



# Tall Tales OF Mystic Ridge



Shelly Gail Morris



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**SHELLY GAIL  
MORRIS**



**TALL TALES**

*of*

**MYSTIC RIDGE**



ZUMAYA EMBRACES

2023

AUSTIN TX

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to all the wonderful people involved in animal  
rescue

## EVERLY VISITS

***The huge mahogany*** door creaked as Emma walked onto her front porch. Feeling grateful, she took a deep breath of the warm Tennessee air. She detected the slight scent of cinnamon.

Her new home was everything she had ever wished for. The nearly fifty-year-old two-story house had a large wrap-around porch. Window boxes filled with pink petunias added cheerful spots of color to the white cedar siding. Black shutters were just the right touch of Victorian elegance.

She picked up a brass watering can and walked down the three steps to the narrow cobblestone sidewalk then tiptoed barefoot through thick green grass to the water spigot. After she filled the can, she watered the green ferns that hung from each corner of the porch, and the geraniums in ceramic pots on each side of the front doors. She set down the empty can and put her hands on her hips as a warm breeze drifted through her long brown hair. This was always how she had envisioned summertime. Life seemed perfect here in Mystic Ridge.

Well, almost.

It had only been three days since she and her husband Caleb had moved in, and already several of their neighbors had brought over delicious pies, cookies, and muffins—literally a warm welcome. People had told her the residents of Mystic Ridge were eccentric and unusual, but she found them kind and gracious. They treated her like she belonged here, like family. She had everything a woman could possibly want.

Yet a lump formed in her throat. Some things would always be unattainable. She had to accept it. Wrapping her arms around her waist, she went back inside.

Sighing, she leaned against the door. The sitting room on her left was full of brown boxes. In the larger family room on her right, Caleb's favorite wornout recliner and big-screen television had purposefully been placed in the middle of the floor. She cringed. They did not exactly fit into the antique setting of the room.

She had three months to perfect her decorating, and it would not be easy. It was June, and in September she would begin her teaching job at Smoky Valley Elementary School. She looked forward to it. She loved teaching. Knowing she could make a difference in a child's life gave her a real sense of accomplishment.

She sat down in the recliner and watched the lace draperies floating in the delicate breeze. Sometimes, she would dream of a little girl with Caleb's brown eyes and her long flowing hair, but the doctors had assured her it could not happen. When she and Caleb were all settled, they were going to look into adoption. A child would complete her life, and she couldn't help but yearn for one.

The sound of banging interrupted her thoughts. Caleb was upstairs, noisily removing cracked paint from the master bedroom walls.

"Honey, someone's walking over," he shouted.

She rose and rushed to the front door. Once again, the hinges creaked as she opened it. A man she estimated to be in his sixties was climbing the steps.

"Hello," she greeted him.

"Hi, I'm Owen Bryant," he said, extending his hand.

She shook it. "I'm Emma Parsons. My husband Caleb is upstairs making a few repairs."

"Welcome to the neighborhood. Are you new to Mystic Ridge?"

"Yes, we're from Macon, Georgia. My husband's a geologist, and he's here to study the Early Precambrian rocks."

"Oh, well, we've got plenty of rocks here in ol' Tennessee." He chuckled.



“I’m going to teach second grade at Smoky Valley Elementary,” she told him.

“That’s just wonderful. Welcome. Expect great things from this here community. We all look out for one another. Mystic Ridge seems to bring out the best in folks, despite our supernatural reputation. My mama, Violet, lives in the house directly across the street.” He pointed toward a burgundy Victorian home with alabaster shutters.

“I don’t mean to trouble you, but I live about thirty minutes away in Knoxville. Mama will be ninety-four on her next birthday and still insists on living alone. So stubborn. The folks who used to live in your house always kept an eye on her, but they hit it big in the lottery and moved to Florida. Father Harrison stops by once a week. But would you mind watching out for the place?”

“I’d be glad to,” Emma said.

“She’s fine, and totally self-sufficient. There’s a working security system, when she doesn’t turn it off.” He scoffed. “She also has an emergency necklace that will alert me if she needs me. Her groceries are delivered, and I have a service for the yard. I’d just sleep better with a real set of eyes on the place. You don’t have to do a thing, really. Just call me if you notice anything out of the ordinary.” He handed her a card containing several phone numbers. She took it.

“I look forward to meeting her.”

“That’s dandy. Let me warn you, though, she’s a pistol—sweet as molasses, but a sure-fire pistol.” He grinned and shook his head, nodded and then shook his head again. “I hate to leave her, but she refuses to move. She’s got a lot of crazy ideas these days. But I can’t deny her intuition. She’s got a real connection to the Man Upstairs, if you know what I mean.”

Emma felt herself grinning.

“Well, call me day or night if you spy anything unusual. I’d like to introduce you, but I’ve got an appointment in town. Thank you so much.”

“I’m happy to do it,” Emma said sincerely.

He turned and hurried down the steps, and then stopped and looked back at her. "I really think you two will get on charmingly."

Emma was pleased at the thought. "I know we will." She didn't have any friends yet and was excited about befriending someone with a connection to the Man Upstairs.

Owen Bryant dashed across the street, climbed in his car, waved, and sped away.

She gazed down at the card. It was sweet that he still looked after his mama. She decided now was as good a time as any to go meet her. The house was stunning, and she'd love to get a peek inside.

She leaned in the door and shouted to Caleb, "I'll be back in a minute. I'm just gonna run across the street."

She closed the door firmly and headed for the Victorian house. As she approached it, she could see a woman through the window. She was laughing and seemed to be waltzing around the room, her vintage apparel flowing behind her. Emma chewed her lower lip. What had she gotten herself into?

When she reached the door, she saw an old door knocker with a cursive V B on it. Her heartbeat sped up. She knocked, and after a few seconds, the door slowly opened with the same creak she was growing accustomed to from her own door.

A small woman with white puffy hair and stunning sapphire eyes grinned up at her. "Good day!" she squeaked.

Emma instantly liked her. The woman was petite and frail, yet clearly giddy and excited at the prospect of a guest. She wore a pink-and-blue floral dress, and a fluffy white boa was draped around her neck. Tiny white lace gloves covered her hands, and a pink rose was tucked behind one ear.

"Can I help you, sweetheart?" she asked in a tender voice.

Emma looked down at her own attire. Her jogging suit suddenly seemed oddly inappropriate.

"Hello, I'm Emma Parsons," she finally managed. "I'm your new neighbor. I just moved in across the street." She pointed. "I wanted to come and say hello."

The woman stepped aside. "Oh, do come in. Come in, please. It is so wonderful to meet you. My son just left. I was enjoying some

tea. I'm Violet, Violet Bryant. I wasn't expecting visitors." She took deliberate steps. "But I'm so glad you came. So glad. We love visitors. Emma—what a lovely name." She gazed toward the window. "Whenever I meet someone new, I seek the reason our paths have crossed. Most encounters have a real purpose, you know. Everly agrees. I think soon I shall know why we have met."

Emma was in awe of the elderly woman's youthful energy.

"So," Violet continued, "welcome to Mystic Ridge. Is everything going smoothly? I've heard moving is a lot of work. You're going to love it here. Mystic Ridge has quite the ambrosial reputation. I suppose you've heard of my friend Sister Crystal Grace?"

Emma shook her head.

"Oh, you must have a seat. I insist. It's a long sordid tale of loss, and then joy!" Her eyes sparkled.

She motioned to a red velvet couch, and Emma sat. Violet settled in a teal brocade-upholstered rocking chair and wound her gloved hands together.

"Oh, where should I begin? A very long time ago, when we were just girls, Crystal left her duties at the washbucket and went exploring up the ridge. Later, she told me she was summoned by a higher power. I don't know about that." Violet's eyes grew wide, and her tone serious. "Anyway, she got lost. The whole town searched for her for weeks, including me. It was so awful. National television aired our plight. Quite the scandal." She crossed her tiny arms. "But after a candlelight vigil, she showed back up, fit as a fiddle, healthy and unscathed. It was remarkable—some said it was a miracle. She had amnesia and was vague about any memories. Personally, I found her smarter, braver, keen and sensible." She adjusted the boa around her neck dramatically. "Her family was just thankful to the heavens for her return. The whole town celebrated."

Emma smiled. "I love happy endings."

"On her eighteenth birthday she entered the Sisters of Southern Mercy Convent and became a nun. It's very close by, and I just adore her visits. She brings me homemade grape jam. I'll share some with you. We see quite a lot of her. She's close with Everly, too."

“We went by a park near the base of the mountains,” Emma began. “I think it was Crystal Caverns Park.”

“Yes,” Violet said. “It’s named after her. They give tours and offer hiking up the ridge and into a few of the caves.”

“I must take a tour.”

“Oh, yes. Quite exciting. I will introduce you to her. I think she will like you.” She paused. “Everly thinks she will, too.”

Emma wondered who this Everly person was, but she focused on her surroundings.

“Your home is stunning.” There were paintings on every wall, and each had its own dainty spotlight. A painting of Jesus caught her eye. She rose and walked to it.

Violet stood and moved beside her. “That’s a reproduction of *Christ Blessing Little Children*, by Charles Lock Eastlake, from eighteen-thirty-nine. It’s my very favorite. And see this little figure in the back, almost hidden by her shawl?” She pointed. “I always joke that it’s my friend Sister Crystal Grace, because it looks just like her, and she plays along and says that Charles was bossy and grated on her nerves while she posed for him.” She laughed and placed her gloved hand on her stomach. “She just loves to tickle my funny bone. Whoever heard of a time-traveling nun?”

Emma chuckled and studied the painting; it was mesmerizing and seemed to float on the wall. She felt that the characters represented feelings of deep love and true adoration. She’d never experienced anything like it.

“It’s quite heavenly.”

“I know,” Violet whispered. “Reaches right into your soul.”

The room was filled with porcelain trinkets and glass figurines. She noticed four porcelain white kitten figurines, their eyes jeweled. There was a tiny gold Egyptian pyramid, and a lifelike owl, also. The entire home had an ethereal glow and smelled of vanilla and fresh flowers. Dozens of family photos filled the tables.

“You rest yourself, and I will be right back,” Violet said, and slowly made her way from the room.

Emma sat down, feeling like she had traveled back in time herself. Violet returned after a while with a tray containing a small

teapot and two porcelain teacups.

Emma stood. "I'll do that. Please, let me." She took the tray.

"Aren't you a sweetheart." Violet accepted the offer and sat down. "My hands aren't as steady as they used to be."

Emma put the tray on a mahogany coffee table and poured a cup for Violet and one for herself. She returned to the soft couch. When she took a sip, the sweet honey flavor relaxed her.

"This is delicious."

"Thank you. Everly taught me to use a touch of honey and cinnamon in my tea." Violet pressed her lips together thoughtfully. "The neighborhood has really changed. I remember when I first moved in—I think Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House, but I can't be sure. My husband Gene was so proud of this place." She sipped tea. "My favorite movie, *The Search for Bridey Murphy*, was on at the picture show. If I remember correctly, I saw it three times. Teresa Wright starred in the movie, but I think Vivian Leigh would have been a better choice. Did you see that picture?"

Emma thought for a moment. "No, I don't think I've ever seen that one, but Vivian Leigh was such a talented actress."

Violet waved her hand. "Without saying, without saying, marvelous, simply marvelous. I haven't been to a picture show in years. My son has tried to take me, but I prefer remembering my old favorites. Did you meet my son?"

"I did," Emma replied. "A pleasure."

"Handsome devil. Everly and I were just talking about Owen. He's starting to show his age, you know. He's a dear boy, just a dear. But he's not so little anymore. Do you have any children?"

"No," Emma said, and then found herself revealing a secret she hardly ever divulged to anyone. "I'm sad to say that I can't have children."

Violet's brows creased. She sipped her tea thoughtfully. "Doctors don't know everything."

Emma poured herself another cup, embarrassed that she'd shared something so personal. Violet smiled at her, relieving her awkwardness.

“Now, exactly what divine intervention brought you to us here in Mystic Ridge?”

“My husband Caleb recently finished his masters in geology.” She chuckled. “He’s obsessed with rocks and gems and crystals and dating them. His employer asked if we’d consider moving here. We came up to have a look around and saw the home across the street. The realtor was in the yard putting a sign up. She let us go inside, and we knew we had to have it. We placed an offer, and Caleb agreed to relocate, all on the same day. We both felt it was meant to be our home, and we didn’t even look at any others.”

“My, my, I’m so pleased. That’s wonderful. How long have you been married?”

“Five years. While we were here, I applied for a teaching job.”

“Oh, a teacher, a teacher. Did you hear that, Everly?” Violet said as she clapped her gloved hands together.

Emma looked around the room, wondering about this person Violet kept talking to. Then she remembered Violet’s previous comment.

“Oh, yes, yes, I’m starting at Smoky Valley Elementary in September. I teach second grade.”

Violet stood. “That’s splendid, just splendid. Let me get us something special.” She slowly but purposefully stood and headed off for the kitchen. Emma could hear her tiny voice as she talked to someone. Her voice was soft, but her tone was serious.

“I think this is the answer to our prayers. She seems genuinely nice, and smart, too, and she’s beautiful to boot. It’s a divine opportunity for you, darling. This is it. This is what we’ve been waiting for.”

Emma wondered if someone else was in the kitchen, but she only heard Violet’s voice.

Violet reappeared in the doorway with a silver tray of pink petit fours. “These are simply delicious, even if I do say so myself. They take an entire day to prepare if you do it properly.” She placed the tray on the coffee table near the tea.

Emma tried one. It melted in her mouth. “Oh, my, yummy! You must give me the recipe.”



Violet held up a finger. "Only if you promise to come visit me again very soon. I want to know all about you."

"You've got a deal," Emma agreed.

They spent the entire afternoon discussing treasured recipes, flowers that grew well in the area, and neighbors who had come and gone. Emma found that she hung on every word Violet said. She thoroughly enjoyed the day, and she thought Violet had as well. She felt grateful she had met such an intriguing, almost inspiring woman. Violet was proud of her life experiences and the relationships she treasured. She was also sharp as a tack.

They said their goodbyes as the sun began to set, and Emma returned home to the overwhelming job of unpacking. Violet filled her thoughts. She went over their conversation again and again. There was something unique about her elderly neighbor, something peculiar. She wanted to know more about her and this Everly person.

That evening, as Emma and Caleb relaxed on the front porch, she told him about Violet; but she had difficulty verbalizing the strange connection she felt to her. He was pleased she had made a new friend. As the sounds of crickets and frogs filled the night, Emma felt as if she was exactly where she was supposed to be. It was calming. But she also felt there was something on her horizon, something in her future, something unusual, and only Violet had the answers.

At eight o'clock she watched Violet's lights go out. She stared at the home, longing to visit again as soon as possible.



When Emma woke, she found a note from Caleb—he had gone to the hardware store to buy a few painting supplies. She hoped it was more than a few.

She showered and put on a robe. Boxes waited to be unpacked in almost every room, but all she could think about was paying another visit to Violet. She remembered a recipe her aunt had given her. It was for Georgia pecan banana bread. Excited, she set about making it, but as she prepared the bread, she felt oddly nervous.

She whipped together two loaves in no time. While it was cooling, she went upstairs to search for the perfect outfit to wear. She knew

she was behaving irrationally, but for some reason, all she cared about today was impressing Violet. She desperately wanted her neighbor to like her. As she dug through suitcases and boxes looking for an appropriate outfit, she heard Caleb downstairs.

“Honey, I have a surprise for you,” he shouted. “Come here, hurry.”

Emma hurried down. Caleb was holding a large brown box. She peered into it. A large white cat with emerald eyes looked back at her. Then, a tiny white kitten appeared under the cat’s paw, and another one after that.

“Didn’t you have a white cat when you were a child?” he asked.

“Yes.” She nodded. “This sweet mama looks exactly like her. Oh, Caleb, they are so adorable and calm. Where did you find them?”

“When I came out of the hardware store the box was right beside my truck door. They looked up at me, and I was smitten. I couldn’t just leave them.”

“Someone knew you were a big softie. You did the right thing.” She kissed him over and over until his face turned a bright shade of scarlet. “I love you so much.”

Caleb had a huge heart; it was one of the things she loved most about him. He had compassion for all living creatures. And this was the most incredible housewarming gift she could have ever imagined. She caressed the mother cat, and then the kittens.

“We have plenty of room. Here, give them to me, and you go find a blanket.”

He handed her the box and dashed away. “We’re a family now,” he bellowed.

She chuckled.

After a few minutes, he returned with a blanket and placed it in the box as Emma positioned the kitties on top. They found a warm corner in the kitchen with just a touch of sunshine. The mother and kittens snuggled close and fell fast asleep.

Emma hugged Caleb as she watched them. “They are just the sweetest. We’ll need some food, litter, and a bowl for food and water.”

“I know. I know. I’ll run back up to the store.” He kissed her on the cheek. “I forgot dropcloths, too, and paint thinner. I don’t know where my head was.” He grabbed his keys and disappeared.

Emma watched the animals. They stretched out and purred, content in their new surroundings. It was as if they belonged here. She felt it, too.

Suddenly, she had an idea. Maybe Violet would enjoy seeing them. Her mind raced. Yes, that was a novel idea. She needed a reason to show up at Violet’s door. This would work. Eagerness consumed her.

She located the perfect ensemble—a purple sundress with lace and flowers around the neckline. She dabbed a bit of cologne on her wrists and pulled her hair into a neat bun. After she was satisfied with her appearance, she skipped through the house and into the kitchen. She whistled a cheerful tune as she sliced a loaf of banana bread and wrapped it. Caleb arrived home just in time.

She rushed to greet him. “Honey, I really want you to meet Violet. How about if we take the kitties over? I know she’d enjoy seeing them.”

He put his bags on the kitchen counter and smiled at her. “You think so?”

She nodded excitedly.

“Okay.” He took in her neat appearance. “I can see this unpacking and remodeling thing is going to be a long, long process. It’s all good, though. I do love our new home...” He paused, “...and you.”

She kissed his cheek, then opened the door and followed him down the front steps.

“It’s odd, really. I feel a strange anticipation when I’m with Violet. It’s like I’m waiting for her to tell me something very important. I want her to like me. I can’t explain it.”

He chuckled. “You spruced up, lookin’ good.” He lifted the box. “I’ve been thinking of names—gemstone names, crystal names.”

“Oh, good.” Emma peeked at the momma, concerned she might be wary. But she was licking her babies trustingly.

“Hold that box tightly. Be careful.”

They proceeded across the street. When Emma knocked on Violet's door, she thought she heard music.

The door creaked open, and Violet tilted her head sideways and smiled at the couple.

"Hello, Emma, my new friend. It's so nice to see you. Is this your husband?"

"Yes. Violet, I would like you to meet Caleb."

Since he was holding the box, he nodded politely. "Pleased to meet you."

Violet blushed. "Look, Everly. He's very handsome."

Caleb looked behind her. The cat and kittens began to squirm.

Violet squinted at him. "What do we have here?"

He placed the box on the ground.

Emma spoke up. "Caleb found a sweet mother cat this morning, and two kittens. Someone left them right beside his truck."

"An unusual welcome," Violet commented. "But quite typical."

"I had a white cat when I was a child," Emma told her. "These three are all white."

"Really?" she drawled, tapping her chin. "Childhood memories come to life."

Emma continued. "We're going to keep all three. I'll have them altered before they can reproduce, and I'll keep them indoors. They won't bother you. I thought you might like to meet them."

Violet peered into the box. "Oh, like a powder puff or freshly fallen snow. Simply lovely." Her eyes filled with moisture as she began petting them. "I bet Sterling is the culprit. He's a big old pristine alabaster male that lives at the senior home. They say his sapphire eyes are hypnotic. He's been there since I was little."

Caleb glanced at Emma.

"They're precious, just precious," Violet said. "Caleb, you are too kind, too kind. Pardon me just one moment, please." She swiftly shut the door.

Caleb shrugged. "What's that all about?" he asked.

"Shhhhhh," Emma instructed. She needed to hear Violet's voice. She absolutely had to hear what she was saying. She placed her ear near the door and listened intently.

“Everly, Everly,” Violet was saying, “he’s a dear man, and she’s a charmer. Think about it. I implore you. I’m not going to be around forever. Your time is running out. They’re lovely people.”

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Violet grinned. Emma straightened up and smiled nervously.

“I brought you some banana bread.” She held it out.

“Well, you must come in, and we will enjoy it together.”

Emma turned to Caleb. “You take the kitties back home—they’ve had a long day. I’ll be there in a little while.”

“Okay. It was nice to meet you, Ms. Violet,” he said. “You gals have a good afternoon.” He lifted the box and headed back across the street. Emma blew him a kiss and followed Violet inside.

She handed Violet the bread and studied her as she walked toward the kitchen. Never in her entire life had she been so curious about anyone. She just had to know all about her and this Everly person.

She sat on the same red velvet couch she had occupied the previous day. Gazing around the room, she was again in awe of this woman who managed so well all by herself. A few minutes later, Violet came in with the bread on a silver tray. Her arms shook.

Emma rose. “Please, let me help you.” She took the tray and placed it on the coffee table.

“There’s tea in the kitchen, if you wouldn’t mind fetching it, my dear. I’m a bit tired today.” Violet sat down. Emma handed her a ruffled pillow and a small blanket that were lying nearby.

“Please, you rest! I’ll get the tea.”

She went into the kitchen and found the water still warming on the stove. She located the teapot and filled it inside when the kettle came to a boil. As she looked for cups, she noticed several bottles of medication. Each one was full. Was Violet not taking her prescriptions? Maybe she should call Owen. Yes, she would.

She found some cups and returned to the living room, setting the tea beside the bread. She could tell Violet had spied her worried expression.

“I’m fine, really,” she said, guessing the cause. “Those pills make me groggy. I still have a few things to take care of. All that old

medicine can't help me. I don't expect to live forever. Why would anyone want to?"

Emma wasn't sure how to respond. She poured Violet a cup of tea, handed it to her, and sat back down.

Violet's thin lips curved upward. "Actually, I'm looking forward to my journey. I have so many old friends and loved ones to visit. I'll see my Lily again."

Emma felt a wave of panic. The thought of Violet dying after she'd just met her was unbearable.

"Don't worry about me, sweet child. Everly has told me all about everything."

Emma's heart skipped a beat. She seized the opportunity. "Violet, who is Everly?"

"Oh, she's my traveling companion. She's been here with me for a few years now. Young Everly came to ease my fears and accompany me to heaven, but my heart just keeps on beating. We've had a grand time together, sharing stories. The funny thing is that I think things have really taken an unusual turn." She leaned close to Emma. "Don't tell anyone, but I think I ease her fears."

Emma nodded, completely confused by what she was hearing.

"You see, Everly is a scared soul. She lived on the western frontier in the eighteen-hundreds. It was a filthy, lawless place. There were constant attacks and wars—no one was safe. As a result, her family was always on the move, and the poor thing never had a real home. She spent months in rickety covered wagons, battling storms, heat, cold and hunger. Her family joined with another family for safety's sake, and she fell in love and was engaged to be married. Her new beau brought her joy, but it was very brief. She fell ill, and her life ended tragically. It was an extremely oppressive existence. Her fears are completely founded." Violet shook her head. "I've been teaching her all about modern life. She's very intrigued by it all."

Emma was speechless and uneasy. She reached for a piece of banana bread and began to nibble it.

"She loves stories. I read to her every day. She likes you, you know." Violet added nonchalantly, helping herself to a piece of bread. They ate in silence for a moment.



Violet put her tea and bread down, clasped her hands in her lap, and sat a bit taller. She examined Emma closely, her eyes narrowed. She placed a hand on her chest, turned and gazed out the window.

"I've felt like it was my time to go for years. I've been ready. But something has kept me here. I think it is my love for Everly, maybe my longing to see her live a peaceful, happy life. She deserves it. I've prayed about it for many hours. Love has kept us here, both of us." She stared deep into Emma's eyes. "Come here, please."

Emma put her tea and bread down and went to kneel beside her. Violet took hold of her hands.

"It's you, my dear. I've been waiting for you. *We've* been waiting for you. Everly needs you. It's her turn."

Emma stared into Violet's serious blue eyes. She didn't know what to say. She was utterly confused.

Those eyes pleaded with her. She felt an unexplainable desire to accept what she was hearing, even though she did not understand. Upsetting Violet was the last thing she wanted to do.

She nodded in agreement.

A gracious smile slowly spread across Violet's face. Her small body slumped as she relaxed.

"I'm so relieved. I can't tell you how long I've worried about her. I couldn't leave her all alone. Things will work out now..." She hesitated. "...now that you're here. It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders and my heart. One never knows what the future holds." She released Emma's hands, took a deep breath, her small chest rising and then lowering. "I'm suddenly very tired, my child. Would you help me to bed?"

She stood, and Emma helped her to a small room just behind the kitchen. It was furnished in soft white and yellow and had gold paisley wallpaper. A walker was shoved into the corner, buried under blankets and throw pillows.

As Violet went into the bathroom to change, Emma took the dishes into the kitchen then returned to the bedroom. She found Violet in a long white gown with lace around the neckline and wrists.

She grinned. "You look like an angel."

Violet chuckled. "I was thinking the same thing about you."

Accepting Emma's help, she climbed into bed, and Emma covered her with a pastel patchwork quilt that lay nearby. Violet looked up at her.

"Windows of time can be gracious here in Mystic Ridge. I'm so pleased you're the one. You're going to get along splendidly. You both possess so much compassion. She can teach you a lot about embroidery, and she loves to sing. She loves sparkly things and is obsessed with emeralds. She's an eager learner. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Take good care of her." A lone tear crept down her cheek. "I'm so very grateful. Goodnight, my dear." Her eyelids fluttered, and then closed.

Emma was terribly confused and concerned. Violet seemed so exhausted and had spoken so strangely. Maybe that was her nature, but Emma's mind swirled with possibilities and scenarios. Violet needed to see a doctor.

She washed all the dishes and carefully dried them. She wiped down the counters and dusted and straightened all of Violet's precious knick-knacks. Before she left, she peeked into Violet's room and watched her sleeping. She looked peaceful.

She made sure all the doors were locked and crossed the street to her home.

That evening, Emma called Owen. She thought he should know that his mother had not been taking her medications, and that she seemed very fatigued. She also told him Violet seemed to think she had an invisible friend named Everly. He said he had heard talk of Everly for years, but it was all harmless. He thanked her for her concern, promised to ask Dr. Abernathy for a home visit, and vowed to stop by himself early the following day.

As Emma lay in her bed that night, she was confused by all the things Violet had said, and about her own fascination with Everly. The box containing the mother cat and kittens was on the floor beside her. Their presence gave her comfort. She watched them as they cleaned each other, cuddled, and purred. There was something

so comforting about a mother and her babies. She petted them gently.

She remembered Violet's earnest expression as she spoke of Everly, the eighteen hundreds, and Everly's fascination with modern life. Violet had spoken so matter-of-factly, like it was normal to have friends from the Nineteenth Century. Maybe Everly had been a character from a book. What if Everly was a spirit who lived in the house? She did believe in spirits and ghosts, she always had. Maybe having an imaginary friend made Violet feel less alone. And that was okay.

But why would Violet say she'd been waiting for Emma? What was she supposed to do? It was beyond puzzling.

She tossed and turned for hours, and then finally succumbed to sleep.

The next morning, Emma stretched and went down to the laundry room to get the kitties a warm sheet from the dryer. As she strolled through the hallway to the stairs, she looked out the window and saw Owen's car in Violet's driveway. To her horror, she also saw an ambulance. She ran outside in her pajamas, Caleb behind her. She stopped on the front porch, trembling. She felt Caleb place a jacket around her shoulders.

They crossed the street together as the ambulance doors closed. Owen appeared at the front door of the house.

"What happened? Is Violet okay?" Emma said in anguish.

He hung his head. "Just after I got here this morning, she passed."

Emma's knees wobbled, and Caleb grabbed her tightly around her waist.

"Oh, no. Not now! She said she had plans for me," Emma cried. "I need to talk to her. I really do."

Owen hung his head. "I'm so sorry. She was in no pain, I assure you. And in her last moments, she spoke of you. She had a box of items all ready for you. Hang on." He went inside and returned with a

large cardboard box. "Here. It's marked *Everly*, but she specifically told me to give it to *you*. It was her last request."

Caleb took the box as Emma began sobbing. "Thank you," she managed.

Poor Violet. Her new friend was gone, and she still had so many unanswered questions. Now she would never understand what plans Violet had for her.

She looked at Owen. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Owen. She was an incredible woman, and even though I only knew her a few days, I'll never, ever forget her."

Owen smiled weakly. "She was one of a kind."

"Is there anything we can do?" Emma asked.

"Sister Mary Jean Stevenson and Sister Crystal Grace are on their way. They've taken control of most of the details. Mama had relayed all of her wishes to them."

Caleb patted him on the shoulder. "We're here for you. Please, let us know when the service will be."

"Will do." Owen turned and went back inside the house.

Caleb escorted Emma home. She cried openly and walked straight upstairs to the bedroom. Caleb followed with the large box. He placed it on the floor near the window. She sat on the edge of the bed and stared at it.

"I'll be right back," he said, and dashed from the room.

Emma felt drained. Why, oh, why had this happened? Violet was her only friend.

Caleb returned with a bottle of water and handed it to her. "I guess it was her time. I'm glad we got to know her."

The momma cat jumped in Emma's lap and nuzzled her chin. She petted her as her mind swirled.

"Me, too. If we'd moved in a few days later, I might never have even met her." The thought was almost painful.

"You lay down for a while." He kissed her on the forehead and left the room.

She situated the cat on her pillow and felt calm come over her. The kittens chased each other under the bed. She rose and walked

to the box Violet had given her and peered inside it. She lifted out the painting of *Christ Blessing Little Children*.

“Oh, my,” she breathed.

It was magnificent.

*Thank you, my friend.* She took it to a corner of the room and leaned it against the wall. It looked perfect. It evoked peaceful feelings inside her. They would hang it today.

Returning to the box, she saw a worn book titled *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. She took it out. There was a VHS tape of *The Sound of Music*. There were several Little House on the Prairie books, and a couple of Nancy Drew titles and two cookbooks. She vowed to read every word. She touched each one, honored that Violet had shared her favorite things with her.

She lifted out two lace handkerchiefs that were folded neatly, and a pair of pearl-embroidered gloves—dainty, shimmering.

A glat black velvet box was the final item. Her knees felt shaky. She sat down on the floor and took it out. She slowly opened it and revealed a spectacular emerald necklace with three stunning stones and a thick silver chain. To her, it looked like a piece that would adorn the neck of an Egyptian pharaoh.

The lush green hue seemed to glow against the dark background. Dangle earrings with substantial round stones were secured in the middle. The jewelry was mesmerizing, haunting. She felt that these pieces had an ancient story, a tale she would never know.

Exhaling, she closed her eyes. This necklace had a past, and a future—a future that somehow involved her.

An uneasy churning knotted her stomach, and she felt a slight cool breeze swirl around her. She opened her eyes.

“Thank you, Violet. Thank you so much. I will treasure these things forever.” She put the items back in the box. The kittens halted their romping and regarded her curiously.

Suddenly, Emma felt odd, as if she had pried through someone else’s belongings. Everly’s belongings. She thought about that poor young girl, living and dying so many centuries ago. It didn’t seem fair that she had suffered so much and died so young. A lone tear

cascaded down her cheek. If only Violet could have lived longer. She longed to know more about Everly.

She rose and looked out the window at Violet's house. Deep sadness panged in her chest. She missed her.

She went back to the box and took out a few of the books and tucked the box underneath the bed. She couldn't believe Violet was really gone.

### ***Three months later***

Caleb was up on the roof repairing gutters when Emma swung her car into the driveway. She rushed to the side of the house.

"Caleb, Caleb!" she shouted. "Get down here! I have news. It's Everly, I just know it."

Caleb carefully climbed down the ladder. "Calm down. Calm down. What's 'Everly'?" He held her shoulders and gazed deeply into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Of course." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him repeatedly. "You're never going to believe it." She couldn't contain her joy. "I went to the doctor today. I was gaining weight, and I thought I felt something—something inside me." She released him and threw her hands up in the air. "I'm pregnant."

"But..."

"Yes, it's a miracle. And everything is fine, truly. My uterus looks perfect, and my blood work is superb. Everything is wonderful. I'm right on track. I feel tired, yet energetic. I even heard the baby's heartbeat, I swear." She couldn't contain her excitement. "I was as shocked as you."

Caleb picked her up and twirled her around in circles. Then he carefully placed her on her feet. "Are you sure? Really sure?"

"Yes, you're going to be a daddy!" She laughed. "And I'm going to be a momma."

"This is incredible. I...I can't believe it." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I gotta get a little basketball hoop, and one of those tiny baseball mitts."

Emma laughed and shook her head. "Darling, it's a girl."



Caleb tilted his head sideways. "It's so early. Did they do a sonogram?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

A slow, thoughtful smile tipped the corners of her mouth.

"It's her turn."

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