

Artist Grace Tyne inherits her godmother's property, only to discover that there's at least one ghost in residence.

Moonlight & Grace

By T. J. Banks

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Sallylogue

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ISBN: 978-1-958892-24-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Banks, T. J.

Moonlight & Grace by T. J. Banks

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024903381

Only, in places where bad things have happened, sometimes a kind of strange force lingers on, like lonely pools of water after a storm; and now and then some of us fall into those pools. What you saw wasn't real... It was an echo you heard, not a voice.

-- Richard Adams, Tales from Watership Down

One day Cobbie dared to ask, "Cat, how is it that you, being-er, what you are, can talk?"

The Cat looked back at him with the gaze of an old idol. She glanced at the hobblebush. "Magic," she said. "The world's full of it."

And Cobbie was left wondering if his friend was, after all, a witch. Yet, it seemed that he had never been without the Cat's wisdom....

-- Barbee Oliver Carleton, The Wonderful Cat of Cobbie Bean

Ordinary people have ghosts around them.

-- Samantha Mozart, Begins the Night Music and To What Green Altar

CHAPTER I

The moonlight slipped into the room on paddy-paws, subtle but persistent. It started out by the French doors and spread, creeping up onto the bed and making its way up Grace Tyne's shoulders and onto her face.

She stretched and sat up, the worn spool quilt falling from her shoulders. There was a sound, too...a kind of purring and humming commingled. But Merlin, her old gray tiger boy, was sleeping soundlessly next to her, and Lilah....She sighed. The crotchety black Persian had died shortly before her move here.

Besides, neither of them had ever purred like this.

Grace sat there, listening. No point in trying to go back to sleep now. She pushed the bedclothes back...carefully so she wouldn't disturb Merlin...and swung her long legs over the side of the bed.

She walked over to the French doors, unlocked them, and slid them open. The night was warm. No need to throw a robe on over her nightgown. Besides, her new backyard was screened by maples and birches on both sides and blue spruces – the old Christmas tree farm, now overgrown – in the back.

Grace slipped outside, closing the doors gently behind her. *I must look like a heroine from a Victorian novel*, she thought, grinning crookedly.

Actually, the yard wasn't really new to her. The place had belonged to her godmother, Lib, and Grace had spent much of her time there growing up. Lib and her husband, Mac, had been her parents' closest friends: the house had been a second home, and Lib, a short dark-haired woman, figured in most of her memories. She'd let Grace roam freely through the house and browse among her books, borrowing whatever she wanted to.

“I don’t usually lend my books out,” Lib would say. “But I know Grace will be careful with them.”

She’d found Lib again as an adult. By then, both Grace’s parents were gone, and so was Mac. They would sit and talk or just sit in easy silence, watching old movies together. Lib had even tried to teach her to quilt. But somehow, despite her skill as an artist, Grace never quite got it right.

“Your seams are too narrow,” Lib had said once. “But you’ve got a good eye for color.”

“Well, I’d better,” Grace had shot back, laughing. “Wouldn’t be much of an artist if I didn’t.” And they’d both laughed.

There was a line from an old story about someone or something being a haven, “a candle-lit room” to come home to. Lib had been her candle-lit room.

But Lib was dead now, too. As her final gift, she’d left Grace this house with all its warm, friendly memories.

The burbling sound was louder now, calling her...beckoning her further into the backyard. Lib and Mac had terraced much of it back when she’d been just a kid. And then there had been the gardens.

Gardening had always been a religion with Lib. Whatever she’d done, she had poured her whole self into; but the gardens were where she was most at home. She’d be out there, no matter what the weather. “Yep, she’s out working in the gardens,” Mac had said one sweltering day when Grace had happened to stop by. “Beats the hell out of me.” She’d laughed and headed out to the backyard, only have her godmother meet her half-way, playfully brandishing her long wooden-handled gardening claw. Her brown eyes had been shining, and she’d smelled of bee balm, phlox, and lavender....

Smiling at the memory, Grace wandered further than she’d meant to. And, suddenly, the June night no longer felt friendly.

The trees seemed to be closing in on her, their branches snaking out and grabbing at her. Or maybe it wasn't the trees but something that hadn't been there before, slithering out from under their roots, making her throat tighten. She wanted to move but couldn't.

Then she heard the miaow. Low and fierce. A battle cry.

The cat jumped out of nowhere, moving as swiftly as wind on the water. She continued yowling or chanting – really, it sounded a little like both – until the shadowy presences melted away, and the trees once again became the old friends that Grace had once climbed and played under.

“*Mrr-rt?*” the cat observed with satisfaction. She turned to look up at Grace.

She was clearly an Abyssinian, but she had coloring unlike any that the artist had ever seen before. She was darker than a Fawn Aby but lighter than a Blue one and had a soft smoky-mauve cast to her coat.

She began strolling back toward the house, acting as though she owned the yard. Grace fell in behind her, mesmerized by the moonlight playing off the brushed-velvet fur, giving it a silvery sheen.

The Aby stopped by the French doors; then, effortlessly, she leaped up onto the large wooden electrical-cable spool that Lib had used as a potting table. Her yellow eyes studied Grace thoughtfully.

“Well,” said Grace slowly, “what is it? What do you want to tell me?”

The cat opened her mouth and made a soft whispery sound.

“Are you talking ancient Egyptian?”

The Aby moved closer. She stood up on her hind legs and placed her elegant spoon-shaped paws on Grace's chest. She

began a strange purr song, the same one that one that had awakened the artist earlier.

Grace leaned into the song, much as the cat was leaning into her. The sound spread through her like liquid silver: she closed her eyes and saw herself in a clearing, the leaves of the birches stirring softly in the early-morning breeze. The cat was there, too, a faint lilac shadow among them, her eyes a-glow. *Lighthouse eyes*, Grace thought. She wondered where the phrase had come from...and how a cat's purr could weave such magic round you.

She opened her eyes. She was back in Lib's yard – her yard, she corrected herself. The Aby had all four paws on the potting table now, but she was still staring up at her, yellow eyes curious.

On an impulse, Grace bent over to pick her up. But her new friend wriggled free and jumped down from the spool. She started to walk away, then stopped and turned those lighthouse eyes on Grace one more time before scampering across the silent street.

Silent, yes, but not completely deserted. A short stout woman stood on the other side, right under one of the street lights: she was leaning on a carved walking-stick and wore darkish clothes and a funny woven hat. The Aby ran up to her. She sat down, wrapping her long tail round her paws, and the woman reached down to pet her. Then she slowly straightened herself up and looked straight at Grace, smiling. Her eyes glowed almost as intensely as the cat's, and there was a flash of silver at each ear. She waved.

Grace managed a little wave back. She watched the old woman and the cat disappear through the trees. Then she headed back inside, locking the French doors behind her.

CHAPTER V

“Happy Halloween!” Anne called out. She quickened her pace and was soon at Grace’s side. She might be short and stocky, but she moved remarkably fast.

Grace laughed. “You know, you’re the fourth person who has wished me a ‘Happy Halloween’ on my walk this morning. Have we got a coven of witches in the neighborhood or something?”

The old woman shrugged. “Well, if you went to the town library and dug through some of the dustier tomes, you’d probably find a few old tales. I don’t recall ever hearing about any hangings, though.” She stopped and pointed to a blue-flowered plant along the roadside. “Borage. Coming out pretty late in the season. It usually flowers much earlier.”

Grace knelt down to study the plant. She touched its pointed petals and fuzzy gray-green leaves. It might’ve leapt off the border of an illuminated manuscript. “It’s such a rich blue,” she murmured.

Anne nodded. “It comes in white, too, but I prefer the blue myself. It stands for courage.”

“Then I think I’ll plant some by the house.” Grace sprang to her feet and brushed her hands off against her jeans. They resumed their walk. “So, no hangings but some possible witchery? You sound like you know something of the town’s history. Did you grow up here?”

“Not far from here.” Anne gave her a lop-sided little smile. “And, no, in case you’re wondering, I’m not a witch. My grandmother was one, though.”

Grace stopped short. She could feel her eyes practically bugging out. “You’re kidding!”

“Oh, I didn’t say she was a very good one. But she was definitely a practitioner, as were some of the women in her sewing group, I suspect.” She quirked an eyebrow at Grace. “Witches are really very sad, very disenfranchised people. If they had any true power, they wouldn’t have to resort to spell-casting, would they? Witchcraft gives them the illusion of power.”

“I never thought of it that way.” Grace glanced at the Halloween decorations in the yard they were passing. “So, it’s all bogus?”

“No, not bogus exactly. They don’t have the power in and of themselves – at any rate, my grandmother didn’t. But they can inadvertently open doors best left shut.”

“She must’ve been—” Grace bit back the rest of her words and wished hard for some kind of cosmic do-over.

“A piece of work? Oh, she was that and more.” The stick fell silent. “You know what her last words to me were? ‘You’re going to see fire.’”

Grace shivered. But before she could even begin to frame her next question, she was startled by something warm and velvety against her ankles. “*Mrr-rt-t?*”

She glanced down. There was the Aby, gazing up at her with those beckoning almost-human eyes: she stood up on her hind legs, placing a slender paw on Grace’s knee.

“Graysea likes you, I see,” Anne remarked.

“Graysea?”

“Oh, yes. We’re old friends, aren’t we, Graysea?” The cat ran over and butted her head enthusiastically against Anne’s outstretched hand.

“How come a valuable cat like that is running wild?”

“Her owner died. Graysea got out of the house, and nobody’s been able to catch her since then. Fortunately, she’s a good

hunter, and the neighbors have been kind about leaving food out for her.”

“Including Lib?”

“Including Lib. Graysea always loved Lib’s yard and thought that those lavender bushes were just the ticket.” Anne smiled softly, then glanced at her watch – an old-fashioned gold Morris watch, elegant as Graysea herself. “It’s getting late, and I should be heading back. Coming along, Graysea, or do you want to stay with Grace?”

The cat sat statue-still for a moment or two; then she walked over to Grace. She looked up at Anne – almost apologetically, the artist thought.

The old woman chuckled softly. “It’s O.K., Graysea, my feelings aren’t hurt. You go keep Grace company.”

“Grace and Graysea. It sounds a little cutesy, almost like a children’s story.”

“A good one,” Anne said whimsically. “I’m looking forward to seeing how it turns out.”

Graysea watched with interest while Grace raked leaves. She would not come inside the house; but she ate the food the artist brought her. She then did a brief inspection of Lib’s mums and late roses before slipping away behind the lavender bushes. Grace lingered in the yard until the wind picked up something fierce and drove her inside.

Merlin was waiting for her. He attacked his food like he hadn’t in months. She sat down by the kitchen table and suddenly felt oddly at peace as the afternoon sun danced around, setting everything a-light and making even the grain of the old worn cupboards and the dark corners beautiful. Merlin, finished with his meal, came over and miaowed

conversationally. She reached down and picked him up; he made himself comfortable on her lap, and they sat like that for a long while. Then she draped him over her shoulder: sleepily, he blinked at her and rested his face against her neck. Grace rose from the table and, carrying him into her room, placed him on the cricket chair. She closed the door behind her – more from force of habit than because she thought he might bolt outside when the trick-or-treaters showed up.

Grace had always loved the magic of Halloween. But her cottage had been up on a hill, quite a ways from the road: the kids had either forgotten it was there or deemed it not worth the hike. Lib's house was close to the street, and the street itself was well-lit. So, for the first time ever, she had enough witches, pirates, vampires, and gypsies to satisfy her.

One small girl appeared at the door with her father. She wore a soft yellow nightgown and had powdered every inch of her face and then some.

“What a lovely ghost.” Grace held out the bowl of candy.

The child's face lit up. She carefully chose a candy bar and murmured, “Thank you.” Her father asked Grace how she was finding things.

“I like it,” she replied, startled to realize that she really meant what she was saying. “Of course, I spent a lot of time here as a kid. Lib was my godmother.”

The man smiled. “Well, it's good to see the house lived in again. Lib always made such a fuss over the holidays, especially this one.” He nodded and, taking his daughter's hand, headed down the driveway.

Score one for me, Grace thought, watching them disappear into the night. *I can spot a ghost a mile away.*

The little ghost girl was her last visitor. She went inside and, locking the door, retreated to the gooseneck rocker with Rumer

Godden's *China Court*. Around ten o'clock, she decided to call it a night and headed back to her bedroom, where Merlin was still sleeping soundly on the cricket chair.

She was just about to draw the drapes when Graysea suddenly came to mind. *Maybe I'll just go see if she's O.K. Halloween isn't the best night for a cat to be wandering around on her own.*

Grace unlocked the French doors and stepped out into a silent silvery world edged with shadows. There was something almost unholy about it, she thought, peering under and around the lavender bushes where she'd last seen Graysea. No Aby. No animals at all, really, except for a rabbit-shaped shadow that flickered past her and became one with all the other shadows.

Still, she kept on walking. Then, just past the lilacs and hydrangeas, Grace stopped short. She opened her mouth, but not a sound came out.

A sort of – there was no other word for it – *portal* appeared beyond the remains of the old fence. Through it, she could see another garden, bathed not in cool moonlight as hers was but in the soft wash of daybreak. Pink and blue morning-glories were unfurling, their vines and heart-shaped leaves spilling over the edges of the portal. And she could've sworn that she smelled honeysuckle, even though she knew that the two flowers couldn't possibly be blooming at the same time.

The portal was widening. The strange garden lay before her in its entirety, more beautiful than anything she could ever hope to paint, and she ached to be part of it. Grace took a step forward.

No. Wait.

A shadow detached itself from the others in the yard, taking shape as it moved toward her. "Lib!" Grace cried out, a mixture of joy and uncertainty in her voice.

Her godmother looked very much as she always had – short, compact, and down-to-earth – but her oval face had lost its wrinkles, and the hair framing it was black again. A warm, spicy, and very familiar scent hovered about her.... “Cloves and oranges,” Grace breathed.

Lib’s brown eyes glowed. “The potpourri I used to make. I especially liked it for my Halloween parties, remember?”

The strangeness Grace was feeling around her fell away then. “Is that why you chose Halloween to come back?”

“Now, *that* would be too much like something out of a story, wouldn’t it?” Lib laughed. “Truth is, I’ve been with you since you moved into my house. You couldn’t see me, but Merlin could.”

“I kinda liked my Halloween theory.”

“There are times when it’s easier to make contact,” the spirit admitted, resting her hand on Grace’s arm. The younger woman closed her eyes for a moment, feeling not the expected coldness but a rush of remembered warmth and kindness. “I do like walking between worlds. And I had to see how you and my gardens were doing.”

“What about this garden?” Grace gestured toward the portal.

“It’s something, isn’t it? Everything I hoped to find is there.”

“Including Mac?”

“Including Mac. But it’s not for you – not for a very long time. That’s why I can’t let you step into it. You’ve got such a lot to do yet.” Lib sighed. “But sometimes it helps to catch a glimpse of what’s beyond. To know what you’re fighting for.”

“Fighting for?” Grace echoed. “I don’t get it.”

The moonlight was a little less sharp, and the figure in front of her a little less distinct. But there was no mistaking the

expression in those dark eyes. “Go home now, Grace. Merlin needs you.”

It took Grace a moment to find her voice. “Is he O.K.?”

“He will be. Now go and take this.” Lib slipped something long and wooden into Grace’s hand. *The gardening claw. That’s why I couldn’t find it.* “It’ll help you.” And then she was gone.

Grace turned back toward the house. Suddenly, the way back seemed very long, and the yard was filled with presences, their faces pale flames in the darkness. Grace gripped the claw’s handle hard, keeping her eyes on the light glowing from her bedroom.

Her steps quickened until she reached the potting table and the side entrance. Dropping the claw, she hurried inside and locked the doors behind her. The dimly-lit bedroom with its unpacked boxes in one corner and its walls practically crying out for fresh paint suddenly looked like the most beautiful place in the world.

Then she saw Merlin.

The old tabby was hanging half-ways off the chair. She rushed over and picked him up; he lay ragdoll-limp in her arms, his breathing shallow. *A stroke, that’s what it must be,* she thought as she sat down on the chair, cradling him. She talked softly to him. It was a silly thing to do, she supposed. But it eased the tightness in her chest and made her feel like she was doing *something*.

After awhile, the words dried up in her throat, and she fell to staring at the shadows in the room. The pewter angel stood out among them, dancing in the moonlight. But it probably just seemed that way because her eyes were so tired, Grace thought....

Her head jerked up. The shadows had taken leave, and a soft pre-dawn light was filtering into the room. It was a kind light, resting gently on Merlin, whose sides had ceased moving. But he still felt warm to the touch. He couldn't have been dead long.

And then, suddenly, he was standing in front of her, his sides sleek and his tabby fur glistening again. Merlin looked at her...at the limp body lying in her lap...and then back at her, his green eyes shining with their old playfulness.

Another cat stood by the French doors. His coat was the color of old ivory, and his morning-glory-blue eyes glowed in his red-gold mask. He looked like Houdini, Jill's Flamepoint. But this cat was young and lithe and had all four legs. Dr. Mullen had had to amputate Houdini's left front paw after the accident.

The Siamese went over to Merlin. They touched noses and vanished, even though Grace had never taken her eyes off them.

CHAPTER VI

Grace buried Merlin under a lilac tree in the backyard, not far from Lilah. The bare branches gleamed silvery-gray in the dawn...an apricot dawn shot through with streaks of pale gold. She was just patting the soil down with her shovel when a thought crept into her sleep-deprived brain: *Stones. I need stones to keep him from being dug up.* She vaguely remembered seeing some loose ones up near the tree farm, the day that she'd found the silver earring.

Within a reasonably short amount of time, she'd completed her task. The stones were flecked all over with mica and sparkled in the early-morning light. Grace gave the grave one last look and went inside, too numb for tears.

The house welcomed her sadly but kindly. She plugged in the percolator and put some bread in the toaster.

The coffee helped her aching head a little. But the toast was cardboard in her mouth. She dropped it into the garbage disposal and wandered into her studio. *Drawing will help*, she told herself. She sat down at the worktable and picked up her sketch pad, only to lay it back down again. The room was so empty. Grace reached for the phone and began dialing.

"Mary?" Her voice trembled.

"What's wrong, Grace?"

"Merlin's gone."

"I'll be right over."

It seemed no time at all before Mary was on her doorstep. She wasn't an overly demonstrative woman – she had an allergic reaction to gush, she always said – but she hugged Grace tightly now. "I'm sorrier than I can say. But you gave him a good long life. Remember that."

Her voice was a drawing salve, easing some of the pain. Grace motioned for her to sit down. “Can I get you anything?”

“Don’t worry about me.” Mary studied her. “You look like one of the walking wounded. You been up all night?”

“Pretty much.” She leaned back in the upholstered rocker.

They fell into a tired, friendly silence. After awhile, Grace roused herself. “Mary, could you let Jill know? She was fond of Merlin, and I don’t want to blubber like an idiot telling her.”

Mary stared down at her hands. They were elegant hands with long tapering fingers and beautifully polished nails, and they didn’t match the rest of her somehow. “I wasn’t going to tell you just yet,” she said slowly, “but Houdini died Monday night. Just old age, same as Merlin.”

Grace closed her eyes. Image after image of the beautiful Flamepoint Siamese with the morning-glory-blue eyes...the cat who had come to her lost and injured...ran through her brain. *There should be a soundtrack playing about now – something buoyant and heartbreakingly beautiful all at once....* Suddenly, she thought of the young Siamese who had come for Merlin just as the day was dawning, and she bolted upright.

“What is it, Grace? Seen a –”

“A ghost?” Grace blurted. “I think I may’ve.” And she told her friend what she had witnessed earlier. “I thought I must be imagining it. He did look a lot like Houdini used to. But he had all four legs, and Houdini had only three.”

“He got the missing one back for the journey,” Mary said softly. “And you couldn’t have imagined it – you didn’t even know Houdini was gone till I told you just now.” She smiled at Grace – a warmly wistful smile that revealed the mystic beneath her usual pragmatic self. “I’m glad that he waited for Merlin so that they could cross over together. Didn’t you tell me that they

were friends during the time Houdini stayed with you at your old place?”

“Oh, God, how they played, Mary –!” Grace smiled wistfully. “They used to wrestle with each other and run through the house like little horses. Lilah would watch them with total disdain, like she was above it all.”

“Trust a Persian for that,” snorted Mary, who’d been one of the few humans that Lilah had ever cottoned to. She rose from the sofa. “We’re going out to lunch. My treat. You’re gonna be less than useless if we don’t get some food in you.”

They ended up at a Chinese restaurant down the road, and Grace was surprised to find that she had an appetite. That she could even laugh at some of her friend’s stories. “So, what’re your plans for the rest of the day?” Mary demanded as they were finishing up.

“My neighbor Rita – the one whose dog I just finished painting – invited me to some sort of get-together at her house tonight. Very informal, but I’m totally done in. I think that I’ll just stay home, maybe watch T.V., and crash afterwards.”

“Go,” the older woman told her.

“But why? I like Rita, but I’m not going to know any of the other people there.”

“So, get to know them.” Mary began ticking off reasons on her fingers. “One, you need to put some real roots down here. Two, you don’t need to be sitting around the house tonight, getting even more down in the mouth than you already are.” She paused. “I will be giving you a kitten, just as I promised. But the ones I have right now are too young to leave their mamas yet. Three – you’re not listening to me, are you?”

Grace shrugged. “Oh, I’m listening, all right. I’m just not necessarily agreeing.” She cracked open her fortune cookie. “Whaddya know – this cookie has two fortunes in it. Nice to

have options.” Mary had her very best deadpan face on, but Grace could’ve sworn that the corners of her mouth were twitching slightly.

Grace glanced in the antique mirror above her dresser. Denim skirt and one of her more colorful thrift-shop sweaters. Minimal make-up. So far, so good. But the outfit needed something. She yanked open the top drawer and rooted around till she found it. A silver necklace with a miniature of Merlin that she’d painted back in his younger days, his green eyes friendly and curious and his silvery-gray fur glistening. “You’re coming with me tonight, buddy. I need all the moral support I can get.” She fastened the necklace and added the silver dangly earrings.

The get-together turned out to be much pleasanter than Grace had anticipated. Rita was a good hostess and put her at ease right away; she also showed off Zeus’s portrait, which was hanging over the fireplace. That – and the Merlin pendant – sparked a conversation with another guest, Sue. “I lost Penrod, my corgi-collie mix, a few months ago,” the tall thin woman with glasses explained in a low, hesitant voice. “If I gave you some pictures, do you think you could do a similar portrait pendant of him? That way, I could have him with me...”

“Sure,” Grace said, not trusting her own voice too much. She gave Sue her number.

“Think you could draw me?” a male voice asked.

Grace turned and studied the questioner. Pleasant-looking enough, she supposed, but not exactly her type. And she wasn’t really looking to date anyone. Still, a bit of banter never hurt anyone. “So, how would you like to be drawn, Mr. –?”

“Darby Jensen. I kinda see myself as the hero of an adventure story or maybe” – there was a glint in the pale-blue eyes – “a romance novel.”

He rambled on. Grace smiled, nodded, and thought of other things. Darby was clearly a legend in his own mind, as Mary would’ve said, and didn’t seem to expect, or want, much response from her. Which was good and allowed her to come up with some impressive variations on her smile-and-nod routine while she pretended to listen.

And then she saw the other guy.

He looked at her with amused eyes. He was slim and wiry, and she had to give him points for having a sense of humor *and* a chin, both which Darby was clearly lacking. He made a face at her...a sort of cross between Dick van Dyke’s and a mischievous Muppet’s...and a laugh escaped her.

Darby broke off in mid-sentence and glared. “What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing you said,” she quickly assured him. “Just an odd thought that popped into my mind while you were talking. *Which makes it so much better. Nice save, Grace.* She nodded and began moving out of the corner he’d metaphorically painted her into, only to practically walk into Spectator Guy.

“That,” he said, “was a really convincing display of looking interested.” He laughed and held out his hand. “Robert Forrest.”

“Grace Tyne.” She took his hand, and he drew her toward him. They were, she suddenly thought, like circles overlapping each other. He had a quirky, down-to-earth charm that she found very appealing; but there was something else that she couldn’t quite put a name to. They fell into conversation as easily as two old friends picking up where they’d left off. He was, it turned out, a cousin of Rita’s.

“I don’t usually come to these things,” remarked Rob. He helped himself to an olive off the *hors d’oeuvres* platter and began poking at the pimento with a toothpick. “Napkin, please.”

Grace handed him one. “What are you doing? Surgery?”

“Of a sort.” Rob extracted the pimento and placed it on the napkin. “When I was a kid, my brothers and I used to do this when we went out to this outdoor diner with our parents. They were pick-your-battles kind of parents, so they tended to let the pimento surgery slide.” He frowned at the olive. “Pears are much more fun to work with.”

“Pears?” Grace could feel the laughter burbling up in her throat again.

“Well, you can cut them in half.”

“Horizontally or vertically?”

“Horizontally, of course. That way, you can scoop out the insides and stuff the pear with whatever you can lay your hands on – pepper, salt, bits of a crinkled-up straw wrapper, horseradish, ketchup, you name it. Then you stick said pear back together with toothpicks and a little flour-based paste and offer it to some unsuspecting person, preferably a brother.”

The laughter escaped her then. “So, what do you do when you’re not sabotaging produce?”

“I work at the wildlife refuge to the north of town.”

Her lips twitched. “You’re a caretaker at a wildlife refuge, and your last name is Forrest?”

Rob grinned. “Yep. Dickens himself couldn’t have planned it better.”

They talked awhile longer; then the grief and exhaustion she’d been keeping at bay hit her full-force. “You look beat,” Rob remarked suddenly. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“I live next door,” she told him with the ghost of a smile. “I hoofed it.”

‘Well, then, I’ll walk you to your driveway.’

Grace didn’t protest. After everything that had happened last night, it felt good to have someone alongside her in the darkness. And when they reached her driveway, he didn’t make any cheesy moves, just shook her hand again. “I’ll wait here until you’re inside,” he said. “We’ll talk again. And soon.”

Once she’d gotten the door unlocked, she turned and waved. He returned the wave and began strolling back toward Rita’s house.

Grace had planned to go to bed right away, but an inexplicable restlessness took hold of her. She wandered from room to room, and everywhere she went, she saw Merlin. Not his spirit – although she put nothing past this house – but memory-pictures so vivid, they tore at her heart and brought joy at the same time. Merlin sunning himself on the octagonal table, waiting for her to come in. Merlin sneaking into the linen closet and making a nest for himself among the clean sheets and pillowcases or nibbling thoughtfully on the broom in the kitchen. Merlin lying on her worktable and playing with her drawing pencils.

That’s what non-animal people didn’t get, Grace thought – how empty and echoing rooms became without four-footeds to welcome you.

Eventually, she ended up right back where she’d started, in the living room. Grace wasn’t in the mood for T.V.; but there was one lower cabinet in the built-in wall unit that she hadn’t gotten around to checking out yet. Lib had had a sizable collection of historical novels, she recalled. They might be just be in there.

The cabinet was packed with books, all right, but they were children’s books. Grace had forgotten how Lib had always kept them where it would be easy for her or other visiting kids to get

at them. She reached for *Emily of New Moon* and dislodged a thin, worn paperback in the process. A collection of ghost stories, put out by Scholastic Books...yes, she remembered this one fondly. Grabbing both books, she headed to her bedroom.

Grace settled down in the cricket chair with the ghost stories and went straight to her very best favorite, “The Wonderful Cat of Cobbie Bean.” It was “Puss in Boots” with a Salem twist, and she lost herself in the story, just as she had when she was ten.

She sighed as she finished it. “*Cobbie Bean...Cobbie Bean,*” she murmured. “*Never tell what you have seen....*”

And just then she heard it – a loud insistent miaow. Grace twitched one of the drapes on the French doors aside and peered out.

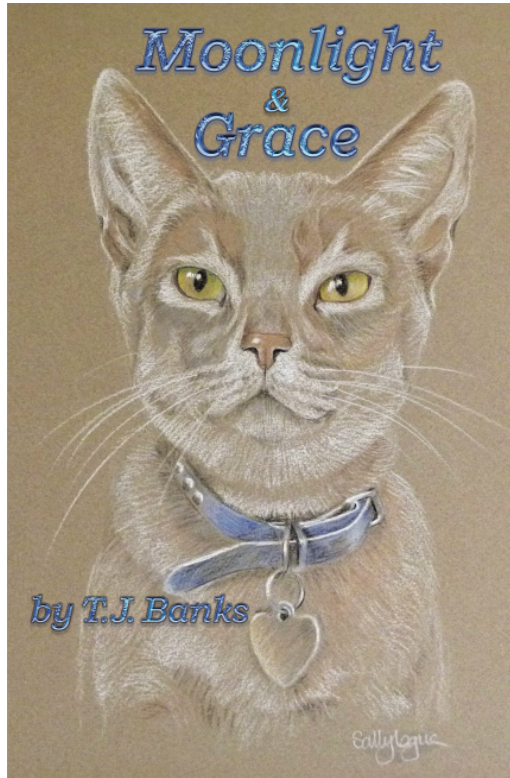
There was Graysea, her lilac fur silver in the moonlight, her eyes glowing.

Grace opened the doors, and Graysea sashayed in. She glanced around the room, taking it all in – the cedar chest that Grace had turned into a windowseat by placing an oblong piece of foam rubber covered in vintage fabric on top of it; the bookcase that her father had re-finished in French Provincial style for her so many years ago; and Merlin’s cricket chair. Then she turned and fixed those insistent eyes on the artist: *Food. Now.*

Grace hurried out to the kitchen to re-fill Merlin’s food and water bowls, still sitting forlornly on the counter. When she returned with them to the bedroom, Graysea was sitting in the middle of the large braided rug, looking every inch the empress. She strolled over the dishes and helped herself to kibble; then, after a quick wash, she leapt up onto the bed, where Grace was sitting. The Aby butted her velvety head against Grace’s face and began burbling away.

“Mumbledy-purr,” Grace murmured drowsily. “You have a mumbledy-purr sort of voice. Very conversational. I like it.” She yawned. “Are you staying this time?”

Graysea’s fierce, thoughtful eyes regarded her steadily. *It’s time somebody took you in paw, human. I’m not going anywhere.*



Artist Grace Tyne inherits her godmother's property, only to discover that there's at least one ghost in residence.

Moonlight & Grace

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