

Ronni Parker doesn't believe in ghosts, but then, she's never met her mother... What really became of her? Was she the young girl raped and then driven mad by the loss of her baby? A tender, tormented soul locked away in a tiny room of a secluded cabin...did she commit suicide? It is the time of reckoning. Because the biggest lie ever told is that the dead bury their secrets.

Echo Of Souls

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ECHO OF SOULS



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Paloma Road ran out at the base of a sloped ridge. An acre of flatland spread wide before it where jagged, gray, stone slates were visible at topsoil level and scattered amid the brush. A good portion of the flats was open and unencumbered. Here and there, bursts of rich color captured her eye. Wildflowers. Some like the ones she had seen growing along the highway. Golden yarrow, and purple coneflowers, and in addition, white boltonia, and yellow-orange coreopsis.

Tension and worry slipped away unnoticed as she let her gaze wander slowly over the expanse. She felt a sense of awe sweep through her. Then rejuvenation as her eyes traveled back to the ridge. Upward. To the top of it. And there, surrounded on three sides by tall southern pines, heavy oaks with thick limbs branching in every possible direction, hardy cypresses, and crested junipers . . . nestled there, like a quiet secret camouflaged by nature, was the cabin.

Here was where her late grandmother had lived. Hidden away from the rest of the world. In a world of her own. So the story went. And Ronni could believe it. But who knew how Ester Mae Whitley had really spent her days. Way out here. So far removed from everyone else. Ronni couldn't begin to imagine.

Nor could she believe this place was now hers. Even sitting here in her car, looking out across the flats and then up again at the cabin on top of the ridge. Seeing did not mean at

once comprehending. It was going to take her a while to get used to the idea.

She got out of her car. Walked to the stone steps leading up this side of the ridge and climbed them eagerly. Once at the top, she took a closer look at the exterior of the cabin.

It ran long, and deep, and its end was flanked by the crowded wood. It was somewhat narrow, she found. No more than thirty feet wide. She surveyed the clapboard porch. It was only three inches off the ground. She wondered if the wood was sound. If not, she wouldn't be falling anywhere. Her feet would simply go through to the ground below. Little chance of a serious injury in that.

She put one foot up. Gingerly testing the wood. There was a bit of squeaking. Some sagging. But that was pretty much the extent of it. She brought her other foot up and moved toward the door. Clutched in her right palm was the key Mr. Saxton had mailed to her the week before.

What would she find inside? Rustic antiques? A wood-burning stove? Some pieces of lovely old furniture she might want to restore? Or pictures! Yes! Surely there would be pictures hanging on the walls. Old black-and-whites. And maybe even one or two of her birth mother. She couldn't wait to see them.

She was about to turn the key in the lock when she thought she caught a glimpse of movement, a fleeting shadow in her peripheral vision, at the small boxed window to her right. Her heart skipped. She looked. Frowning. Her hand around the knob. Eyes searching, but now seeing only the dirt-crusted pane of glass and a rather large spider web in one corner that stirred and fluttered when disturbed by the occasional light breeze.

Get a grip, she told herself. *It's only a spider web.*

Still, her hands were trembling as she turned the key and twisted the knob. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

Put her palm against the heavy wooden door, and gave it a push. It swung inward on squealing hinges.

She stepped over the threshold and stood there a moment to let her eyes adjust to the cabin's interior murkiness. In the ray of sunlight spilling in through the doorway, she watched particles of dust swim in the air, spiraling and swirling before drifting slowly down to the floor again.

She made a quick visual sweep of the front room, but couldn't really see anything yet. Just familiar shapes without details. A sofa. One chair. A small table. She moved further into the room. Taking three more steps. But her progress was brought to an abrupt halt.

Something smelled.

Frowning, she looked to the right. Saw a rickety old dining table. Two wooden chairs. One of them pushed slightly back from the table and angled outward. In the center of the table . . . a candle. Recently extinguished.

Still smoking.

For the longest time, she stood there. Wondering. Trying to reason. Staring and seeing it, but unable to comprehend it.

Nobody could move that fast.

It wasn't humanly possible. She'd had her hand on the doorknob for only a few seconds between the moment she heard the sewing machine stop, and the next, when she'd come into the room. Yet, someone had most definitely been in here. The proof was right in front of her.

She stepped forward. Nerves jangling with emotions. Fear. Uncertainty. Confusion. Heightened awareness. She reached out with one hand and the emotional knot tightened. Like a constricting snake, it squeezed and squeezed. Still, she could not stay her hand. Because sometimes seeing something drew a person's touch, whether the touching was wise or not. And when the urge pulled hard enough, there was no escaping it.

She removed the swatch of cloth from beneath the poised needle. Broke the thread. Held the material on her open left palm and with her right hand, lightly ran her fingertips over the raised stitching that formed the words sewn there.

Ronni.

Mine.

The knot in her chest tightened a little more. She struggled to make sense of the sewing machine and its mysterious, unseen operator, and the equally disturbing and perplexing message clearly intended for her. The message was

about her. Someone was staking a claim. *On her*. As binding in her mind as a written, signed contract. She was somebody's *mine*. Like an object. Something up for grabs. She wasn't flattered.

Her skin crawled as if hundreds of tiny insects were scrambling up her back, to her neck and shoulders, and then down her arms. Using the pores of her skin as footholds for their grappling, scurrying feet. No, she was not flattered.

She looked up. Searching the room visually while standing where she was on this side of the sewing machine. Her eyes saw no other person, but her brain was not fooled. Because the rest of her was sensing what her eyes were not seeing. Feeling with certainty; she was not alone in the room.

Was it the girl she'd seen only moments ago from outside, standing at the front window, looking out and watching as she'd cut and collected the flowers? The girl who had vanished before she could get back inside? Where had she gone? And so quickly. Maybe to the cellar. From there, perhaps out, through the door at the top of the stairs. The one Jack used. And now, left in her wake, was this residual *lingering* of her presence.

And this message sewn on the scrap of cloth.

Ronni.

Mine.

Except the two did not add up. Not in a way that Ronni could compute using sane, logical reasoning. If the girl she'd seen at the window had also been in this room, and had sewn the message on the cloth, how had she gotten *out* of the room with the door shut and Ronni standing just on the other side of it in the hallway? It wasn't physically possible. And yet...she'd heard the machine running. Then stop the instant her hand had touched the doorknob. And she was now *holding* the evidence.

More bugs crawled over her skin. The creepy sensation was so intense this time it compelled her to leave the room. Not to turn and flee--because that would require turning her

back to the room and she was not at all keen about doing that-- but to slowly step backward in the direction of the open doorway, instead. With the stitched scrap of cloth clutched in her hand.

But what was she going to do with it? She wasn't sure what *to* do with it. Should she show it to someone? Who would believe the story behind it? Who would listen and not think she was crazy? Who--

She stopped at the door, still facing into the room. And in that instant knew exactly who she wanted to show it to. But first she needed to calm down. Fearing that if she didn't and approached Jack in such a harried manner, with all of this spook-vibe emanating off of her, he might tuck tail and run. She would have to choose just the right moment. For now, she folded the piece of material and tucked it into the left front pocket of her jeans, then drew the door shut as she backed slowly out of the room.

She walked back up the hall and emerged into the kitchen, where she found Jack standing in the front room just a few feet inside the doorway. Hesitant to come in any farther, it seemed, in the absence of her presence. In his stained jeans, tattered shirt, and torn boots, with his ratty beard and disheveled hair...he could have passed for a wayward seaman.

"Well," she said. She offered him a strained smile. "There's nobody here but us."

He made no comment. Merely looked at her. Then away again. But not before she saw the troubled clouds brewing in his eyes.

She moved to the counter. "You can leave the door open. We'll enjoy the scenery." She motioned him toward the table.

Jack got his feet and legs working. He removed his hands from his pockets and combed his fingers through his hair in an attempt to smooth it down as he made his way to the table.

"It looks different...all made up," he said.

“Why don’t you sit down?” she encouraged.

He carefully drew out a chair. Lowered himself to it, and stiffly sat. Receiving him, the old chair squeaked and creaked. He avoided touching the table. As if he feared he might accidentally knock something off it.

Ronni moved the kerosene lamp to the counter where it would be out of the way for now. Then went to rummage in the cabinet above the sink. Searching for a flower vase. There wasn’t one. But she did find a blue glass jar, and was pleasantly surprised by it. She wondered what it might have contained originally, as she held it beneath the spigot and filled it with water.

“I kind of like that nothing matches,” she said, “but still seems to, somehow.”

Jack cleared his throat. As if he meant to say something, but didn’t. He shifted in the chair and it squeaked again.

“Perfect,” Ronni said, holding up her small bouquet. She had left their stems long, and the three purple coneflowers cheerily bobbed their large heads as she carried them across the room.

Jack looked on as she came to put them in the center of the table. His eyes brightened. She thought he was pleased.

“Did my grandmother do much of this sort of thing?” she asked, touching one of the flowers. Wondering...

“S-sometimes.”

“Wildflowers are so beautiful. She must have filled every room in the cabin with them.”

“No. Just that jar, every now and then.”

She glanced at him with pleasant surprise. “This blue one?”

Jack nodded. “I-I found it by the river one day. Washed up next to a cypress stump.”

Ronni arched her brows. “Really?”

“Thought she might like it.”

"I know I do," she said, looking at the pretty blue jar. It made a lovely contrast to the rich purple hue of the coneflowers.

"You'd be surprised... what them waters turn up."

Ronni paused. "Such as?"

"Just sayin'."

She waited, but he did not elaborate, and it did not appear he was going to without encouragement. Curious, she had to ask. "What else have you found?"

He scratched his chin. Thinking. Finally, he said, "Arrowheads. Pieces of old Creek Indian pottery."

"Really?" She was fascinated.

"That's where the Suwannee gets her name," he said. "It's a Creek Indian word. Means *echo*."

"I heard it today," she said. "When I was out cutting the flowers."

"You can hear it good from here. Specially on a still day."

Ronni went to the refrigerator, which, despite its prehistoric appearance, worked just fine now that it had the power it needed from the generator. She took out the ham. "Anything else?"

"Well..." He thought about it. "Found a gold bracelet once."

"How'd you manage that?"

"Saw it shinin'," he said. "Sparklin' in the shallows. I ate good that night."

"Yeah?" She put the ham on the counter. Glanced over at him a moment, then bent to get the dinged-up roasting pan she remembered seeing in the cabinet below the sink.

"I traded it," he told her. "To a hooch. For some rice and red beans."

Ronni finished rooting the pan out of the cabinet. Straightened. Frowned. "What's the difference between a hooch and say... someone like yourself, Jack?"

“Thought you mighta learned that in them fancy articles you said you read.”

Ronni looked at him. His witty sarcasm surprised her and she laughed a little. “So I’m still learning.”

Jack folded his arms over his chest. Amusement shined in his eyes like something else he’d recently found. He seemed to be settling in a bit. She was glad to see it. And hoped she didn’t wind up saying anything that would change that. But then, there was still the matter of what was tucked in the pocket of her jeans.

Ronni.

Mine.

She put the roasting pan in the sink. Started the hot water running. Added dish detergent. Waiting patiently for Jack to continue. He took his time, but got around to it eventually.

“Well, the river rats...they come and go,” he began explaining. “A hooch camps out. Stays awhile.”

“Oh,” she said. “So...you’re a hooch?”

“No. I’m a floater.”

“You don’t camp? I thought you said--”

“Different kind of campin’,” he said. And at her look of total confusion, he elaborated. “I got a raft, see. At night, and sometimes in the day, I bank her. Sometimes I camp on the shore. Sometimes on my float. A hooch ain’t got no float. Lives on the riverbank.”

Ronni knew this part. She did learn *something* from her reading. “In a shanty. Or a shack.”

Jack nodded. “That’s right.”

“Are there very many women?”

“A few.”

She started scrubbing the pan. Glancing up, she saw a look of remembrance come over Jack’s face. But this was no pleasant stroll down sunny memory lane; no longer did he appear amused. Not even a little. On the contrary, his eyes darkened and his expression changed to one of brooding.

“There was this one,” he said. “We called her Gypsy. Never did know her real name. Came all the way from Louisiana. S-so she said.”

“You didn’t believe her?”

He shrugged. “Where she come from didn’t matter none to me.”

But apparently something did, Ronni thought.

“What was she like?”

“Trouble,” he said, glancing up, then away again. “She took up with a hooch named Roy. Stayed with him awhile. He was good to her. But she was a youngin’. And Roy...He never knew what hit him.”

Was Jack referring to a rocky romance? Ronni was intrigued. “What happened between them?”

“Well, like I said. Roy took her in. When he woke up that mornin’ and found her curled up sound asleep right there beside him, h-he didn’t know what else to do.”

Ronni paused. “Just like that?”

“Some time durin’ the night.”

She finished drying the pan. Set it aside. Moved on. Getting a knife to cut the ham free of its wrapper. “Sounds pretty bold for a young girl.”

“That’s how she was,” he said.

Ronni wanted to hear more. “Tell me.”

“Well, Roy was smitten with her right off,” he continued. “Every time he saw me, h-he had to drag me over for a jar of that brew of his while he went on and on about her. About how guilty he felt ‘cause he was so much older than she was. And about how she was all the time teasin’ him, and with him tryin’ to stay decent by her.”

“I see.”

“Gypsy...” He wagged a finger. “She knew what she was doin’.”

“What do you mean?” She leaned over. Put the ham in the oven. Straightened, and reached for the thermostat knob. Then paused. Remembering that the oven was one of the

excuses she had used in coaxing Jack into coming back for dinner.

But he seemed to be unwinding all right. And if they did have a problem with the oven, they would know it in just a few minutes. She switched it on. Set it to the appropriate temperature. And returned her attention to Jack.

“So she was using him.”

He nodded. “But I never told him so,” he said. “Such a thing as that, a man ought to find out on his own.”

“And did he?”

Quietly, he nodded again.

Ronni turned, deciding that the wine had been chilling long enough, and took a bottle out of the refrigerator. She carried it to the table. Poured some into the two jelly-jar-glasses. Aware that Jack was watching her with interest. When she was finished with the pouring, she passed one of the glasses to him. Took the other one for herself, and tipped it to his.

“Here’s to new friends.”

“And Ester Mae,” he added. Then he raised his glass to his nose. Sniffed. Peeked shyly at her over the rim. And took a tentative taste. Decided he liked it and drank some more.

Ronni smiled. She thought he might even be enjoying her company, in spite of his reservations over being here. She was trying hard to keep things low-keyed for his sake. So far, so good.

She pulled out the chair across from him and sat down. “Tell me more about your friend, and the Gypsy girl.”

He lowered his glass. Looked at it. Placed it on the table. Ronni refilled it. “Well, Gypsy wasn’t too keen on the idea of...” He paused. Looked a bit embarrassed. “Of returnin’ Roy’s affections, you might say.”

“Oh. You mean she didn’t want to have sex with him. Just keep him hoping she might, so she could continue taking advantage of him.”

Jack stared at her. Then raised his glass. Tossed back half of what she'd just poured him. And looked like he wished the wine were something stronger.

"You're a might candid," he said.

"Some might say so." She smiled and flicked her bangs out of her eyes.

"You be a Whitley all right."

Ronni took that as a compliment.

The smell of the country ham in the oven was beginning to permeate. Jack noticed it, too. It registered in his expression. He looked toward the kitchen. Stared that way a moment. Licked his lips. Then wiped the back of one hand across his mouth, and scratched his bearded chin.

Ronni helped herself to more wine and waited for him to continue his story. The delectable aroma of the baking ham was a bit of a distraction for him.

"You were saying?"

He shifted his focus. A bit reluctantly. Ran his hands down the thigh portion of his soiled jeans and returned his attention to their conversation. Settling down again with his glass of wine.

"I reckon Gypsy finally got bored stayin' with Roy. She took to wanderin' up and down the river. Nosin' around some of the others."

"Meeting the neighbors? Making new friends?"

"Don't know as I'd call 'em neighbors," he said. "Spread too far apart for that. And most ain't too social. They don't take too kindly to strangers."

"Why is that?"

"Too much thievin'."

"I see. What about *your* things? Since you're here, I mean. Are they safe? Your raft?"

"There's one thing I ain't got to worry about," he told her. "Dog's on the raft. Won't nobody come near it long as he stays put. And I reckon he'll stay 'till I get back. Always does."

“Dog?”

She thought about the one that had darted out of the brush in front of her car this morning. And wondered if the two might be one and the same.

“Mutt. Showed up one day. Took to me and my raft, for some reason or other.” He frowned. Shook his head. Drank more of his wine.

How fitting, Ronni thought. A stray dog for a stray man. She imagined they were well suited to each other.

“He didn’t like Gypsy,” Jack went on. “Not one bit. Sh-she came wanderin’ upstream that day. Had her hair all tied up and such, in a red scarf that she done weaseled somebody out of. Came flouncin’ up and made like she meant to come on board my float. Didn’t ask if she could. Too used to gettin’ her way with folks. But Dog...He set her straight. So I didn’t have to say nothin’. Didn’t want to. On account of Roy.”

“Ah.” She nodded. “You didn’t care much for her, I take it.”

Something sparked in his eyes. It whispered of things hidden. Of dark secrets best left unspoken. But then he dropped his gaze, and when he looked up again, what she’d seen in his eyes was gone.

“You’d be right,” he said. “She stirred the pot most everywhere she went.”

Ronnie raised her glass. Sipped. Then paused. Something smelled different about the ham. “Just a second, Jack.”

She hurried to the oven. Curious, Jack stood up. Was eager, perhaps, for a first glimpse of his highly anticipated dinner. He couldn’t resist, and came to stand quietly peering over her shoulder as she removed the ham from the oven.

“Oh, damn,” she started, putting the pan down on the top of the stove. “It’s burned.” She turned back around. “Jack, I--” Nearly collided with him.

“S-sorry,” he stammered, stepping back.

“Did I set the temperature too high?” She moved around him. Went to dig the wrapper out of the trash. “I know I’m not the best cook in the world, but . . .” She held it up. “I *can* cook a ham, for--” She stopped. Reading the small black print on the label. Here was something she’d missed. “Oh.”

“It don’t look too bad,” Jack said. He was now standing at the stove; he couldn’t help himself.

Ronni dropped the wrapper back into the wastebasket and sighed. “Pre-cooked.” She touched a hand to her forehead. “Pre-cooked, Jack.”

And if she’d read the entire label and not just the temperature-setting instructions she would have known she had only to *heat and serve*.

Well. The stove was working properly.

“We can make do.” He leaned over it, sniffing.

Ronni looked at him. The sight of him with his nose all but buried in the ham--burned as it was, and still willing to eat it, struck her as insanely ludicrous. She laughed and swatted him on the shoulder.

He blinked at her. Looked at the ham. Then at her again. “I’ve eat worse.”

Ronni wiped at her eyes.

“We just...peel off the...black part,” he said, pointing with one finger.

She shook her head, laughing some more. Then shrugged. “Okay.” If he wanted to eat it, she wasn’t going to stop him.

She sent him to the cellar to pick out a jar of the home-canned vegetables. He came back with snapped green beans. She emptied them into a pot and while they were heating on the stove, she made a fresh garden salad for added variety. Soon they were sitting down to their meal. It turned out that Jack was right about the ham. Once they peeled off the charred outer layer, what was underneath was actually quite tasty.

Jack wasted no time digging in. Ronni tried not to watch him too much as he was eating. He seemed very self-conscious. Eating his ham with his fingers at first. Then deciding to use his fork. It didn't matter to Ronni one way or the other. She was just glad to see he had a healthy appetite.

She thought this might be a good time to try and talk to him again about the girl she'd seen in the window. And she was anxious to find out what he might have to say about the message sewn on the piece of cloth that was still secretly tucked away in her pocket. She wanted to show it to him. Get his take on it. First, though, the girl.

"Jack?"

He looked up from his plate with a mouthful of beans and ham rounding out both cheeks.

"Tell me about the girl we saw at the window." She spoke softly. And continued eating in the hope that he would do the same.

But hunched over his plate, Jack stopped chewing. He looked surprised at first, that she was bringing up this particular subject in the middle of their meal, whether gently posed or not. He finished chewing the food he had in his mouth, and swallowed. Slowly, he lowered his fork. The surprise showing in his expression gradually thinned and bled into the darker shade of resignation. He looked like a man tired of running from something he could not get away from. Something he knew he had to square off with, in the end.

"Please, Jack," Ronni pleaded. "Don't make me think I'm crazy. That *you're* crazy. We both saw her. She's...what? Fifteen? Sixteen? Dark hair, something like mine? Dark eyes?"

Jack did not respond. He only looked at her with that worn expression.

"You pretended not to see her. Why, Jack? So I'd second-guess myself? Is that how it's going to be?"

Still, he said nothing.

“Maybe I could have talked myself into believing it was a trick of the sunlight on the glass. That I only imagined seeing her face. Her *face*, Jack.”

He flinched as if she had physically thrown something at him. She didn't enjoy it. Made more aware of how worked up she was getting, she lowered her voice.

“The thing is, I'm no good at pretending”, she told him. “Never was. Not even as an only child. I never had an imaginary playmate. And I didn't like playing with dolls. My mom finally stopped buying them for me. My adoptive mom, that is. Same difference right? Well, what I really enjoyed was catching beetles. Especially those really bright shimmering-green ones. Not very girly, I know,” she added. “But that's who I am, Jack. So you'll just have to forgive me for not fitting whatever pre-conceived image you might have had of me before I came here. Forgive that I can't force myself into pretending I didn't see that girl standing at the window. I can't do that, Jack.” She slowly reached down. Dug a hand into her pocket. “And neither can you.”

She placed the swatch of material on the table. Left it folded, and pushed it toward him. Curious, he looked at it. But made no move to touch it.

“Open it, Jack,” she prompted. But gently. Then she waited.

He sat staring at it for the longest time. Contemplating. She could see the wondering in his eyes. He was curious all right. But he was also leery. Cautious. Afraid.

She gazed beyond him. To the wide front window. Recalling the image of the young girl, which was still very fresh in her mind.

“She looked so sad,” she mused. “I've never seen a person look so sad.”

Jack slowly reached for the swatch. Began unfolding it.

“Why is that, Jack? Do you know? I think maybe you do.”

Suddenly Jack snatched his hands away from the cloth, as if it were an object on fire and he had accidentally touched it. He stood up from the table. So abruptly, his legs hit the edge of the chair and sent it skittering across the floor behind him.

“I-I should go.”

“Jack, wait--”

She scrambled out of her chair and started after him. But already he was at the door. “Please. Don’t go. I just...I need answers, Jack. That’s all.” She held out her hands. Pleading.

Jack paused. Looked at her. Scowling. It seemed he intended to say something. But he didn’t. He turned away, instead, and Ronni followed. She caught up with him on the porch.

“Come on, Jack. Look, it’s early still,” she tried. “There’s plenty of daylight left yet. Won’t you stay a little while longer?”

He didn’t answer. He hurried across the porch. Avoiding the steps altogether, he took the footpath on his way down the steeply sloping ridge.

She watched as he maneuvered his way to the bottom on quick, nimble feet.

“Jack!”

He did not stop. No matter how many times she called out to him. Finally she gave up and just stood there on the porch. Still watching when he reached the flats. There, he paused. He turned to look back at her. His expression was firm. Resolute. His gaze was steadfast. It stopped her from calling out to him again.

“What are you so afraid of, Jack?” she wondered out loud in a quiet whisper.

Jack raised one hand. Palm facing toward her. She offered a wave in return. Then he turned away. And left her staring after him.

“Come back soon, Jack.” She spoke softly once more in the late afternoon stillness. “We’re not done yet, you and I.”

Ronni Parker doesn't believe in ghosts, but then, she's never met her mother... What really became of her? Was she the young girl raped and then driven mad by the loss of her baby? A tender, tormented soul locked away in a tiny room of a secluded cabin...did she commit suicide? It is the time of reckoning. Because the biggest lie ever told is that the dead bury their secrets.

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