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The Smell of Salt

by Alice Baburek

The case was deemed unsolvable. And that's when Liz Trevor gained notoriety for her relentless pursuit. It caused a rippled effect. No partner. No children. No pets. And very, very few friends.

The missing was no longer missing. Liz persisted that the missing person was not missing at all, as his distraught wife had thought to be. It took fourteen long months, many sleepless nights, and a bushel full of money to find the so-called victim. Of course, *he* was none too happy when Liz found his hiding spot. It meant Charles Weston, a hedge fund analyst who not only embezzled money from investors but defrauded an insurance company, would stand trial. The guilty verdict saddled Charles Weston with a lengthy prison sentence and “restitution.”

This case put Liz Trevor in the spotlight. Something she did not like at all. Her private investigation agency consisted of three people; two were distant cousins who needed a job. Unlike what people thought of Liz, she had a huge heart and a nose to solve the impossible. She was so good at her job that the dead manipulated her into taking care of their unfinished business. But unlike living clients, the dead never paid the bill.

Liz knew instantly when a spirit needed her help. She could smell them—the smell of salt. Her sense of smell magnified beyond the normal sensory perception of living people. Both cousins, Hayley Walters, and Andrea Foster, assumed Liz had a special connection to those who

were “in-between” and the need to finish “business” before being able to find their way into the light. So, when Liz set them down to inform them of their next case, it came to no one’s surprise.

“Ladies, what we have here is a typical cold case,” said Liz as she handed Hayley and Andrea each a manilla folder. “Inside, you will see the details of the unfortunate death of Leslie Higgins, age 23, classified as a homicide back in 1982. There was little evidence collected. A piece of rope was used to bind her wrists and the chain from around Ms. Wiggin’s neck. Cause of death—strangulation. Other than these two pieces of evidence, nothing else had been collected by the local police. Granted, DNA wasn’t even conceived back then, so there may have been other clues or evidence. It wasn’t a surprise when the detectives could not solve the murder.”

Hayley and Andrea scanned over the typed notes. Each remained silent. “A reward was offered, which resulted in no leads whatsoever. Ms. Higgins had just arrived in Sarasota, Florida, a week before her death. No next of kin is listed. Her parents died when she was twelve. She grew up in an orphanage in Jersey. By eighteen, she decided to try her luck in New York City. There, she spent the next four years of her life as a freelance journalist,” explained Liz.

“What made her decide to move to Sarasota?” asked Hayley as she closed the folder. She removed a piece of gum from her jeans and shoved it into her mouth. Andrea’s hand shot out toward Hayley. “Sorry, Hayley. It was my last stick,” she said with a forced smile. Andrea’s eyes narrowed at her cousin.

“A job. The Sarasota Gazette sent Higgins a letter and asked her to cover a story for them. They were short on investigative journalists. I guess Higgins was good at what she did for a living.” Liz leaned back in her high-back chair.

Hayley sighed and then snapped her gum. “Is this a paying client?” Andrea placed her folder on the desk.

“What difference does it make? You still get paid. I don’t hear Andrea complaining,” replied Liz.

“Well, cuz, is this one dead or alive?” asked Andrea. She already had her iPad out scrolling.

“Dead...and she doesn’t want to reveal her killer,” added Liz. Both younger women looked at one another.

“That’s messed up,” commented Andrea. “Who wouldn’t want to give up the name of their killer? I thought that was the whole purpose of this...whatever we do...I guess we call it justice, but to them...as in the dead, we give closure so they can move on up!” She put her hands up in the air.

“I know. It’s frustrating. I asked her several times to no avail. She won’t give up the name,” said Liz.

“Why are we wasting our time then? We have a butt load of cases from *paying* clients who want to help in any way they can. Unlike the dead...making it more difficult for us,” said Hayley. Her cyber security and IT data analyses degrees were crucial in solving crimes and searching for lost people.

“It’s not a waste, Hayley. I get it. People who are stuck here instead of there,” said Andrea, pointing to the ceiling. “They deserve justice, too.” The twenty-three-year-old crossed

her arms. A blond ponytail swung behind her round head. With a pair of huge wire-rimmed glasses perched on her tiny nose, she looked more like a scientist than a forensic and digital evidence technician.

Hayley uncrossed her long, muscular legs. She stood almost six feet tall. With short brown hair and a lanky upper body, she looked like a track star even at forty-eight. “You’re nothing but a bleeding heart, cuz.”

Liz stared at her cousins. The only family she had on this earth—alive. Unlike either of them, she had the instinct of a natural tracker. And, of course, she had her unusual ability to converse with the dead. Even at the delicate age of sixty-five, Liz knew her job would take her beyond the normal expectations of private investigating. Her short, round stature and white-cropped hair made her look like a typical grandmother. But there was nothing typical about Liz.

“Let’s take a vote,” insisted Liz. “All in favor of a living client, raise your hand.” Hayley raised her long arm. “All those in favor of a dead client, raise your hand.” Two hands shot up.

Hayley rolled her eyes as she crossed her arms. “There’s nothing easy about this case. I still feel it wastes our time when we have so many other ‘doable’ cases. But majority rules.” She shrugged her shoulders.

Andrea and Liz smiled. They knew their cousin was a softy down deep inside, even though she tried to conceal it. And with nothing left to say, all three women got to work.

The Leslie Higgins homicide would prove to be one of the most difficult cases the Salt & Pepper Private Investigators Agency tackled in their fifteen years of existence. Even though it had been only eight years since Andrea Foster joined her cousins, she had proven a valuable asset. There was no denying her solid background, entailing forensic and digital evidence. It had cost Liz a pretty penny regarding the electronic and technical equipment needed to support Andrea's investigative skills. But in the end, it had seemed to be its weight in gold.

Hayley had researched the dead women's background as far back as she could, considering there was no mainstream internet until the 1990s. Finding out about the life of Leslie Higgins would have to be investigated the old-fashioned way. She had already booked a flight to Sarasota, Florida.

"You're leaving tonight?" asked Liz. Her desk was cluttered with stacks of paper. She liked having things at her fingertips.

"Yes. I'll be at the Marriot. I'm hoping it won't take me more than a few days to track down a relative or even a friend of hers. When will you be arriving?" asked Hayley. Liz was busy scribbling notes down on a yellow legal pad.

"In a couple of days. I want to visit the Sarasota Police Department and talk with their cold case detective. I might be able to even speak with the first officer on the scene—if he's still alive." Liz gave a half grin.

"How will you explain to them why you are investigating a cold case?" asked Andrea as she walked into the office, snapping her gum.

“Most of the time, I don’t. They are happy someone else is looking at a case that remains unsolved. I wing it,” explained Liz. Suddenly, she could smell it—salt. She abruptly stood up with her nose in the air.

“Are you kidding me? She’s...she’s here?” whispered Andrea. Liz always smelled the apparition before seeing it. A ghostly swirl faded in and out in the corner next to the steel drawer cabinet.

The other two women followed Liz’s gaze. They couldn’t smell or see anything. But remained still and silent.

“Leslie...we need your help. I know you don’t want to reveal the killer. I’m not sure why that is. But we need your help?” asked Liz. She narrowed her eyes. The woman’s body was transparent. A linked chain hung around her neck, then disappeared below. The smell of salt intensified, and Liz thought for a brief moment she might sneeze. The woman’s hand outstretched into emptiness. A rope dangled from her wrist.

“Leslie, please. We know about the chain and rope. What else are we missing? You need to guide us in the right direction.” But as Liz took a step forward, the apparition dissipated into nothingness. The smell of salt lingered in the air.

“Did she give you any other clues?” asked Hayley. She remained seated behind her desk.

“Unfortunately, no. She keeps showing me the chain and rope. I’m hoping they still have the evidence collected at the scene. But any good detective knows to resubmit the items for DNA,” explained Liz. She plopped down back into her worn chair.

“Now you know why I don’t like working for dead clients. Plus, they don’t pay—at all!”
said Hayley.

“It’s so amazing watching you, Liz. It’s freaky. I wish I could see them like you do,”
exclaimed Andrea wide-eyed.

“Well, I smell them more than anything. I have to figure out what she’s trying to tell me.
She keeps showing the same thing over and over. We’re missing something. Maybe once we’re
down in Florida...” Liz didn’t bother to finish. She ran her hand through her thin grey hair.

Hayley arrived in Sarasota by midnight and headed straight to the Marriot after picking up her
rental. She was surprised by the nightlife. People packed inside the hotel’s bar. After checking in,
she decided on a nightcap. Her loose blouse and tight jeans were a bit out of place. Many of the
patrons were dressed for a fancy night out. But it didn’t stop Hayley. She couldn’t care less about
being stared at. She was used to it. Her height made her an oddity before anything else.

She squeezed in and found an open stool. She then ordered a dry martini. Hayley rarely
drank. But this was a special occasion. It marked her fifteenth year of private eye sluicing with
her cousin. One she stumbled upon by pure chance. She sipped her drink and glanced around.
People were laughing and conversing with one another. Music piped from above.

“Excuse me,” said a voice next to her. She turned to look at the man beside her. He was
attractive by all standards. He was almost as tall as she and, from his manly looks, roughly the
same age. His short black hair was streaked with grey, giving him a “Sam Elliot” look. He had a

shaven face and a single stud in his left ear. Definitely a man of this century. His body is lean and muscular. A dark blue shirt and tie with dress jeans that fit snug. He smiled as he watched Hayley look him up and down.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he said, moving a tad closer. Hayley turned to face the bar as she sipped her drink. She did not answer the man.

“I’m sorry. Bad pick-up line. I’ll leave you alone. Enjoy your drink,” he said as he turned to move away from her.

Hayley was by no means looking for male companionship. Her job filled her life. But sometimes, she needed distractions. Maybe she could justify him to be just that—a distraction.

“Sure!” she called out to him. He abruptly stopped and stepped back towards her. By now, the music had died down.

“My name is Jim Neighbors.” He held out his hand. Hayley reciprocated immediately. It was warm and soft.

“As in *Mayberry*, the television sitcom?” asked Hayley, still holding his large hand in hers. He released his grip and smiled.

“I get that all the time. My last name is spelled N-E-I-G-H-B-O-R-S. And I can’t sing,” said Jim.

“I’m Hayley, spelled H-A-Y-L-E-Y. And I can’t sing either.” They both chuckled together. She placed her empty glass down on the bar. Jim signaled the bartender.

“What can I get you?” asked the middle-aged man.

“Another for the lady...and I’ll take whatever is on tap,” said Jim. He placed a fifty-dollar bill on the counter. The bartender swiped it up, then moved down a bit to make Hayley’s drink. A couple of minutes later, he returned with both drinks and change.

“Thanks,” said Jim and left a ten for a tip. He gulped the beer and winced.

Hayley watched him before taking a sip from her glass. She was not used to drinking, and one was definitely enough. Jim wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Do you live here in Sarasota?” asked Jim.

“I don’t know,” replied Hayley. She never gave out information. There were predators everywhere.

“I see. I get it. You’re not going to answer any questions, are you?” he said, tilting his head. Hayley stared into his dark blue eyes.

“No...I’m not. I appreciate the drink, but I have to go.” Hayley slipped off the chair. Jim backed up into another man.

“Hey...asshole...watch it!” said the intoxicated man.

“Sorry, buddy,” replied Jim. He lifted his hands in the air.

“I’m not your buddy, idiot.” The drunk man shoved Jim knocking into Hayley.

“Come on now, take it easy. Just call it a night.” Jim turned to face Hayley. The inebriated guy lifted an empty glass from the bar to swing at the back of Jim’s head. Hayley was quick. In

three consecutive moves, the drunk man was lying on the floor, trying to figure out how he got there.

“Go home and sleep it off,” shouted Hayley standing above the dazed stranger. Jim couldn’t believe what just happened. This woman took a drunk man to the floor in seconds. A wide smile crawled across his face.

Hayley stepped over the man as a crowd gathered. She pushed people aside and walked away. Jim hurriedly followed her through the lobby of the hotel.

“Wait up, Hayley!” called Jim. Hayley glanced back over her shoulder. She stopped in front of the elevator and pushed the number three.

“Where did you learn to do that?” asked Jim. Hayley let out a sigh.

“You seem like a nice guy...but I’m not that kind of girl. I hope you get lucky, Jim; it just won’t be with me. Goodnight.” The doors of the elevator swished open. Jim stepped back as Hayley entered the elevator. He couldn’t help smiling as the doors slowly closed.

Liz Trevor’s flight was bumpy. The storm delayed the landing in Sarasota. She arrived two hours late. Hayley remained in her hotel room working on the information she did have. Liz had texted late last night stating she would be arriving first thing in the morning. But as usual, the weather did not cooperate.

Liz glanced at her cell phone then sent a quick text to Hayley. She headed for the baggage area to pick up her suitcase. By then, Hayley should be waiting outside. Almost twenty minutes

later, Liz stood outside in the heat. The humidity soared above normal for this time of year. Early August was always hot—but then again so were the rest of the months for the state of Florida.

Hayley had rented an SUV. She maneuvered over to the side lane marked “arrivals.” Liz was standing there busily looking at her cell phone.

“Need a ride?” called Hayley through the passenger window. Liz glanced up at her cousin. She was happy that the two of them were close. Almost like sisters.

“How are you?” asked Liz as she opened up the back door and slung her small bag inside.

“Fine. I was surprised by your text. How were you able to get a flight out so quick?” asked Hayley. Liz slipped into the front seat and shut the door. Hayley put her blinker on and proceeded to blend in with the exiting traffic from the busy airport. Minutes later there were racing down the freeway.

Liz glanced around at the scenery. It had been a while since she had been in Florida. In fact, the last time, it did not end so well.

“They had a cancellation. I snagged it. A bit pricey, but that’s nothing new. Anyway, I want to get to the Sarasota Police Station as soon as possible. I’ll check in at the hotel later. What are your plans for today?” asked Liz.

Hayley moved in and out of traffic with ease. The sun was beating down through the windshield. Both women were glad they brought sunglasses.

“I was planning on driving around where Leslie Higgins stayed the brief period she was here. Maybe someone remembers her or the unsolved murder,” replied Hayley.

“Good idea. Can you drop me off at the station?” asked Liz. Hayley gave a slight nod. The outside of the police station was a standard brick building. There was a parking lot attached to the side. Hayley pulled the rental in and left the engine running.

“Text me when you’re finished. I’ll come back and pick you up.” Hayley released the door lock. Liz opened the door.

“Good luck. Hopefully, someone remembers something.” Liz got out of the car and strolled to the side door of the station. Seconds later, Hayley had blended into the traffic.

Liz tried the door and it was locked. She hurried to the front glass door. It opened with ease. As she stepped into the police station lobby, she noticed the cameras above. An officer sat at a huge desk behind a bulletproof partition. She looked like she was in her early twenties fresh out of the academy.

“May I help you?” she asked with a smile. Liz smiled back.

“Yes. My name is Liz Trevor. I’m here to see the cold case detective on staff.”

“Do you have an appointment?” asked the female officer.

“No. I’m from Cleveland, Ohio. I’m a private investigator with the Salt & Pepper Agency. We’re working on a cold homicide case,” explained Liz.

The young dispatcher gave a slight nod. “Give me a moment. You’ll want to speak with Detective Jim Neighbors. Have a seat. I’ll see if he is in.” And before Liz could say another word, the dispatcher was on the phone.

Liz sat down in one of the empty chairs. She took out her phone to text Hayley. Suddenly, the side door buzzed open. A handsome man in his mid to late forties, tall, lean, and muscular, stepped into the lobby. His square jaw and groomed hair accentuated his male appearance. Tight jeans, shirt and tie, and cowboy boots. A gold badge hung from his belt along with the black holster on his hip.

“I’m Detective Jim Neighbors. What can I help you with, ma’am?” he strolled up to Liz and outstretched his large hand. Liz stood up and shook the detective’s hand.

“I’m Liz Trevor, a private investigator with the Salt & Pepper Agency in Cleveland, Ohio,” she replied

“You’re a long way from home, ma’am. We don’t get too many PI’s here in Florida. How can I help you, Ms. Trevor?” asked Jim as he crossed his arms.

“Please...call me Liz. Is there a place we can talk privately, Detective Neighbors?” asked Liz.

“May I ask what this is in reference to?” asked Jim.

“The Leslie Higgins cold case from 1982.” Jim’s eyes widened. He had reviewed the murder book more than once.

“You’ve got my attention. Let’s go back into one of the empty interview rooms.” He gestured to Liz towards the locked door. A buzz sounded seconds later. Jim held the door open for Liz, then took the lead. They walked down the narrow hallway to the last room on the left. He punched in a code, and it opened. Inside sat a small square table and three folding chairs.

“Please have a seat,” said the detective. She sat down across from Jim.

“I won’t take up too much of your time, Detective Neighbors. Would it be possible for me to look at the Leslie Higgins murder book?” asked Liz.

Jim studied the older woman. He could use of new set of eyes. But he had to make sure of her identity. But before he could say another word, Liz had pulled out her ID and credentials. She slid them over to Jim.

Jim gave a slight nod and examined the documents then looked back up at Liz. “We don’t get too many private investigators looking into our cold cases. In fact, I don’t remember any. Usually, it has to do with a missing person or civil cases concerning child custody.” He slid her papers back.

Liz immediately placed them back within her worn leather briefcase. “I was hoping to review the murder book.” She waited for his response.

“We don’t normally ‘share’ information, especially when the case is open. May I ask your interest in Leslie Higgins? Especially since you are from Ohio.” He leaned back tilting the folding chair.

“Let’s just say...I’m looking into for a friend.” Liz did not give up any more information.

“That’s pretty vague. Did *you* know Leslie Higgins?” he asked.

“No...not while she was alive,” replied Liz. “Detective Neighbors, have you made any progress on the cold case?” He let out a sigh.

“No. There hasn’t been any new leads in years. It just might be one of those cases that never get solved,” replied Jim.

“If you feel that way, then you won’t mind someone else taking a glance at it. What do you have to lose?” asked Liz. She forced a smile.

Jim remained quiet for a brief moment. “Let me run it by with my captain. I’ll see if I can make a copy for you. There isn’t a lot of information. Where are you staying?”

“At the Marriot on Front Street,” replied Liz. He gave a quick smile. Liz handed him a business card. “Cell number. Thanks again Detective Neighbors.” They both stood up. Jim showed Liz back out to the lobby. She gave a slight wave and stepped outside into the sun and humidity. She sent Hayley a text. Liz noticed the coffee shop across the street from the police station. Minutes later, she was scrolling through her emails sipping an ice-cold latte.

Hayley was not far from the police station. She had struck out big time. The few people she was able to speak to did not remember Leslie Higgins or the murder. This case was becoming harder and harder as time went by. Sometimes she did not understand her cousin, Liz. And many times, she doubted her cousin’s ability to speak with the dead. But she would try her best with this case.

Hayley pulled into the police department’s parking lot. Liz was walking across the street to meet her cousin. They smiled at one another.

“Hey...any luck?” asked Liz slipping into the front passenger seat of the SUV rental. Hayley shook her head from side to side.

“Nada...nobody remembered her nor the murder. I struck out. How about you?” she asked.

“I met with a...Detective Jim Neighbors. He’s the head of the cold case division in Sarasota. He’s going to see if he can get me a copy of the murder book. Let’s keep our fingers crossed.” Liz sipped at her cold drink.

“Wait...did you say Jim Neighbors?” asked Hayley. She pulled out of the parking lot.

“Yes. He’s the cold case detective. Not bad looking, if I say so myself.” She winked at her cousin.

“I think I met him,” said Hayley. Liz looked at her cousin.

“When?” she asked.

“At the hotel bar last night. I thought for a minute he was trying to pick me up. You’re right...he’s easy on the eyes that’s a definite plus.” Hayley headed back to the hotel.

“Why were you at the hotel bar?” asked Liz. “You don’t drink.”

“I do...every now and then. Besides, I was all tensed up from the flight. You know I don’t care for flying. I like my feet on the ground. My encounter with Neighbors was brief. A drunk jerk tried to smash a glass into the detective’s skull so I had to set him straight.” Hayley shrugged her shoulders.

Liz’s eyebrows lifted. “Sounds just like you, cousin. I’m sure the detective was appreciative by your quick actions to save him from a huge headache besides stitches.”

“Neighbors couldn’t believe it. I told him I could hold my own. Anyway, I think he wanted to go back to my room. But I told him I’m not that kind of girl, even if he is that kind of guy. I don’t need any more complications with my life. I like it just the way it is, thank you.”

Hayley parked in the hotel parking lot. “We’re here.” The women exited the SUV and went to their designated rooms which happened to be next door to one another.

“I’m going to see what else I can stir up while we are here,” said Hayley. Liz was unlocking her hotel door with the electronic key.

“Okay. I’ll let you know if Neighbors is able to give me that copy of Higgin’s murder book. I’m still searching the archives online to see if there were any articles related to her death that I missed.” Liz gave her cousin a two-finger salute and then closed the door.

Detective Jim Neighbors made the copies himself. He placed them in a binder. It wasn’t hard to convince his captain. He had given Jim the green light. They were getting nowhere on figuring out who murdered Leslie Higgins. When he was finished compiling the information, he called Liz Trevor.

“Trevor,” answered Liz.

“Ms. Trevor...this is Detective Neighbors. My captain was eager to have a fresh set of eyes looking over the murder book of Leslie Higgins. I made a copy for you. I’d like to swing by later this afternoon and drop it off. Will you be available?”

“I will, indeed, detective. How about four o’clock?” suggested Liz.

“See you then, Ms. Trevor.” And the call was disconnected.

Liz smiled. It was then she smelled it. Salt. The odor was pungent. She could taste it in her mouth. She turned around instantly. A swirly white smoke hung in the air.

“Leslie? I’m getting your murder book this afternoon. But you have to help me. We’re not getting anywhere. I’m not sure your case can be solved if you don’t help me.” The whirling cloud turned dark. The smell intensified. “I want to solve your case.” Liz started to choke. Her lungs filled with a thick smoke. “Stop...this!”

A loud bang on the door. “Liz...it’s Hayley. Open up.” Liz staggered to the door. Her head was spinning. Her eyes and lungs burned. She could barely see to unlock the door. Her body slumped to the floor as darkness took over.

Liz could see Leslie Higgins. She was once a beautiful, vivacious woman who loved life. The job was going to be her ticket to the top until it wasn’t. Leslie’s bulging eyes and swollen neck screamed agony. The ropes burned into Leslie’s wrists. The heavy chain kept her locked in her prison—the prison of death.

And then she heard the voice. A soft familiar voice. A voice that made her feel at ease. The horrible images of Leslie Higgins faded into a calming darkness.

“Liz...Liz...can you hear me?” repeated Hayley. “Come on cousin. Please open your eyes!”

Her eyelids felt like led. Her mind jumbled. Her throat dry. With all her will, she forced them open. Blinking several times to adjust to the light and to her cousin’s wrinkling brows. Tears wet Hayley’s cheeks.

“Oh, thank the heavens above, Liz. You gave me a scare. Don’t do it again!” whispered Hayley. The cool cloth felt good on Liz’s forehead. Her eyes steadied to her cousin’s face.

“Water,” she uttered. Hayley handed Liz a bottle of water.

“Let’s sit up so you can drink it,” said Hayley as she tried to get her cousin into a sitting position. Liz’s body slowly moved. The water tasted good going down her parched throat. Her headache dissipated.

“What happened?” asked Hayley. She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“I...I...saw Leslie Higgins. She was...um...chained and tied. I asked her again for help. I told her we can’t do it without some direction.” Liz gulped down the rest of the water.

“Liz, this has to stop. Each time you get a vision or visitation, it takes such a huge toll on your body...and none of us are getting any younger. I thought...I thought we lost you.” Hayley hugged her cousin. A half smile crept across Liz’s lips. She patted her cousin’s back.

“Oh honey. It will take a lot more than that to keep me down. I’m hoping once we review the Higgin’s murder book, we’ll be able to figure this case out once and for all.” Liz closed her eyes.

“When do we get the murder book?” asked Hayley.

“Detective Neighbors is dropping it off around 4 p.m. today,” replied Liz in a low tone.

Hayley glanced at her cell phone. “He should be here soon.”

“Wait...what time is it?” asked Liz. “How long was I out?”

“It’s 3:45 p.m. Liz. You’ve been out quite a while. I came by to ask if you reached the detective, and I heard you moaning through the door. I got in and was ready to call 911. You grabbed my hand and squeezed, then mouthed the word ‘no.’ So, instead, I made you comfortable and placed a cold washcloth on your head. I said a quick prayer I wasn’t making a terrible mistake by not calling for help.” Hayley let out a sigh.

“Thanks for taking care of me.” Liz gave a smile. Then a knock on the door startled both of them. “Must be Detective Neighbors.” Hayley got up to answer the door. She looked through the peephole then unlocked the door.

“Detective...so good to see you again,” said Hayley. Jim’s head snapped back.

“I’m here to meet with Liz Trevor. How did...” his voice trailed off. Hayley pulled the door all the way open. Liz was sitting on a brown leather couch.

“Come on in, Detective Neighbors. I’d like you to meet my cousin Hayley Walters and part owner of Salt & Pepper PI Agency,” said Liz. Jim stepped into the hotel suite. He flashed his pearly whites. Hayley couldn’t help but blush.

“Well, I’ll be...” he muttered to himself. “I had no idea. It’s nice to see you again, Hayley.” She gestured for him to sit down.

“Any more surprises I should know about?” he asked. Liz shrugged.

“We have one more cousin who is part of the team, Andrea, but she’s back home holding down the fort. What do you have for me, detective?” Jim was still staring at Hayley.

“Oh, right. Here’s a copy of Leslie Higgins murder book. The rope and chain were resubmitted for DNA evidence. We’re still waiting to hear back from the lab.” He then focused on Liz.

“Are you alright? You look a little pale,” he commented. Hayley sat down on the far end of the couch.

“My cousin had an episode. Leslie Higgins is not cooperating.” Jim looked back and forth between the two women.

“I don’t understand,” said Jim.

“I’m sure you’re not interested in my...my special abilities, detective. My cousin doesn’t know when to keep her mouth closed.” Liz tossed Hayley a scornful look.

“Oh, geez, Liz, just tell the man. Either he believes you or not. It doesn’t make a difference. In fact, sometimes, it’s even hard for me to believe.” Hayley got up and opened the mini-fridge. She took out two bottles of water and then handed one to Jim. He took it and set it down by his foot.

“What special abilities are you referring to?” he asked. Liz sighed.

“I can communicate with the dead,” stated Liz. Jim chuckled.

“You’re kidding, right? Are you clairvoyant?” asked Jim.

“No, I’m not—to both your questions. Most of them are murder victims who need me to solve the unsolved.” Liz scratched at her neck. She didn’t like explaining her unique gift.

“I don’t get it.” Jim placed the murder book on the couch next to him.

“There’s nothing to get. She smells salt and then a dead victim appears. Sometimes they help with the case but sometimes they don’t—Leslie Higgins is one that won’t help us. She knows her killer but won’t tell Liz.” Hayley crossed her long arms.

Jim slapped his knee and pointed to both women. “You’re yanking my chain, right? This is some kind of joke?”

Neither woman smiled. Their lips were thin, and their eyes narrowed. Jim’s smile dropped from his face. The two ladies were definitely serious.

“How...how is that possible?” he asked in almost a whisper.

“Shall you explain it to him, or shall I?” asked Hayley.

“Be my guest, cousin.” Liz sat back against the couch and closed her eyes.

“My cousin has the ability to communicate with the dead. Not all the dead. Only the ones who need our help in solving their murders in order for them to move on. You know...head for the light...or dark or wherever. She knows they are around when the smell of salt becomes overwhelming. Sometimes she sees images...sometimes not. Leslie Higgins asked us to help her solve her murder. But unfortunately, Leslie knows who murdered her and is reluctant to tell us,” explained Hayley.

Jim scratched at his face. He’s heard of this kind of thing before but never encountered it on the job. He always considered psychic ability a bunch of hog wash. But he knew these two cousins were serious—dead serious.

“In fact, Liz had an episode just a few minutes ago. But it was above the normal connection. I found her on the floor trying to catch her breathe. She scared me.” Hayley rubbed her cousin’s knee.

“Was it Leslie Higgins?” asked Jim. Liz gave a slight nod.

“I think Leslie was finally trying to communicate something...but I have no clue what it was,” said Liz. “I collapsed to the floor. Hayley found me. Normally, it doesn’t get to that extent. That is how I know she was going to say or show me something. I told her we couldn’t solve her case unless she helps. Especially, when she knows who did this to her,” insisted Liz.

“Did Leslie Higgins tell you she knew her killer?” asked Jim.

“Not in so many words. It’s hard to explain if you don’t see the images or apparitions. Take my word on it. Leslie knows,” replied Liz.

“Okay...if Leslie knows her killer and she is holding back, let’s figure out why she would hold back such pertinent information. It could solve her case.” Jim glanced at both women.

Once again, he noticed what an attractive woman Hayley was. It would be nice to get to know her better—on a personal level.

“Well, it could be someone she knew and that person is still walking the streets free. Or it could be her death was an accident. Of course, I don’t know how a chain around the neck and hands tied behind the back could justify an accident. Another reason maybe she is afraid for her family and the repercussions,” suggested Jim.

“Maybe...I know this is a long shot. Maybe...whoever murdered her is dead too and they have not moved on either,” said Liz. “It could be a possibility for her resistance to tell me.”

“Wait...the dead is being haunted by the dead? How is that even possible?” asked Hayley.

“I don’t quite understand what the spiritual world entails and how it works. It’s a whole new plane of non-existence. I’m just taking a stab in the dark.” Liz rubbed her temples.

“Where do we go from here?” asked Hayley. Liz leaned forward and closed her eyes.

“Let’s go on the assumption whoever killed Higgins is dead too. Do you have a list of people who were interviewed during the initial investigation?” asked Liz. Jim gave a slight nod.

“We do. I can run a check on each one of them to see if they’re still alive.” Jim got up to leave. “She didn’t know that many people. She lived here a week before she was murdered.”

“We know. It’s a long shot. I’m hoping something comes back on the DNA testing. But it’s a long time ago.” Liz slowly stood. She felt a tad woozy.

“Jim, I’ve got to lay down. This last encounter really drained me. Please let me know if you get any hits on the people who were interviewed.” Liz did not wait to hear a response. She staggered down the short hallway to an open door.

Hayley watched her cousin. Then turned her attention to Jim. “Sorry about that. She usually takes a nap after a visit from the dead. We’re still not sure what it does to her body physically. I’ve talked to the people in the area where Leslie Higgins was staying in Sarasota.

Nobody remembers her or the murder itself. I think trying to solve this case is like a shot in the dark. I'll walk you out." Hayley made her way towards the door. Jim followed.

"I'll get on the list of names," said Jim. Hayley opened the door. She stepped out into the hallway as Jim pulled the door shut.

They walked to the elevator, and Jim pushed the lobby button. "Would you want to go grab a bite to eat?" Just then, the doors swished open.

"I like to stay close to my cousin after an episode...just in case." She gave a half smile.

"I understand. Maybe another time." Jim stepped into the elevator.

"Another time, then," replied Hayley. She waved her fingers as the doors slowly closed.

Andrea had called the hotel that evening. There were two new cases pending on her cousins returning to Ohio. She had talked to Hayley only to find out that Liz had a bad episode. Over the years, it began to take its toll on Liz. She wished Liz would focus more on the living than the dead. Their agency was barely floating. The worst thing about trying to solve cases for dead was that they didn't get paid.

"Hayley, we need these two cases. Both missing persons. Our savings is drained. We're barely keeping afloat. Can't you talk to Liz about rethinking our case load? I understand she wants to help these people...move on, but our bills need to get paid. How much longer will you two be in Sarasota?" asked Andrea.

“I’m not sure. We got the murder book of Leslie Higgins from the cold case detective. He running down a few things and will get back to us. I’ll try to wrap up things here soon. There’s not much we can do,” said Hayley.

“Please do. I’m starting on the first missing person’s case. I’ll work on the preliminaries while you two are still in Florida. Hurry home, cuz...I need you.” The line between them went silent.

Hayley knew she had to urge Liz to finish and return to Ohio. Paying work was at home not in Florida. Even though she would have liked to have gotten to know Detective Jim Neighbors a little better. But her love life would have to wait.

Both women remained quiet on the plane to Ohio. Neither spoke of the Leslie Higgins case nor the ones waiting for them back home. Liz was not happy with Hayley. Her insistence on returning without any advancement on the Higgins case bothered her. Detective Neighbors came up empty. He, too, had to move on with other cold cases more solvable. They agreed to stay in touch.

Liz pulled her bag inside the agency’s office. The murder book was shoved in between her clothes. She would not give up the case but realized it had to be put on the back burner. Leslie Higgins would not give up her killer, which left Liz in a difficult situation.

“Glad you’re back. I left two folders on your desk so you can catch up. Missing persons.” Andrea stood in the open doorway. Liz was busy pulling out the murder book from her suitcase.

“Hayley will be in soon. She had to run a few errands.” Liz finally turned to face her young cousin.

“Look, Andrea. I know you think this is a waste of time and money, but I’m not giving up on the Higgins case. I can’t. It’s something...I have to do. But you’re right. The agency needs paying clients. So, I will delve into those folders you left for me. Thanks again for holding down the fort while we were gone.” Liz walked over and hugged Andrea. She let out a huge sigh.

“I get it, Liz. I really do,” whispered Andrea in her cousin’s ear. They released one another.

“Let’s get to work,” said Liz.

Work on the two cases preceded for the next several months. Liz had very little time to focus on anything else. The Leslie Higgins murder book sat on a bookshelf collecting dust. Liz would glance at it every now and then. Sometimes she could sense Leslie in the office with a slight smell of salt. The odor lingered briefly and then disappeared. Maybe Leslie finally gave up on Liz.

Of the two missing persons case, they had tracked down one of them still alive. The other, unfortunately, committed suicide. It was heartbreaking for the family of the latter. Liz never liked giving a death notice. People looked for closure. She wasn’t sure if suicide was considered that since it opened up so many more questions which probably would never be answered.

As the days, weeks, and months rolled by, the Salt & Pepper PI Agency had picked up a few more cases. Divorce, child custody, and spouse cheating cases to be exact. Liz wasn't fond of the spouse cheating. Too much surveillance—too much wasted time. Andrea and Hayley hated sitting and watching. So, Liz volunteered. She thought it would be a great time to review the Leslie Higgins murder book again. It had been eighteen months since they returned from Florida, and she had spent little time reviewing the case. And during that time, Leslie barely made her presence known to Liz. In fact, Liz was hoping by some miracle Leslie Higgins found peace and moved on.

Liz stifled a huge yawn. She had been over the murder book several times. She stopped briefly and let out a sigh. Rehashing the same thing over and over was not helping in the least. If Leslie Higgins wanted her to find her killer, she would have to tell Liz who the killer was.

The murder book sat on the passenger seat. Liz noticed the door to the apartment building opened. Hal Jones, the cheating husband, walked out with a young woman on his arm. She leaned in and planted a big, wet kiss right on his thin lips. She thought she saw a flick of tongue. Yuck! Jones pulled the young woman into his arms. His left arm slid down and squeezed her tiny behind. Click! Click! Click! These shots were a treasure trove of evidence for Deborah Jones, Hal's wife.

As they released one another, Hal Jones placed his arm about the woman's waist, and they both got into his Lexus and drove away. Liz had plenty of photos for her client Debra Jones. It will be easy for her to win her case against her husband with this evidence.

Liz packed up the camera. It was then she smelled the overwhelming odor of salt. *Leslie?* A smoky apparition manifested in the backseat. Liz turned to face the murder victim.

“Leslie...I can’t help you. No one can except for *you*. You’ve got to tell me who killed you, Leslie. Please! I’ve gone over and over your murder book. I want to solve your case so you can move on or...or whatever you’re supposed to do.” Her left eyelid fluttered from the pain. Liz tried desperately to keep herself awake. The darkness swirled and tightened its grip but not before a man’s face appeared clear as a bell. Four black thick numbers blazed in gold. And the word “family” written in script. Liz slumped sideways and succumbed to the inevitable.

Andrea Foster had not heard back from Liz since her surveillance shift ended almost three hours ago. That was unlike Liz. She was a stickler for punctuality. Something was wrong. She could feel it. Without hesitation, she grabbed her car keys from the desk drawer. Locked the agency doors and rushed to the stake out point.

Traffic was light. Andrea weaved her way in and out. As she reached the designated street, she slowed down checking the parked cars. As she neared the street address of the cheating husband, she immediately recognized Liz Trevor’s car. But as she coasted by, there was no one inside.

Andrea found a spot to park her car. She got out and raced to Liz’s vehicle. She peered in. That is when she saw Liz collapse on the front seat.

“Liz!” shouted Andrea. She tried the door, and much to her surprise, it was unlocked. Liz began to stir from Andrea’s shaking.

“Oh, my head...it really hurts,” moaned Liz. Her eyelids felt like weights. She could hear Andrea’s voice floating in the air. Finally, Liz forced open her eyes. The sun was bright. Andrea’s contorted face loomed above.

“What? What’s going on? Andrea? What are you doing here?” Liz asked as she tried to sit up. The intense pain she had felt earlier slipped away. Andrea gently helped her cousin.

“I’m taking you back to the office. I’ll bring Hayley back to get your car.” Liz did not argue. She still felt woozy as Andrea helped her inside the other vehicle.

“Wait!” cried Liz. “Give me a piece of paper.” Andrea yanked out a notepad and pen and then handed it to Liz. Instantly, Liz wrote down 13862. Her head felt heavy on her shoulders. She closed her eyes and could see his face. “My car can wait. I need Hayley to draw the face I saw. I’m pretty sure it’s the face of Leslie Higgin’s killer.

Andrea started the car. “What’s with the number?” She merged into traffic and headed back to the office.

“I think it’s a badge number. I don’t know if it’s a Sarasota or a Cleveland cop.” Andrea lifted her eyebrows.

“Well, it’s about time Leslie gave up her killer.” And with that said, both women remained silent for the remainder of the trip.

Hayley’s sketch made Liz smile. Now, all she had to do was talk to Detective Jim Neighbors to see if there was a cop that looked similar to the sketch and had the badge number 13862. After leaving a message for him, she decided to look into a Cleveland cop. Her contact within the FBI

promised to check it out as soon as she had the chance. So, with no other leads to follow, Liz again set Leslie Higgin's murder book aside.

The next two weeks flew by with her current clientele. She tried to focus on the work sitting on her cluttered desk. But the sketch and badge number kept bugging her to no end. Finally, almost three weeks later, Detective Neighbors contacted her with the information.

"Detective Neighbors...it's been a while. I hope you're calling with good news?" said Liz, keeping her fingers crossed.

"Liz...sorry it took so long to get back to you. I've been swamped with cases. Two more detectives retired, so our caseload exploded. I'm sure you don't want to hear excuses...I researched the photo and badge number. The badge number is not part of the series in Sarasota. And as for the sketch, I couldn't find anyone who resembles it—past or present. I wish I had better news. Did you hear back from your contact at the FBI?" asked Neighbors.

"Not yet. I'm praying there has to be a connection somewhere. If not, why in the world am I fixated on the sketch and badge number?" Liz felt deflated.

"Maybe it's not a badge number...maybe an address or a zip code. Maybe the pic isn't a cop. Could be a perp already in the system. I ran the sketch through the Florida databases. No hit. But if your contact was willing, she could run it through the Ohio database. Just a suggestion," added Neighbors.

"I'll give my contact another week. If I don't hear back by then, I'll give her another call. I appreciate you checking into it for me," said Liz.

“I should be thanking you for spending time on our cold case. If you found out anything...anything at all, give me a shout, Liz,” said Neighbors.

“Will do...take care, detective.” Liz disconnected the call. She would need a miracle to solve this case. Obstacles each way she turned.

Special Agent Kim Harris read over Liz Trevor’s request for information. She had put it off long enough. Even though she did not always see eye to eye with Trevor’s tactics, the Salt & Pepper PI Agency did solve cases—regardless of the fact they sometimes resorted to relying on the paranormal for help.

As Agent Harris delved into the project, she realized that the numbers were indeed associated with the Cleveland Police. The specific number 13862 had been assigned to a beat cop named Harry Williams, who retired at least ten years ago but still lived in the area with his wife, Melanie. As for the sketch, it did look very similar to William’s photo back when he first joined the force. As she gathered the information, a slight chill ran down her spine. Could this man be the killer of Leslie Wiggins? Living and working in plain sight?

Liz sat behind her cluttered desk. The photos of the Deborah Jones cheating husband case had turned the tables in favor of Deborah. She got the house, half the money, and spousal support for the next five years. She closed the folder and placed it in the old metal file cabinet against the wall. The sound of her cell phone chime muffled inside the top drawer of her desk.

“Trevor,” she answered.

“It’s Special Agent Harris. I got the info you wanted on the Leslie Higgins case. I’ll email you the file.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your help.” Silence filled the line.

“Harris? Are you there?” Liz looked at the screen on her phone. The call had been disconnected.

The open laptop pinged. She quickly sat down and retrieved the email from Agent Harris. It was like hitting the jackpot. The name, address, and badge number of Officer Harry Williams appeared on the screen, along with a picture of him when he joined the Cleveland Police Department years ago.

“Hot dog!” cried Liz. She instantly grabbed her jacket off the coat rack and headed to her car. She couldn’t wait for her cousin's return, who was diligently working on another “cheating spouse” case.

The drive to Painesville was bumper to bumper. She dared not call ahead. A surprise visit was usually the best approach. Hopefully, Harry Williams would be home and agree to speak with her. After all these years, *if* he was indeed the killer, and that’s a big *IF*, a confession would be great but highly unlikely. If he did it and kept his mouth shut all these years, time will tell.

The house was located on the bend of the cul-de-sac. It looked to be one of the newer colonial homes situated right off Route 44. It was close to shopping, restaurants, and Painesville school system. A dark blue roof and light blue vinyl siding made it stand out compared to its

drab, colorless neighbors on either side. The front lawn and bushes meticulously landscaped left you with the feel of “money.”

Liz parked her car on the street. She knew from the information sent from Agent Harris that Harry Williams was married. She adjusted her jacket and walked to the front door. Using the brass knob, she knocked hard.

The heavy, solid door opened just a crack. Liz waited for a brief moment. She could not see who was behind the door.

“Who is it?” asked a timid voice.

“Hello...my name is Liz Trevor, and I’m from the Salt & Pepper Private Investigating Agency, and we’re working with the Sarasota Police Department. We’re looking into the Leslie Higgins murder case from 1982. I was wondering if I could speak with Mr. Harry Williams. Is he available?” asked Liz.

The door opened wide. An older woman with gray hair pulled back into a bun and stared at Liz. For a brief second, Liz remained stoic. She could not believe her eyes. The elderly senior was an older version of Leslie Higgins, the deceased murder victim. *Was this woman a long-lost relative?*

“I’m Melanie Williams—Harry’s wife. Let’s go around back and sit on the patio,” she said. Liz could not take her eyes off the familiar-faced woman. She followed her as they walked on the concrete path next to a retaining wall. The backyard was spacious and well-manicured.

Luscious grass and several weeping trees shade the patio area. The heavy metal table and chairs sat close to the double-breasted grill and the small tiki bar—a definite area for entertaining.

“What a lovely home you have, Mrs. Williams,” said Liz, taking in the beautiful scenery. The older woman turned to face Liz.

“Please...won’t you sit down, Ms. Trevor. Would you like something to drink?” Melanie gestured toward one of the metal chairs.

“No, thank you.” Liz needed two hands to yank out the weighted piece of furniture. “I’m sorry for staring, Mrs. Williams, but you look very much like Leslie Higgins, the woman’s murder we are working on.” Liz sat down across from the woman.

Melanie bowed her head. When she looked back up at Liz, her eyes were full of tears. Then, without saying a word, she began to sob.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Mrs. Williams,” said Liz. She pulled a tissue from her briefcase and handed it to the elderly lady. Melanie took it and dabbed her eyes.

“Please...call me Melanie.” Liz gave a slight nod.

“Melanie, may I ask why you are crying?” Liz shifted on the hard seat.

“It’s been so long...I just wanted to live my own life. Is that so much to ask?” murmured Melanie. Liz strained to hear the woman’s soft, shaky voice.

“I’m confused. I’m here looking into the cold case of Leslie Higgins, Melanie. Did you know her?” asked Liz. Melanie gave a slight nod.

“You did know Leslie Higgins?” Liz’s eyes sparkled.

“Leslie...Leslie was my twin sister,” whispered Melanie. She sniffed and wiped her nose.

“Wait...did you just say Leslie Higgins was your *twin* sister?” asked Liz. Melanie locked eyes with Liz.

“You must understand, Ms. Trevor, we were separated at birth. I didn’t know I had a twin until years after the death of my parents. But it was too late. I even tracked down the orphanage my sister had been living all those years. She left, and no one knew where she had gone. I thought...I thought there was a reason why she didn’t want to be found. And back then, there was no internet or social media,” explained Melanie.

“May I ask why you were separated from Leslie at birth?” Liz’s heart skipped a beat.

“At the time, my father had no job. He liked to drink. I suppose you’d call him an alcoholic. Anyway, he didn’t really want either one of us. But my mother insisted on keeping both of us. He wouldn’t have it. They agreed to keep one baby. And I was the ‘one.’”

“The information I have on Leslie stated she was sent to the orphanage *after* your parents passed away,” said Liz.

Melanie shook her head side to side. “No...that’s not correct. Someone made a mistake. She was sent directly to the orphanage from the hospital. In fact, the orphanage insisted she would be adopted because the fact she was new born baby. But of course, we know that wasn’t so. My mother was devastated and was never the same. Back then, my mother did not work and depended on my father for money, the few times he could actually hold down a job. My father

kept on drinking. There were many times I felt guilty I had been the chosen one,” explained Melanie.

“I don’t mean to judge, but Melanie, it didn’t sound like you had the ideal life either. Your father is an alcoholic, and your mother sounded like she had the baby blues,” replied Liz.

“As for the accident...my father had been drinking. I’m not sure why I wasn’t with them that particular day. I remember being at the next-door neighbor’s house when the highway patrol came. After the funeral, I was sent to live with a third cousin in Virginia. As soon as I was done with high school, I left and came back to Ohio. I got a job as a secretary and met my husband, Harry. He had just finished the police academy and got a job with the Cleveland Police Department.” Melanie let out a huge sigh.

“Did you ever tell Harry about your twin sister?” asked Liz.

“Oh yes! He volunteered to use his police resources to track down Leslie. Harry was the one who found the orphanage in New Jersey. He even found out she moved to New York and had become a freelance journalist. Then she was offered a job in Sarasota, Florida. When he told me everything, I was so excited. I asked him if I could call her and arrange a visit. He persuaded me to wait until he had spoken with her to make sure she didn’t harbor any bad feelings toward me.” Melanie gave a half smile.

“Is there any chance you can remember the exact date he spoke with her?” asked Liz.

“Well...I never did get to talk to my sister. Harry had taken a couple of vacation days and drove down to see her in person. When he came back, he told me she wasn’t interested in

reconnecting with her twin and that she resented me for having the ‘good life’ while she suffered inside the orphanage,” said Melanie.

Liz moved about, unable to keep still. “Melanie, can you remember the exact day he returned from his trip to Florida?”

“I’ll never forget it. I was devastated by the fact my sister refused to see me. I thought for sure...since we had no other relatives...and that I was her twin...she’d forgive me and want to have a relationship.” Melanie’s eyes were moist. “It was July 16.”

Liz’s mind raced. Harry came home the day Leslie Higgins's body was discovered. *Coincidence?* There was no coincidence when it came to murder.

Suddenly, her nostrils filled with the smell of salt. Liz glanced about. A swirling wisp of smoke hovered in the air directly behind where Melanie was seated.

“Are you alright, Ms. Trevor?” asked the elderly woman.

“I...I...” Liz could not get the words out quick enough before darkness engulfed her spiraling her down into a deep abyss.

The paramedic was taking her blood pressure. Liz forced her eyes open. The ground was hard under her back. Her hands and feet tingled. A tinge of the smell of salt lingered.

“Ma’am...can you hear me?” asked the young paramedic. Liz stared up into the blue sky. There was only one reason Leslie Higgins had made an appearance there at her twin sister’s home.

“Yes...I can hear just fine,” replied Liz. She tried to sit up.

“Hold on, ma’am. You should really let us take you to the emergency room to get checked out,” said the paramedic.

“No, thank you, young man. I’m fine. If you would help me up, I’d appreciate it,” said Liz as she leaned on his shoulder to stand.

“Ms. Trevor, maybe you should listen to the paramedic and go to the hospital,” said Melanie. The paramedic helped Liz to a seat by the table.

“I’m fine, Melanie.” The paramedic packed his bag.

“I can’t force you to go, Ms. Trevor, but I highly suggest it.” He stood for a brief moment. Liz did not move.

“I would make an appointment to see my primary physician since you won’t go to the hospital. Good day, ladies.” The paramedic grabbed his bag and left the two women alone.

“Ms. Trevor...are you sure? You gave me such a scare. You just fell off the chair onto the ground and didn’t move. I called 911 immediately,” said Melanie. On the table were two tall glasses filled with ice water.

“May I?” asked Liz. Melanie gave a slight nod.

Liz gulped down the entire glass. It felt cool against her dry parched throat. By now, the scent of salt was long gone.

“Do you have many fainting spells?” asked Melanie as she sipped her cold water.

“Only when I get a visit from the other side,” murmured Liz. A slight headache clung to the back of her skull.

“The other side? What other side?” asked the older woman.

“It really doesn’t matter...Melanie, I need to speak with Harry. Will he be home later today?”

“He should be. I don’t ask where he goes. He tells me to mind my business. Over the years, he’s changed. And not in a good way, either. He’s not the same man I married years ago. He’s bitter. I used to ask him what was wrong, but then I stopped. He’d get angry. It would have been better if I’d keep my concerns to myself. Between you and me...I think that is why he retired early from the police force. At the beginning, his ambition to become a detective was all he ever talked about. Well, that dream never came to fruition.” Melanie lifted her glass to her lips.

“I don’t mean to pry, but did you two have any children?” asked Liz. Her headache was almost gone.

“No...it was just another thing Harry blamed me for...not able to conceive a child. I told him we both should be tested...it may not be me but him. He was furious and would do no such thing!” Melanie averted eye contact. Liz had a suspicion it wasn’t Melanie who had the problem of conceiving, but Harry.

“I’ll be honest with you, Ms. Trevor, I don’t think Harry is going to talk to you. He’s a very private man.” Just then, they heard the sound of a car.

“Hello! Where are you, Melanie? I’m home. What’s for dinner?” a male voice shouted.

Melanie jumped up out of her seat.

“Back here, Harry. We have a visitor!” shouted Melanie. Liz watched as the woman tensed. If she wasn’t mistaken, she would swear Melanie was afraid of her husband.

The six-foot white-haired retired cop walked quickly to the table. Liz got up as he approached. His pale green eyes blazed. Flushed cheeks and rapid breath. Both hands curled in a tight fist.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he shouted pushing himself into Liz’s personal space.

“Whoa...I don’t appreciate your intrusiveness,” replied Liz. Her palm almost touching his wide chest.

“I could say the same for you!” he cried not backing down.

“Harry! What is wrong with you? This woman is working on my sister’s murder case. I’m glad someone has taken an interest in solving it. Why are you being so rude?” stuttered Melanie.

Harry’s head swiveled between the two women. He wanted to hit this strange woman.

How much did she know?

Melanie walked to her husband and laid a gentle hand on his muscled forearm. The tension in his body slightly eased.

“I apologize...I thought you might be a reporter. They like to snoop around digging up the past, making trouble for all in their path,” explained Harry. Liz peered at the hot-headed man. *Could he have murdered Leslie Higgins? What would be the motive? And why would reporters come around bothering the elderly couple?*

“I’m not a reporter. I’m a private investigator working with the Sarasota Police Department, looking into the unsolved murder of Leslie Higgins back in 1982. And it would be very helpful if I could ask you a couple of questions, Mr. Williams.” Liz sat back down.

Harry Williams stared down at his wife. She forced a smile in return, then removed her frail hand from his thick arm.

“Harry...please. Please help Ms. Trevor. You know it has bothered me all these years the terrible way my sister had died. I know we weren’t close, but she was still my twin sister. The only family I had. Please, Harry, for me?” begged the elderly woman.

Harry pulled out the metal chair and plopped down. He wiped the sweat off his brow. Then placed his hands inside his lap.

“What do you want to you? I went over all of this back in 1982. Nothing has changed. I’m sure you read my statement.” Harry stared hard at Liz.

“Yes, you’re correct. But as a retired law enforcement officer, you know how it all works. So, if you would please indulge me...Mr. Williams?” Liz pulled out a small notepad and pen.

Harry went through the whole scenario. It did not wave from his previous statement long ago *except* for the part when he supposedly confronted Leslie Higgins in Sarasota.

“You do realize, Mr. Williams, you never told the police. It is not stated in your formal statement. Why did you feel the need to omit it?” asked Liz. Harry glanced at his wife.

“I didn’t feel it was necessary at the time. Melanie was so distraught over the fact Leslie didn’t want to reconnect.” He shrugged his huge shoulders.

“Are you sure it’s the only reason?” pushed Liz.

Harry’s eyes grew dark at the insulation. “You think I killed her, don’t you? That’s exactly why I didn’t tell the police!” He abruptly stood up.

“You need to leave—now!” shouted Harry. Liz looked over at Melanie. Her head hung down.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Williams...Mrs. Williams. I can see myself out.” And without another word, Liz walked to the front of the house and left in her car.

Andrea and Hayley listened as Liz explained the strange encounter with Mr. & Mrs. Williams. The cousins remained quiet while Liz went over Williams's initial statement in 1982 and the one he provided Liz on her visit.

“I’m still stuck on the fact Leslie Higgins had a twin—let alone her twin was still alive, never once contacting the Sarasota Police to find out what happened to her sister,” exclaimed Andrea. Hayley gave a slight nod.

“I mean...I get it. Not getting along, but murder? Even if they weren’t fond of one another...murder?” questioned Hayley.

“Here’s the thing,” said Liz. “It could be true...but no one knows except for Harry. That’s what *he* claims. I’ll be the devil’s advocate.”

Liz gathered her notes. “I’ll give you my take on this scenario. I think something happened, not sure at this point. Harry decides to pay a visit to Leslie Higgins in Sarasota, giving the excuse to his wife of trying to repair a relationship that was severed when the twins were just infants. Either got mad she refused to reconnect with Melanie or...” Andrea jumped in.

“Or...he made a sexual advance against Leslie, and she would have nothing to do with him, then he snapped. Murdered Leslie and high-tailed it back home to convince Melanie her twin wanted nothing to do with her. Of course, it wouldn’t explain why he left the whole visitation with Leslie in Florida out of his initial statement to the police,” said Andrea. She plopped down in the high-back cushioned chair.

“Exactly, my point. If he was innocent, he would have told the entire story to the police back in 1982. He omitted important information intentionally. I think to throw off any suspicion of his involvement in Leslie’s death. I’m telling you...he has a short fuse!” Liz leaned back.

“Let’s say Williams is the killer. He had to have gloves not to leave any type of DNA evidence on the chain or rope which was found on the body. But even though DNA wasn’t prevalent in the 80’s, he *was* a police officer and knew fingerprints could be left. He knew more than the average killer being a cop. And you can drive from Florida to Ohio in a day. It’s a long and tedious drive but it can be done,” added Hayley.

“Were the numbers his badge numbers?” asked Hayley.

“I didn’t get to ask Melanie Williams. And he tossed me out before I had a chance to ask him. I have a feeling he wouldn’t have answered anyway. I think I’m going to pay a visit to the Cleveland Police Department and see what I can find out about Officer Harry Williams,” said Liz.

Liz Trevor had arranged to meet with Captain Ellis Wellington of the Cleveland Police Department. His tenure racked up to about thirty years. In all likelihood, he knew Officer Harry Williams. The million-dollar question—would the captain divulge information about a former police officer?

Liz found the indoor parking lot and slipped in a space located on the third floor. She took the elevator down to the main entrance. There she was searched and went through a metal detector. Almost twenty minutes later, she was sitting in a small office waiting to see the captain.

“Ms. Liz Trevor?” asked the pretty dispatcher. Her long hair pulled back into a pony behind her petite head. The huge belt filled with an assortment of “cop tools” hung heavy on her slim figure.

“I’m Liz Trevor.” She stood up. Her dark blue pantsuit fit snugly—it shouted all business. Or so she liked to think it did.

“Captain Wellington will see. Please follow me.” The dispatcher waited until a buzz sounded. Turning the knob quickly then holding it for Liz.

“Thank you,” said Liz as she slipped by the young female.

“Door 3—on the left.” The young officer gestured toward the narrow hallway.

Liz gave a slight nod. It wasn't even ten steps. She pushed the heavy door. It was empty except for a small square table and two plastic chairs. It looks like an interrogation room. Liz sat down to wait. Seconds later, Captain Ellis Wellington in his official uniform entered. He gave a brief smile then sat down across from Liz. Broad straight shoulders and a full head of thick white hair his fading blue eyes. Coarse wrinkles stretched across his aging face, which carried the many years of working in law enforcement.

"I am Captain Ellis Wellington. You must be Ms. Liz Trevor from the Salt & Pepper Private Investigation Agency. Your agency is well known, Ms. Trevor and highly respected. You've helped solve several cold cases." He stuck out his huge hand. Liz reciprocated.

"Thank you, Captain Wellington. I have an excellent team." Liz shifted in her seat. The plastic was hard.

"What can the Cleveland Police Department do for you, Ms. Trevor?" asked Wellington. He intertwined his fingers and placed them on the top of the empty table.

"I am working with the Sarasota Police Department in Florida. It is a cold case from 1982. The unsolved murder of Leslie Higgins." The smile on the captain's face vanished. Liz noted the facial change.

"Detective Jim Neighbors from Sarasota has been assigned the cold case. I have met with him. DNA testing has been done on the evidence which was retrieved at the murder scene. Our findings led us to a retired police officer by the name of Harry Williams," explained Liz.

The captain leaned back in the chair. For a brief moment, Liz thought he'd crack it in half with his large frame.

"What are your questions, Ms. Trevor?" asked the captain. He narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. Once again, Liz noted Wellington's facial changes.

Liz pulled out a small notepad and pen from her pocket. She clicked the pen and glanced at the captain. He was staring behind her at the camera in the far corner of the room. It wasn't unusual for every room in a police station to have a camera.

"Did you know Harry Williams when he was a police officer?" asked Liz.

The large man bit his lower lip and looked down at the table. "You have to understand, Ms. Trevor, I have worked with many police officers over my thirty years. And when I became captain, I made it a point to get to know each and every officer under my command." He locked eyes with Liz.

"Yes...I do remember Officer Williams. Next question," he said.

"How was he at his job?" asked Liz.

The older man's eyebrows crunched together. "If you are asking, did he perform his duties as an officer of the law...yes, he did. Next question."

Liz could tell by the captain's glare he was not happy with her questioning. She knew it would only be a matter of time before he stopped and asked her to leave.

"Captain Wellington, was he under your command in 1982?" she pushed.

“In 1982, Officer Williams and I were patrol officers. He was not under my command at that time. Next question, Ms. Trevor.” The captain crossed his arms. She needed to speed up her questioning.

“In 1982, Officer Williams was questioned in regard to Leslie Higgins's murder. His statement read...” Liz pulled the folded sheet from her pocket and read Harry’s initial statement from 1982. “And he was questioned because his wife, Melanie, is Leslie Higgins’ twin sister.”

“The Cleveland Police Department did no investigation. Can you tell me why he wasn’t considered a suspect?” Wellington’s eyes narrowed.

“Why would he be? You have his statement. If it was good enough in 1982, then it’s good enough for 2023,” replied the captain.

“I visited Harry Williams and his wife, Melanie. He told me he wasn’t completely honest at the time. He placed himself in Florida when she was murdered. But he neglected to report that to both the Sarasota Police and the Cleveland Police.” Liz closed her notepad.

“What do you want from me, Ms. Trevor? Procedures back in the 80s were quite different than they are now. If you have DNA, I assume it’s not Williams, or he would be under arrest. I can’t help you, Ms. Trevor. And now, if you don’t mind, I have a department to run.” Wellington got up and left before Liz could say another word.

As the door clicked shut, it locked immediately. Liz tried to open the door. She began to pound with the palm of her hand.

“Hello? Can someone unlock the door, please? I can’t get out. Hello?” she shouted. Liz turned and faced the camera. She waved her arms back and forth in the air to gain attention.

Liz tried the door one more time. Locked. She sat down and used her cell phone to call the office. Hayley picked up.

“Salt & Pepper PI Agency, may I help you?” asked Hayley.

“It’s me, Hayley. The wonderful Captain Wellington locked me in a room at the police station, and it seems he forgot about me. Can you tell them to let me out?” asked Liz while trying the door again.

“Are you kidding? They can’t hold you for no reason,” said Hayley.

“I think, in a roundabout way, it’s a payback for having the audacity to question him about a fellow police officer. But I don’t want to sit here all day,” replied Liz.

“Why don’t you call the front desk and tell them you’re in a locked room?” said Hayley.

“I think it would be better if you just came here. This way, they have to release me because you’re waiting. Please, Hayley?” begged Liz.

“I’ll be right there, cousin.” Liz sat down and waited for Hayley to arrive to set her free. In the meantime, she reviewed what little information Captain Wellington had barely given. He was hiding something—that’s for sure. The camaraderie between police officers was strong, even after retirement.

Suddenly, the door burst open. The female dispatcher smiled. “You’re free to leave, Ms. Trevor.” She gestured for Liz.

As Liz squeezed past the young officer, she briefly stopped and handed her a business card.

“Could you please give this to Captain Wellington and ask him if he remembers anything about retired Officer Harry Williams I would appreciate a call.” She smiled and strolled down the narrow hallway that dumped into the lobby.

Hayley was pacing. She threw the male officer behind the partition a dirty look.

“Ridiculous, Liz. We’re all on the same side. Don’t these bozos know that?” Liz nodded toward the glass door.

“Let it go, Hayley. It’s not worth making a stink. I’m hungry.” The two women left the precinct.

Captain Wellington watched out his office window. His brow was lined with sweat. He knew sooner or later, this day would come. He was hoping for the latter after his retirement. Trevor knew. And now all she had to do was prove it.

Harry Williams sat at the Paradise Inn bar, drinking a cold beer and munching on nuts. The unexpected text from Captain Wellington upset his day. It could only mean one thing—trouble. Ever since that nosy private investigator came poking around, he kept looking over his shoulder. And Melanie... well, she just about stopped talking to him. Not that he cared. He’d liked to get rid of her—permanently like her sister. But this time, he would make no mistakes.

The life insurance premium was for a substantial amount. He could move and live quite comfortably. Maybe even go back to having sex but with someone a lot younger and more

vibrant in the bedroom. He thought about the porn he watched last evening, and his crotch got hard. He could still get it up, even at his age.

The bar door opened, letting in the sunlight. Williams did not bother to turn around. He grabbed another handful of peanuts and shoved them in his mouth. Wellington slid on the stool next to him. There were no other patrons at eleven o'clock in the morning. The bartender was busy watching the television mounted to the wall.

“Trevor came to see me. Asked a shit load of questions. You need to deal with this, Williams. I can't have an investigation under my wing. I'm retiring in six months.” Wellington tried to get the bartender's attention.

“Why are you worrying about this woman? She doesn't know anything. She can't prove anything. And as for the DNA evidence, it won't lead back to no one. Gloves. Let it lie. It will go away. Don't get your panties in a bunch,” said Williams. He gulped his beer.

“You're wrong this time. Trevor knows. She's getting close—too close. With all the advancements in DNA...you know it's just a matter of time.” Wellington rubbed his face.

“Have a little faith, my man.” Williams slapped the captain's back. Wellington grabbed his wrist.

“I'm not going down for this, Williams. I'll turn your ass in before I go down. You got that?” Williams tried to pull his wrist free, but Wellington's grip was tight.

“Okay! It's going to be alright. I'll handle things.” Wellington released his grip and stood up to leave.

“Thanks for stopping by,” said Williams. Wellington flipped him the bird, then disappeared into the sunlight.

Liz arranged to meet with Melanie, away from their residence. She lucked out because Melanie had told her Harry got up and left.

The Town Diner housed the regular lunch crowd. The two women had to wait for a table. After being seated, Melanie kept glancing over her shoulder at the door.

“It’s okay, Melanie. Unless you told Harry where you were going, he wouldn’t know to find you here. Relax. Check out the menu. They have good food,” said Liz.

“I’m Sadie. May I get you ladies something to drink?” A middle-aged server chewed on a wad of bubble gum. Her Town Diner’s yellow shirt was stained. Ripped blue jeans hung loose on her shapely hips.

“I’ll have a cup of tea,” replied Melanie.

“Make that two,” said Liz.

“Be back in a second.” Sadie turned on her heel and left them alone.

“Everything is exceptional. Order whatever you like, Melanie. It’s on me,” said Liz.

Melanie shifted in her seat. The noise inside the diner increased.

Sadie returned with their drinks. “I brought a variety of teas to choose from.” She placed the steaming hot cup and a rack filled with assorted teas in front of each.

“Ready to order?” asked Sadie. She flipped open her tiny notepad.

“I’ll have a BLT sandwich on rye with fries,” said Liz.

“I’ll have a cup of chicken noodle soup and a biscuit with butter.” Melanie handed the menu to Sadie.

“This will be the easiest order I’ll have all day.” Sadie snapped her gum and then hurried across the busy floor.

“Melanie, you’re probably wondering why I asked you to meet me here,” said Liz, leaning in.

“I wasn’t surprised at all. I know you are working hard to find my sister’s killer. I appreciate your effort, Ms. Trevor.” Melanie straightened the napkin on her lap.

“Liz...call me Liz. And yes, I do want to find Leslie’s killer. She deserves justice, especially after all these years.” Melanie stared at Liz. Her eyes filled with tears.

“You think Harry murdered my sister, don’t you?” asked Melanie.

Liz gave a half smile. “Why would you think that, Melanie? Has he said something to you about involvement in her murder over the years?”

Melanie shook her head back and forth. “No. Harry doesn’t talk to me about it at all. In fact, he told me never to bring up her death. It’s taboo.”

“Surely, he has to understand even though you two may not have been close, you’re still sisters—twins. Justice is justice regardless of the ins and outs of a relationship,” explained Liz.

Melanie took out a tissue from her handbag and dabbed her moist eyes. "I guess it's my fault for not pursuing it. When I heard she wanted nothing to do with me, I was devastated. All those years we were separated." Melanie sniffled.

"Do you think Harry murdered Leslie?" asked Liz point blank. Melanie's eyes opened wide.

"You do," she replied. "And that's good enough for me."

Liz jerked her head back. She couldn't believe her ears. Sadie, the server, balanced the tray full of food.

"BLT with fries." Sadie placed the hot plate in front of Liz. "And a cup of chicken noodle soup, a biscuit and butter." Melanie leaned away from the table as the food was set down.

"Thank you," said Melanie.

"If you need anything else...just give a holler. Enjoy!" said Sadie. Minutes later, both women were eating. Silence filled the air between them.

"You do realize, Melanie, that as soon as there is enough evidence connecting Harry to your sister's murder, he will be arrested. And if tried and convicted, he'll spend what remaining life he has behind bars." Liz wiped her face with the soft napkin.

Melanie kept eating her soup. She buttered a small piece of biscuit and placed it in her mouth. Quietly, she chewed. After a couple of minutes in silence, she cleared her throat.

“Justice. Harry has been able to live, breathe, and do whatever he pleases for the last twenty years while my twin’s decomposing body rots in the ground. It’s only fair Harry should rot away in jail for the next twenty years.” Melanie gave a half-grin.

“I have to admit, I’m surprised by your attitude, Melanie. I believe Harry lied to you and the police. I believe Harry followed your sister down to Florida with the sole purpose of killing her. Maybe he approached her, and she refused his advances. Maybe he didn’t want you to reconnect with your sister. Maybe he just didn’t like her. No matter the reason, I believe he had every intention of killing Leslie and then high-tailing it back to cover his tracks. The law enforcement family has a strong bond. Very seldom do they turn on one another. In this case, when Harry gave his official statement to the police, they took his word. Harry was never a suspect—until now.”

Melanie sipped at her warm tea. She listened as Liz presented her case. “Harry has a safe deposit box. I can get you the key. There might be something inside to incriminate him. I want justice for my sister.” Her eyes filled with tears. “If she were still alive, we’d be close.”

“I think you’re right, Melanie. And I know this may sound a bit off the wall, but she’s been protecting you all these years. She loved you. And still does.” Liz placed her hand lightly on top of Melanie’s and gave it a slight squeeze.

“I won’t ask how you know...but if you should happen to speak with her again, let her know I’ve always loved her and would have done anything to be together,” whispered Melanie.

Instantly, Liz could smell it once again—salt. Her head began to swim. Voices echoed within her aching skull. Melanie’s voice faded in and out. The swirling mist appeared behind Melanie. Leslie Higgin’s shape appeared. Her words were faint.

“I...I can’t hear you, Leslie.” Liz’s words were slurred. The apparition evaporated. Darkness surrounded Liz as she slipped unconscious.

The images were clear. Leslie Higgins smiled as she held out her hand. She looked alive and vibrant for being dead. Liz still could not hear but knew the words.

“Ms. Trevor, can you hear me?” asked a strange male voice. “Ms. Trevor?”

Liz’s eyes sprung open wide. For a brief moment, she forgot where she was. Melanie’s face loomed above. She tried to focus. The strange voice kept repeating itself.

“Yes...yes, I can hear you. I need to sit up,” insisted Liz. A pair of hands pushed her back into a sitting position.

“Oh, Liz. You gave me a scare—again!” exclaimed Melanie. The paramedic knelt on one knee beside her.

“Ms. Trevor, I highly suggest getting checked out by your primary physician. You shouldn’t be getting dizzy spells—even at your age,” commented the man.

Liz forced a smile. “Gotcha, young man. I will take your suggestion under advisement. Now, if you would be so kind to help me up.” A small crowd had formed around the three of them. The diner’s owner was on his cell phone, pacing back and forth.

Andrea pushed through the doors. “Liz! Are you alright?” she cried out, reaching her cousin’s side. The paramedic stood to leave.

“I advised Ms. Trevor she should...” Andrea cut off before he could finish.

“Thanks for your help...I got this,” insisted Andrea. The male paramedic gave a slight nod and left the diner.

“Come on, let’s get you back to the office.” Andrea helped her cousin to her feet.

“Thank you for lunch,” said Melanie. “I’ll get you the key.” She gave a slight wave and left the two women.

Melanie Williams strolled into the Salt & Pepper PI Agency several days later. Hayley issued her into Liz’s office. Liz stood up to greet her guest.

“I hope you are feeling better, Liz. Did you have a nice visit with my sister, Leslie?”

Melanie sat down in the chair.

“She was trying to tell me something. It was as if the words were put inside my head. She wanted me to give you a message. You were right. You two would have been close. And she never stopped loving you either.”

“Did she tell you it was Harry who committed the murder?” asked Melanie.

Liz looked down and nodded. “I’m sorry, Melanie. Your husband’s a killer.” Melanie placed a key on the desk and slowly pushed it toward Liz.

“Please...please get justice for Leslie,” murmured Melanie.

Liz was at the Wells Fargo Bank when it opened. She was led into the back vault area to view the safety deposit box. Once the clerk left her alone, she quickly opened it and dumped the contents.

A folded, yellowed single sheet of paper with tiny dark spots. A peace sign key ring with one key and another dark spot. And the piece of resistance—one pair of faded pink bikini underwear. Liz sat down at the table and stared at the damning evidence. She'd bet her life the dark spots were blood belonging to Leslie Higgins, along with the underwear. Taking great care not to contaminate the evidence, she put on gloves and placed each item in its separate evidence bag. As she closed up the box and slid it in its place, the smell of salt permeated the surrounding air.

“Leslie,” whispered Liz. In the corner, a swirling white mist hung in mid-air. Slowly, a ghostly figure took shape. The face was that of Leslie Higgins. Liz could barely make out a smile.

“We got him, Leslie. Undeniable proof. You should know it was your sister who turned in her husband. She will testify to convict him. Melanie never stopped loving you.” The mystical shape floated upward and disappeared. Immediately, an intense headache filled her skull. Liz staggered.

As she reached the entryway, the clerk was waiting. “Ma’am...are you alright?” she shouted, reaching Liz just before she collapsed.

Visions danced within her mind. Melanie, then Leslie. Grotesque features engulfed Harry William’s face. Unspoken words spewed like vomit from his contorted mouth.

“Ma’am...can you hear me?” asked a male voice. Liz felt cold. A shiver ran down her spine.

“Another blanket!” shouted the male voice. Warmth began to seep through her body.

Liz forced her eyes open. The young male paramedic looked down. He let out a huge sigh.

“Ms. Trevor...we need to stop meeting like this,” he said with a half grin. As her mind cleared, she realized it was the same paramedic who revived her the last time she had an episode. The smell of salt had vanished.

“Thank heaven you’re alright,” said the bank's branch manager. She was an older woman with a tight face and white hair.

“Ms. Trevor will be fine,” replied the male responder. He pulled off his blue gloves and packed his bag.

“You can have these back,” said Liz. She yanked off the blankets.

“Keep them...they’re all yours. Ever since COVID...well, CDC guidelines. Maybe you should carry them in your car.” He got up and gave a slight salute.

“Did you want me to call anyone?” asked the manager. Liz was standing.

“No...thank you. My car’s outside. I’ll be fine.” And without saying another word, she picked up her bag and left.

It had been six months since finding the irrefutable evidence in Leslie Higgin's murder case. Harry Williams had been on the run. The marshal service had joined the hunt for the elusive killer.

Liz and her cousins had resumed solving cases of "paying" clients. They had wracked up the bills in searching for Leslie Higgin's murderer. Melanie had offered Liz a small amount of money. But Liz already knew Melanie's financial situation was like any other retired citizen in this great nation—nothing to spare. So, unbeknownst to Andrea and Hayley, Liz refused the offer. Melanie would need it in the coming months, especially when the authorities apprehend Williams. Since the murder occurred in Florida, the trial would be remanded to the Florida courts. And since Melanie was to testify against her ex-husband (she proceeded to obtain a divorce from Harry immediately), she would have to stay in Florida until the trial was over.

As Liz headed into the office on Saturday, she instructed Andrea and Hayley to enjoy their weekend *away* from work. The women had been working many hours and needed a well-deserved break from other people's problems.

Liz locked the office door behind her and flipped on the overhead lights. Her desk was cluttered with mix-matched paper and folders. She released a huge sigh. As she sat down, her thoughts rushed to Leslie Higgins. It had been six months since she visualized the dead woman's apparition. Hopefully, once the authorities catch Harry Williams and he is tried and convicted, Leslie can finally find peace.

With those thoughts shoved to the back of her mind, Liz tried to focus on the newly acquired "non-paying" client. She hadn't mentioned it yet to her cousins. They dreaded working

for “the dead.” She had printed off several articles about the unsolved murder of Nick Stoll. The Indiana Gazette, dated February 17, 2009, reported his gruesome demise as a “horrific” murder. Poor Mr. Stoll had been decapitated. Once again, clues were limited, if not none.

Liz took a deep breath. She wondered if Nick Stoll would pay her an unannounced visit. It was then she heard a thump. The sound came from the back of the building where documents were housed.

“What the...?” she said out loud. Liz pushed her chair back and quickly moved down the narrow hallway. The door to the storage unit was locked. She pulled out her keys. It was then she noticed a split in the frame. Someone had broken in. Liz stood perfectly still and listened—a few more thuds and ruffling of papers. Slowly and quietly, Liz inched backward.

In that brief moment, the storage door flew open wide. Liz froze in her tracks. Standing barely three feet in front was the tall, menacing figure of Harry Williams. His face contorted in rage. Clothes torn and ragged. He had grown a beard, and his hair was now shoulder-length.

“*You* did this to me!” he shouted. Spittle shot from his filthy mouth. “If you hadn’t stuck your damn nose into *my* business...” The crazed man did not bother to finish. Williams lunged for Liz. Liz turned on her heel in a split second and hurried down the dark hallway. Williams is close behind, spewing unintelligible words. She could smell his body odor. Without slowing down, she hurled herself into her office. But Williams had been too close. She could not hold the door back to lock it. His enormous stature bored down on the flimsy door, splitting it.

Liz fell back, smacking the carpeted floor. She tried desperately to catch her breath. As she rolled to the side, she felt his giant hand sling her body like he was swatting a fly. Seconds

later, his heavy body straddled her petite frame. As she wiggled and gasped for air, she could hear him mumbling as he wrapped his rough fingers around her thin neck. Her eyes bulged as the oxygen supply stopped. Darkness crept around her vision.

And as she began to slip into a permanent blackness, the extreme pressure around her neck dissipated. Her brain tried desperately to focus. *Was she dead?* The heaviness on her chest lifted. Air rushed into her collapsing lungs.

Liz rolled to her left side. It was then she saw him. Harry Williams towered above. Once again, he mouthed words she could not hear. Liz followed his line of sight. There hovering in the air in the far corner of the office was the ghostly figure of Leslie Higgins.

Williams stood transfixed by the apparition. He did not see Liz as she stood up. He did not see Liz as she staggered and retrieved the gun from its case. Her breathing had returned to normal even though her throat was still on fire. With shaky hands, she lifted the revolver.

“It’s over, Harry. Get down on the ground. I don’t want to shoot you,” demanded Liz, trying to clear her throat.

But Harry Williams paid her no mind. He was still glued to the spot, mouthing invisible words. As he spoke nothing, the wispy smoke that formed Leslie Higgins's face slowly moved, giving the appearance of a slight nod.

“Harry! I’m not going to tell you again. Get on the ground!” demanded Liz. By now, she had slid behind him and grabbed her phone.

“911-what is your emergency?” asked the female dispatcher. Within that split second, Williams twirled around using an open hand to contact Liz’s face. Pain exploded as she dropped the phone and the gun. White stars burst behind her eyes as she agonized from the impact.

Harry Williams swooped down and picked up the gun. But instead of using it on Liz, he slowly turned to face the fading image of Leslie Higgins. Liz touched her sore jaw. The pain was intense.

“I don’t want to!” cried Williams. The ghostly apparition moved closer to him. Once again, she could see the outline of Leslie Higgin’s face and the slight nod. “No...please!” Harry Williams turned the gun on himself.

Liz tried to call out for him to stop. But she could barely move her jaw. As she dragged herself up off the floor, Williams placed the gun against his temple and pulled the trigger. Brain and blood matter, along with tiny pieces of his skull, projected violently from the other side of his head. Harry Williams's lifeless body crumpled to the ground.

Liz could not move. She remained stoic even when she heard sirens in the distance. Finally, she drew her eyes to the misty spirit. Leslie Higgins's lips formed a smile this time, mouthed the words “thank you.” And this time would be the last time Liz would ever see Leslie Higgins.

Melanie closed the front door to the house. She glanced at the “Sold” sign hanging from the wood post on the lawn. Her eyes filled with tears. Harry had committed the ultimate act—suicide. There would be no trial, no testimony, and no conviction. Harry had become his judge, jury, and executioner.

Liz had explained that Leslie's spirit had saved Liz's life. Melanie realized Leslie had saved her life, too.

The attending nurse helped Liz in and out of the hospital bed. After examination of the injuries she sustained from the brutal encounter with Williams, they warranted a two-night stay. Purple bruising had formed across her jaw and crept into her swollen cheek. Nothing that TLC and time wouldn't heal. Liz closed her eyes.

"Knock, knock," came a familiar voice. Melanie tip-toed in, holding a small bouquet of flowers. Liz forced a half grin.

"How are you feeling, Liz?" she asked.

"Better," she replied tight-lipped.

"I wanted to thank you and say goodbye. I decided to move to Sarasota, where it's warm and peaceful. My house sold quickly. A young couple with two children bought it." Melanie looked down at the floor.

"Good luck, Melanie," said Liz with difficulty.

"You've given me closure, Liz...and that I will be eternally grateful." Melanie gave a sad smile and left.

Liz stacked the folders neatly on top of her desk. She had sent Andrea and Hayley out on their next "paying" case. As she stood up to leave for the day, the name NICK STOLL echoed inside her mind. Once again, a faint odor of salt lingered in the air.

“I know...I know...I’m working on it,” said Liz to no one. She shut off the lights and closed the door, wondering what new trouble she would get herself into *this* time.//

Editor note: If you would like to let Alice Baburek know your thoughts on this novella you may write to her c/o Books & Pieces Magazine editor@booksnpieces.com Add ALICE BABUREK in the subject line and we will forward your email to her.]