

Chewy-Who grabbed his toy bear, making a loud squeaking noise.

The sound drew Mary Jane back to the moment. “Elizabeth and I had no pets.” She looked toward Chewy-Who. “Thank your God for his companionship. Trust me. You’ll be glad to have him on those long sad days when you have nothing to think about except your death.”

Mary Jane’s smoke hung in the air like a rain cloud come to dampen Victoria’s world.

She walked to the sofa and sat. The pungent smell of weed made her cough, then she cleared her throat. “We can solve this together. Tomorrow we’ll write out everything on a piece of paper, then...”

“No. We can’t.” Mary Jane watched a car chase on the TV. “I die sometime tonight—it’s in the journal.” She pointed at book, resting on the coffee table. “You’ll find my body tomorrow. Elizabeth was 79, and I am now. You’re next...”

“No more.” She stood. “This has gone far enough. We’ll figure it out later. You’re not dying because it makes little sense. I’m tired and going to bed,” she said, heading to the steps.

“Victoria, wait.” Mary Jane placed her joint in the ashtray and wobbled to the staircase. “Please, don’t forget to put on the wedding band.” She twisted the ring on her finger, then tried to remove it. “It won’t come off until I croak. That’s what happened with Elizabeth. Remember my words.”

“What’s up with the ring?”

“Everything here,” Mary Jane made a sloppy circle with her arms, “won’t change to 2016 without you wearing it. The house is a trap, but also your comfort. Look at your PJs. They look like something you’d wear out. You aren’t from the 1800s

and neither are your ways. You're strange, and they'd call you a witch. The town folks kill others for being different, like Chinamen and Indians."

Mary Jane turned, then stopped. "Victoria." She bowed her head as if she was debating something. "I have to tell someone." She wrung her hands. "I see things." She glanced at Victoria and then the floor. "It sounds weird, but I saw a man before I got trapped."

She stared into Victoria's eyes. "He'd show up real tiny," Mary Jane held her thumb and index finger an inch apart, "and then a normal size. With a poof! He'd disappear." She snapped her fingers. "Like that. There's also a wolf who runs around the house. He'd come in from a wall, then vanish out another."

"Aunt Mary Jane. You're not as different as you assume. I've had similar experiences. We'll talk more tomorrow. I'm tired."

Mary Jane smiled and wandered back to the sofa.

Her aunt's lack of nightlights made walking into the bedroom difficult, like stepping into an inkblot. Chewy-Who laid beside her, and she appreciated his warmth.

Chewy-Who would kill anyone who tried to harm her, but what about ghosts or curses? How could he fight those? She hoped when the home changed it came with nightlights.

Her eyelids fluttered. One last prayer floated through her mind before sleep overtook her. She prayed she'd wake up from this nightmare or curse or whatever it was, and find herself in the bed, waking from a nap.

# Denver

## Chapter 5: June 1898

“You wanted to see me?” Denver asked as he entered the office of Judge Franklin Moore.

“Come in, sit.” He motioned Denver to one of the leather chairs next to the enormous mahogany desk where a green gas lamp rested. Books lined the wall and to the right a giant fireplace.

Denver sat across from his boss, better known by the townsfolk as the Judge. Not certified, but an honest man who promised to uphold the law. He owned Shiloh, a cattle ranch, for over twenty years now. Denver had been his foreman for the past two years, come July.

“Do you want us to take the herd north? The weather’s good.”

“Yes, but not why I called you.”

The Judge was knowledgeable in business, and he dressed the part in his white button-down shirt, black vest, and tie. His boots spit-shine.

Denver took off his hat and pushed his black hair back, but a strand fell into his eye, reminding him he needed to visit the barber.

The Judge played with his pencil. “Corbie can deal with the cattle. I need your help with a personal matter.”

“What might that be?” He wanted to go north with the cattle but respected the Judge. He’d stay and listened to what the man had to say.

“There’s a problem with the property northwest.”

Denver frowned, not much up in that part of the property, just a trail heading to the summer fields.

The Judge walked to the fireplace, placing his hand on the white stones. He turned after poking at the ash. It was June, so no logs burned, but Denver could tell by his stalling he was bugged.

“I can tell you’re not following me, and I don’t blame you,” the Judge said. “I’m not being clear. There’s a trail heading toward town that forks to the right leading to caves.”

Leaning back in the chair, Denver crossed his legs, putting his hat on his knee, and nodded. He knew of it but he never gone there. His primary concern was running the ranch, not chasing down a flowery path for the joy of it.

“There’s a four hundred acre lot north, purchased by a fellow named Wilbert Werner a few years before I settled here,” the Judge said, gazing into the blackened fire-pit.

“I’ve heard of Mr. Werner. Didn’t Werner die? Isn’t his daughter living there now?”

“Yes. Mr. Werner passed two years ago.”

Instead of waiting, Denver moved the conversation forward. “What’s the problem with the property?” If he were to get chores done, they needed to pick up the pace.

The Judge leaned the poker against the stone lip of the fireplace and sat behind his desk. “I need you to locate the

owner because I want to buy it. It'd make moving the herd north to the highland easier."

"A good idea, but don't we take the cattle through that property already?"

"We have, but it's not right. With Mr. Werner being dead, we ought to pay someone for the use of that land. Something here," he said, pointing to his heart, "says trouble's coming. I don't know what kind, but I can't shake the feeling."

Denver focused on the first part. The rest he'd rather not deal with. "I'll find the owner and straighten things out. You could draw up the paperwork. But what if they choose to rent? Are you fine with that?"

"I'll handle that when it comes." He stood. "Keep this between us, mind you," the Judge said, putting his finger on his lips, then sat on the corner of his desk.

Denver nodded, tucking his hat on his head, and headed for the door. "I'll leave—"

"Not so fast," the Judge said, catching him by the office French doors.

"Whats' the trouble?" he asked. We locate Elizabeth's husband, offer him a deal, done. Then I can join Corbie."

The Judge frowned. "I believe Elizabeth never married and has passed on as well," he said.

"What do you mean? Dead?" Denver asked as he ran his hand through his thick, black hair. Why was this complicated? Why couldn't the Judge find someone else? Denver just wanted to run the herds.

"She hasn't been seen in over a year. Now you understand the problem," the Judge said, smiling and sat down.

Denver dropped into the chair and removed his hat. He understood, yet didn't particularly want to dig up the dead. This property became more trouble than he wanted.

"Have you heard the gossip that Josephine Craft is a witch?" the Judge asked, moving his pencil to tap it against a lamp.

"Sure, everyone knows about the crazy Crafts." Denver twisted the ring his father had given him eight years earlier. The white gold piece with red flecks relaxed him when he touched it. The piece warmed him like no other metal. "Don't tell me you think they're mixed up in this?"

The Judge went to the bookshelf, picked up a scrapbook, and brought it to his desk. He pulled out a newspaper clipping. "Read this."

WITCHES DAUGHTER SCORNED in bold black ink headed the top of the article. The story explained how Mr. Werner never married Sara, the daughter of Mrs. Craft. It claimed that Mr. Werner feared for his life and wished not to wed into a family connected to the black arts.

Denver figured it was a normal misunderstanding between a couple and the paper glorified the reason for readership.

The Judge tapped the paper with his pencil. "The newspaper talks about black magic being used."

"How does witchcraft play into this? Do you believe in it?" Denver handed the clipping back.

"Not sure." He tapped his pencil against his coffee cup, sighed and rubbed his chin, then continued. "Sara was to marry Wilbert because she was pregnant. The child was his, but he married Margret instead, in '75. No one knows what happened

to the baby. Many claimed the witch killed it.” He shook his head. “It was a big scandal back then. Supposedly, Josephine killed the child and then placed a curse on the Werner home. I don’t think witches and ghosts are real, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t foul play. I want to understand it, with your help.”

Denver walked to the fireplace and poked at the ash. His mannerisms often imitated the Judge’s. When he showed at the ranch, he was in poor health and had a bullet in his arm. The Judge helped patch him up. Denver spoke in his feverish condition and the Judge learned of his sad story of growing up with an abusive father. Ever since then, they’d been close.

“I don’t believe in magical stuff,” the Judge said. “But I ran into the Werner’s family cemetery the other day, when I was checking the supplies in the line shack, and there are markers for Elizabeth and her parents. So, who’s living on the property?”

“One of her brothers or sisters?” Denver sat in the chair again.

“No. They moved away after Werner died in ’96. Someone owns that land. Or at least is living on it. I’m certain of it.” The Judge headed toward the door and Denver followed. “See what you can find out, son.”

“I’ll try my best.”

He grabbed Denver’s shoulder. “Also, look into the rumors of a mountain lion north of here. If it’s Rat Tail, we probably will need men.”

“Fine.” He tipped his hat and left.

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His first stop was the saloon. A few beers later, he left, telling the bartender to put them on his tab. He strolled into Mr. Bemis's office, who handled the deeds in the courthouse, where the titles were stored.

"May I help you?" Mr. Bemis asked. He stood behind the counter with an old book flopped open in front of him. On one side of the room sat Bemis's desk, which he never used, preferring his dungeon more. Dark curtains separated the counter from the shelves, which were filled with transactions.

As Denver stepped in, the smell of dusty paper reached his nose, causing an itch. He rubbed his face.

"How's the recording going today?" Denver found making small talk first, often made it easier to get information. People lit up when speaking about themselves. He hoped Bemis would fill in the blanks.

"Fine." Mr. Bemis tucked his head back into his novel, so Denver cleared his throat, since warming up to him wasn't working.

Bemis glared over his spectacles. "Anything else you need?"

He laid his hat on the counter, his words coming in a rush. "I'm looking for who owns the four hundred acres three miles from town that's set in the far northwest corner of Shiloh Ranch. It's for the Judge. I can show you on a map."

"Why didn't you say? Are you referring to Werner's lot?"

"Yep," Denver said, smiling, glad Bemis understood.

Bemis disappeared into the dusty tomb of books and came out with a deed. He laid the book flat so Denver could examine it.

“See, the Werner family purchased the ranch in 1874, before the Judge moved here. I believe he settled here in 1876, if memory serves me. Anyway, he bought up all the land around the Werner’s, so they established an easement on the account, since they needed a way on and off their property.”

“I’ll take your word on it, sir.” Denver leaned in for a closer look at the record. “Who took over after Mr. Werner died?”

Bemis pointed to the title. “His daughter Elizabeth became the owner in 1896. Because she never married, I put the title in her name. She’s the only living relative.” He shrugged.

“Have you seen Elizabeth?” Denver removed his finger from the book before Bemis closed it on him.

“Now that you mention it? No.” He took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirtsleeve. “It’s been two years since her daddy’s death. I had heard she was ill, but... time flies.”

“It’s my understanding she died.”

Mr. Bemis frowned. “Then I need to update my records.” He paused. “If you say she’s dead, why not check with Smyth?”

“Thank you. I will.”

“Good luck. I hope the Judge finds what he’s looking for.” Mr. Bemis spectacles covered his eyes once again. “And Denver, if you find she has died, please inform me.” He waved his hand over his records.

Denver nodded.

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The bell jingled above the door as Denver entered the undertaker's office. The townsfolk placed his business behind the courthouse.

A sign on the wall read, HANDMADE COFFINS TO FIT EVERY SIZE, COME ONE, COME ALL. Smyth's wild sense of humor. His desk crowded out everything else in the front area.

Smyth came in, wiping his hands on a towel, and pulled his chair out. "Howdy. Sit," he said without looking at him.

Denver sat.

"Why if it ain't Denver? How ya been? Haven't seen ya for a while. That's a good thing." He slapped his hand against his leg and laughed while sawdust billowed around him. "What brings ya here?"

Denver smiled and took off his hat. "A question for you." The direct approach worked best with Smyth.

"Here, I thought ya were ed-u-ma-catted. What could I tell ya?"

"My mother made sure I could read and write, but I have questions about the dead, which makes you the right person to ask."

Smyth nodded. "What might ya be asking, son?"

"Have you buried Elizabeth Werner, say, within the last two years?"

"No." He scratched at his whiskers. "I still remember her pa's burial. What a mess with his cattle trampling all over his body. I put parts together, if ya get my meaning." He winked at Denver. "His other children got up and left, leaving

Elizabeth on her own. As I recall, she got sick, never ventured outside, as far as I know.”

“And you know for a fact?”

“Yup. I’m sure,” he said. “The doc mentioned no one dying of any illness except Mrs. Carson. She had an awful cough. Although the witch’s daughter—” He tilted his head toward the house at the end of Main Street. “Sara was in here a year ago, asking about a new girl living in Werner’s home. Seemed odd cause I haven’t seen no strangers in town.”

“Really,” he said, leaning in closer. “Did she mention the girl’s name in all her rambling?” Smyth often put information into a long-winded story, and Denver didn’t want to listen. He’d rather asked specific questions for Mr. Smyth to answer straight up.

“Mind ya, I try not to pay attention to Sara with her mother being a witch, but something like Mary Ann, no, Mary pie, that makes little sense, Mary Jane?” He scratched his head. “Yeah, that’s it, Mary Jane.” Smyth’s chair squeaked as he pushed it forward. “Ya could ask Mrs. Craft or her daughter, but if I were ya, I’d stay far away, if ya get my meaning.” Smyth pointed his bony elbow in Denver’s direction like he was rubbing it in.

“Thank you, Mr. Smyth.” He rose.

“Wait, before ya leave, let me tell ya of old Mrs. Wilcox’s cat. Please sit. Can ya believe she wanted me to give the beast a funeral?” He beat Denver to the door. “Come and visit a while longer.”

“Sorry. My chores are calling.” Denver tipped his hat, walked around him, and left before Smyth went off on another one of his stories.

With the day over, Denver had no actual information, except Elizabeth became a recluse and Mr. Smyth believed in witchcraft. He headed to the ranch, but instead of heading home, he took the fork and sought the trail the Judge claimed led to the caves. He came to a willow tree that hung over the Werner family graveyard. A white picket fence surrounded the small plot. There were four graves. Mr. and Mrs. Wilbert Werner shared the same tombstone. Elizabeth's marker was not a fresh grave, but several years old.

The fourth lay open with Mary Jane's name on it. Branches rustled in the wind, sounding as if the lost souls were crying. Not one to spook easily, Denver dismounted his horse, Joe-D, and peered into the hole. Two rattlesnakes slithered out. Drawing his gun, he shot both dead.

Remounting his horse, he followed the trail east until he came upon a homestead snuggled between boulders and pine trees. Might've missed it if he wasn't paying attention.

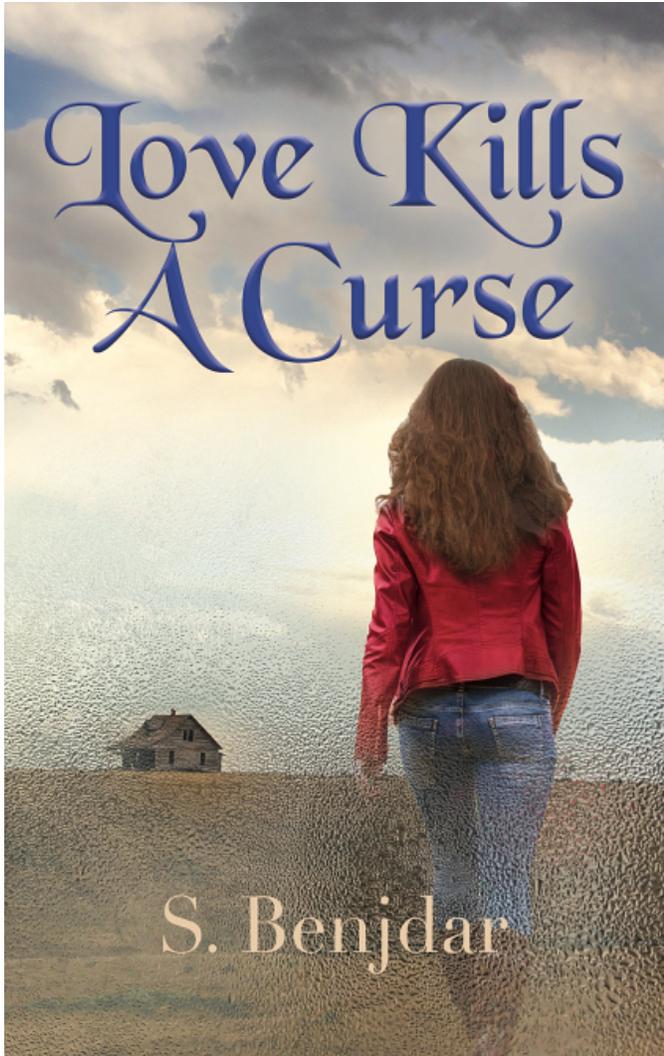
The barn doors stood open, so rather than getting off his stallion, he trotted Joe-D up to the gate. Something was off. A haystack sat to the left of four stalls. "Hello?" Two horses neighed at him, both beautiful: a white mare and a black mustang.

He rode to the house and tied Joe-D to the front post. Smoke rose from the chimney, showing someone was inside. Denver tripped on the missing a step on his way to the front door and ran into the broken rocking chair, bumping his knee. The place needed repairs, but otherwise in good shape.

He knocked with no answer. The stained-glass windows with pink flowers suggested a woman-owned the house.

Trying again with a louder knock, still no answer. He stepped over to the window and rattled it. No one greeted him. He peeked in and saw wild orange furniture and night robes hung on the peg by the steps. A dog's tail appeared by the sofa, then disappeared around a wall. "I'm sorry dog, you're living in such a bright-colored horror." He was glad no one opened the door, and he didn't have to enter the ugly home.

Since no one answered, and he was sure they were home, he might want to pay a visit with the Craft's. Smyth said Sara knew the folks.



*Nineteen year old, Victoria finds herself taken from 2016 and place in 1889 due to a family curse. She struggles to break the curse, and falls in love with a foreman from a near-by ranch.*

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