

DARK DREAMER

A DARK VISTA ROMANCE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Last night I dreamed of Iris,” Phoebe said. “I promised her I would come.”

Cara looked up from the morning paper. “Shall I call our friend?”

Phoebe’s face fell into shadow. “Perhaps it was my imagination.”

Cara took her twin’s hand. “You say that every time.”

Where two paths crossed beneath the low silvery boughs of a huge birch tree, a woman lay on a quilt of brown and yellow leaves. Her hands were roped behind her back. Twigs and earth matted her honey-colored hair.

She lifted her head as Phoebe knelt. “You found me. I knew you would.”

Phoebe unfastened the rope and cradled her. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry. I tried to come sooner.”

“It’s okay. You’re here now.” The woman tried to smile, but her face was contorted with bruises.

“Who did this to you?” Phoebe asked urgently.

“I don’t know his name.” Her head grew heavy on Phoebe’s shoulder. “I’m so tired.”

“No. Wait!” Phoebe shook her.

“Tell my folks I love them.” She closed her eyes.

“Iris!” Phoebe begged.

The body in her arms felt like lead. She sank down on the leaves

next to it and sobbed uncontrollably. The smell of earth and decay invaded her nostrils. A hand touched her shoulder.

“Phoebe?” Cara’s voice. “Sweetheart?”

Phoebe rolled over, blinking into the light.

Her twin cupped a cool hand to her cheek. “Is this the place?”

Phoebe nodded. Exhaustion drained the strength from her limbs. Her legs wobbled as Cara helped her up.

Standing a few yards from them, in suit and tie as always, Special Agent Vernell Jefferson put his cell phone away. He looked awkward. Men like him folded their arms when their instinct was to reach out.

“Is she okay?” he asked Cara, as if Phoebe couldn’t speak for herself. That was nothing unusual. Most of the world preferred talking to Cara.

The FBI agent drew a few steps closer, his keen brown eyes assessing the leafy site. A long, rectangular mound of earth corrupted the contours of the forest floor. Phoebe shivered. It was not the first time she had lain on someone’s shallow grave.

Cara removed some tissues from her coat pocket and placed them in Phoebe’s hand. “We should get going,” she said.

They walked back to the car in silence. Overhead, the sun was trying to come out. Until it did, the day would remain damp, the wind weak but biting. Within a couple of months this area would be knee deep in snow. It was lucky they had found Iris before winter set in.

“We really appreciate this,” Vernell said, opening the passenger door for Phoebe.

She met his eyes and watched his pupils betray him. Vernell was much more excited than his demeanor suggested. In his line of work, the dead spoke through their physical remains. Clearly he was impatient to decipher those of Iris.

“I have a message from her,” Phoebe said.

His face quickened. “About him?”

“I’m sorry.” She dispelled his hopes. “She just wants someone to tell her folks she loves them.”

Vernell did a good job of masking his disappointment. “I’ll take care of it.” His eyes moved to Cara. “If you want to wait a while, I can have someone drive you to the airport.”

“No. You folks have work to do.” Cara glanced up the forest road north. “And what do you know? Here come the troops.”

Phoebe followed the direction of her sister’s gaze. A convoy of

police vehicles was closing in on them, lights flashing. Hastily she retreated into the car. Law enforcement didn't know she existed. That was part of her deal with the FBI.

Vernell walked Cara to the driver's side and waited for her to get situated. "Don't forget what we talked about," he said.

"I'll be in touch." Cara started the motor.

Vernell thanked them again, then stepped back and slapped the car roof as if it were a horse's rump. Phoebe watched him in the side mirror as they accelerated away. He waved briefly before turning to face the approaching patrol cars. She wondered how he was going to explain chancing upon Iris Meicklejohn's body miles from civilization, ten minutes' hike into a dense forest near Maidstone Lake in Vermont. Or did FBI men capitalize on their mystique at times like this? Vernell said local police tended to be in awe of the Bureau.

"What did he mean?" she asked Cara. "What shouldn't you forget?"

"Routine stuff. Nothing you need to worry about."

Phoebe knew she should protest. It wasn't fair that Cara always took responsibility for the practicalities. But they had been through this a hundred times. Cara said they were identical twins, not clones. There was no reason for Phoebe to struggle over things her sister could manage easily, like computers and talking to strangers.

It was Cara who had made their deal with the FBI. Phoebe would never have had the nerve to claim she was a psychic, let alone expect to be hired for her services. Besides, she wasn't a real psychic. She didn't read minds or look into the future. She didn't concentrate on people's clothing and get images—not often, anyway. She dreamed, that was all.

It hadn't always been that way. Before the accident, she'd had the same garbled dreams as everyone else. But head injuries and several months in a coma had changed everything. When she returned to consciousness she was convinced that a woman called Samantha needed to talk with her and was waiting near a willow tree north of Liberty in the Catskills. Cara had indulged her, and they drove to a spot on Route 47, then hiked for half an hour until Phoebe heard Samantha's voice. A few yards off the track they found clothing and a body.

Cara phoned 911, saying they were hikers who had stumbled on human remains. The whole experience had been straightforward, even rewarding. They gave statements to the authorities and received praise

and gratitude. It turned out the local police had suspected Samantha Lewis's boyfriend of killing her. Finding the body led to his conviction. It was Cara who testified in court. The prosecutor said she was better on the stand than Phoebe, who spoke too softly and came across as kind of...“dreamy” was the word he'd used. Phoebe knew he really meant “flaky,” which was something no one would ever accuse Cara of being.

When she had her second dream, nobody connected the two discoveries—they were in different states. Yet again, she and Cara were hikers who found a body.

Then came the Sally Jorgensen kidnapping. The case was all over the television. A prominent Philadelphia judge, Sally had vanished from her home, and her kidnapper demanded the release of a prisoner in exchange for her life. By then Phoebe had already seen Sally in a dream and knew where her body was. This time, since the location was in the heart of the city, they could not pose as hikers. So Cara phoned the FBI and left a tip, declining to give her name. To Phoebe's surprise and dismay, Vernell Jefferson turned up on their doorstep a few days later.

The African American agent had traced their call and connected the dots. He could accept that two grisly discoveries might be a creepy coincidence, but three? It looked suspiciously like they had information not known to the authorities. After ruling them out as suspects, he had asked point blank which one of them was the psychic. They'd been working with him ever since.

At first, the arrangement was unofficial. The FBI does not employ psychics, and according to Vernell, most people who claimed to have such powers were opportunists and attention-seekers. Only a few individuals were the real thing and, of these, Phoebe was in a league of her own. Her complete anonymity was a condition of their agreement.

She had not asked for money, but after she'd led Vernell to several bodies, Cara arranged a meeting with him and his masters, and the FBI hired Phoebe officially. Awarded the phony title of Consultant Forensic Botanist, she now earned fees that made it unnecessary for her to hold down her 9 to 5 admin job. Vernell said he wanted her free to travel anywhere, anytime. Cara said Phoebe was his ticket to the top.

Iris Meicklejohn had disappeared four weeks ago. It was not Vernell's case, but it would be now. On their way to Vermont, he said Iris might be the latest victim of a serial killer now on the radar. Phoebe

wished she'd been able to tell him something that would help solve the case. But her dead visitors seldom wanted to discuss their killers. They were more interested in sending messages to loved ones. That's why they wanted their remains found. So the people who grieved for them could have closure. Once they'd attained this, they no longer wanted to talk.

Maybe she would try to reach Iris again. If she concentrated on her late at night, perhaps Iris would visit. Or, if there were other women killed by the same monster, maybe one of them would invade her sleep. Phoebe wished she had some control over the process. She had questions of her own.

For a start, it would be nice to know if her visitors were in heaven. And if they were, was Jesus really God's son who died to save us all, or just a guy far too liberal for his times? Also, could anyone explain why, if God was all powerful, he stood by while good people suffered hideous fates? Phoebe couldn't be the only one who wanted an answer to that.



Rowe Devlin did not believe in ghosts. She'd said as much to the realtor standing in front of her. Not that it made any difference. Bunny Haskell ran busy fingers through her diligently corkscrewed platinum hair and continued her pitch.

"This is the ballroom." She flung open two wide decorative doors. "They say the daughter of the family can still be heard waltzing here in the dead of night." Coily, she arched her overplucked eyebrows. "Right up your alley, I'm sure."

The room they entered was long and paneled in black oak. Ornately carved trim decorated a high plaster ceiling. At the far end, latticed windows and French doors faced onto vast front lawns and a wide terrace. Rowe could imagine a happy throng spilling from the room on a long summer's eve, the tinkle of champagne flutes, laughter echoing into the night.

Right now, drifts of red and yellow leaves swirled around the wrought-iron balustrades, serving notice of the winter to come. And it looked like Dark Harbor Cottage hadn't seen a glittering party in years.

Rowe crossed the creaky hardwood floor and stood before the

windows, picturing how it would be to walk her dogs in this corner of Maine. They wouldn't know what to do with themselves, having spent their entire lives in a Manhattan apartment. She could see them now, careening across the huge meadow that extended from the cottage to the woods at the boundary of the property.

This remote place was as picturesque as a scene from a jigsaw puzzle. Standing sentinel on either side of a long driveway, hundred-year-old oak trees shimmered in their bronze foliage. To the east, a stand of birches glowed bright yellow against balsam and spruces, undaunted by the late-October winds. Beyond these woods lay the ocean, serene and winter blue beneath a mackerel sky.

"Secluded enough for you?" Bunny inquired with the breathless confidence of an agent who could smell a sale.

"It needs some work," Rowe said, trying not to sound like she would be willing to pay full price. "The kitchen's in terrible shape."

Bunny waved a hand. "It's a Victorian. You'd never get a fully restored property in this area for what this seller is asking."

"I'm amazed it hasn't sold sooner. Is there something I should know?"

Bunny laughed that off breezily. "What can I tell you? The market's been slow. I've only shown the place to a few families, and they didn't want to deal with the renovations."

Rowe thought about the turret room upstairs with its astonishing views of Penobscot Bay. It was the perfect place to write. "Tell me about the neighbors."

Bunny consulted her clipboard. "Well, you're on six acres, so they're not going to bother you. To the north, there's a cottage owned by a family from New York. It's closed up for most of the year—they're only here for a few weeks each summer. And over there is a Shingle Style house." She pointed vaguely past the birches. "I believe two sisters live there. They keep to themselves."

Rowe pictured a pair of maiden aunts in their seventies stitching quilts on their front verandah. Who could ask for more? "Sounds ideal."

"I knew you were going to love the place!" Bunny ushered her back into the hall. "Want to see upstairs again?"

"Sure. Why not?"

From the bottom of the grand cherrywood staircase, Rowe stared

up. She could imagine how spectacular the entrance vestibule would look with the woodwork fully restored and the curved stained-glass windows sparkling clean, shafts of tinted light beaming down. She wouldn't be able to do everything at once. She didn't have unlimited money. But she could start work on the entrance and stairs right away.

The second floor needed improvements, but it was not in bad shape. There were six bedrooms, one of which had been converted in recent times to a master with its own half-decent bathroom. Above this, up a narrow spiral staircase, was the airy turret room Rowe had earmarked for writing. She climbed the steep wooden steps to this retreat and crossed to the grimy bowed windows.

The view was surreal, the bay a netherworld that rose from the mists at dawn and glowed like a jewel as its gossamer cloak dissolved in the sunlight. Countless islands studded the seductive waters, their rocky shores populated by black guillemots and puffins. Rowe had taken a windjammer tour of Penobscot Bay a few months earlier when she'd first thought about relocating, and had fallen under its legendary spell. The bird life amazed her. Circling squadrons of gulls and razorbills tracked the lobstermen and schooners across the chill waters. Ospreys had made a comeback in recent years, even nesting occasionally on the roofs of homes in this area.

The turret room opened onto a widow's walk that ran along the roofline. Rowe could see herself pacing its length on a tranquil summer's day, the extraordinary seascape shifting at her feet. This place was light-years away from Manhattan. In other words, perfect.

Bunny chattered on about climbing values for the waterfront properties of Islesboro, about the sought-after position this one enjoyed with its cove frontage and privacy, its proximity to Camden, and the easy drive to Portland airport. All that, and a carriage house.

Rowe listened with only half an ear. She felt remarkably contented in this room perched dizzily atop the cottage. Of all the real estate she'd viewed in the past few months, this was the home that instilled a sense of belonging, and more importantly, the feeling that she could write within its walls.

"Let's talk price," she said.



“We have new neighbors. Make that ‘neighbor,’ singular.” Cara dropped her hat and gloves on the kitchen counter along with a couple of bags full of groceries. The pervasive aroma of Chinese food greeted her, and yet again she gave thanks that her sister loved to cook, otherwise they’d be living on Marie Callender frozen entrees. “I spoke with the movers,” she continued. “You’ll never guess who it is.”

Phoebe glanced up from her wok. “Someone famous?”

“Rowe Devlin, the author.”

“The guy who writes those horror books?” Phoebe looked mildly dismayed.

“Actually, it’s a woman.”

“A woman writes that stuff? I had no idea. She must be weird.”

“They’re fiction,” Cara said. “She’s probably really normal.”

“Well, I can talk.” Adopting a singsong tone, Phoebe proclaimed, “Hi, I’m Phoebe Temple. I see dead people.”

Cara laughed at this parody, relieved that Phoebe’s sense of humor was back. Her sister was always in the doldrums for a few weeks after a Dream. “Maybe stick to the forensic botanist handle,” she suggested.

“One of these days someone is going to ask me about plant spores or pollen signatures.”

“And you’ll tell them palynology is a science so riveting you could talk about it for hours. They’ll change the subject.”

“I’m counting on it.” Phoebe slid their stir-fry onto a serving plate and carried it to the kitchen table. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat of the wok, and she pushed a few fine ebony curls away from her face as she sat down. “Do you have to go to L.A. next week?”

“Put it this way.” Cara picked up her chopsticks. “If I don’t, they’re not going to hire me again.”

Phoebe’s straight dark eyebrows drew together in consternation. “Did you stay home the past two weeks because of me?”

Cara avoided her sister’s moody gray eyes. “I had things to do.”

“You and Vernell are up to something. What is it?” Phoebe slid the soy sauce across the table before Cara could ask for it.

Cara chewed slowly on a piece of broccoli and considered several ways she could respond. Opting for the direct approach, she said, “He wants you to work more proactively.”

“What does that mean?”

“For a start, he’s wondering if there’s some way you could invite

the process intentionally. You know, instead of waiting for the dreams to come along.”

Phoebe looked alarmed. “How would I do that? I can’t control what happens when I’m asleep.”

Carefully, Cara said, “Vernell thinks it might be a good idea for you to spend some time at Quantico in Virginia.” She steeled herself for the inevitable. Her sister wasn’t going to like this idea one little bit.

“The place where Jodie Foster trained in *Silence of the Lambs*?” Phoebe’s low, soft voice sounded strained.

“Yes, training is part of what they do there.” Cara tried to sound reassuring as well as enthusiastic. “They also have a big forensic science research unit and you’d be working with profilers and people like that.”

“They’re going to think I’m a nut.”

“No, they’re not. Vernell says everyone is hanging out to meet you.” Hearing a small, horrified gasp, she added hastily, “Everyone who knows, that is—just a handful of people, really. They even have a code name for you.”

Phoebe calmed down a little, releasing her chopsticks from a death grip. “Like a spy name?” She seemed slightly tickled. “What is it?”

“Golden.”

Phoebe gave this some thought. “Is that a joke name?”

“No. Nothing like that,” Cara hastily assured. Phoebe was hypersensitive about what she termed her membership in *Crazies Unlimited*. “Vernell says it’s because you’re what they always dreamed of. Back in the 1980s the CIA tried to create people like you to spy on the Russians. They had a secret training program called *Star Gate*.”

“Did it work?”

“I don’t know.” Cara dripped extra soy sauce over her meal. “But some of the people they trained are still around. Every now and then the FBI hires one for a case. They’re called *remote viewers*.”

Phoebe chewed reflectively. “*Remote viewers*. Yes...it is kind of like that.”

Sensing she had secured her twin’s interest, Cara said, “I think you should do it. You have a gift, and you can help people. It can’t hurt to see if there are other ways you could make it work.”

The FBI was also offering an astonishing amount of money, but Cara didn’t want to discuss that. It would only cause performance

anxiety. Phoebe already worried that she was letting everyone down if she didn't dream often enough.

"How long will I have to stay there?" Phoebe asked.

"Maybe a week or so."

"And you'll be there, too?"

Cara had known this was coming. "Of course." Hopefully, within a couple of days Phoebe would feel comfortable and she could escape and deal with the backlog of work that had piled up over the past several weeks.

Phoebe twiddled with her chopsticks. "I don't want to feel like a circus freak."

"You know I would never let that happen."

"It wasn't all that long ago they'd have burned me for being a witch, and now I'm hired by the government and I have a spy name. Funny, isn't it?"

"Hilarious," Cara said without smiling. "I'll phone Vernell. We can leave as soon as I get back from L.A."