

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: GHOSTS

I was in the checkout lane reading an article about Katie Holmes seeing an exorcist.

“Do you believe it?” she asked me

“I don’t know.”

“The *Star* got sued for printing lies about her.”

“That should teach them for messing with Tom Cruise’s wife.”

“Katie Holmes is one tough bitch. Tommy boy better watch out that she doesn’t cut off his you know what.”

She seemed very frank for a stranger. I wanted to hear more.

“What do you think about the supernatural?”

“When I was a kid, they took me to see somebody because they heard me talking to ghosts.”

“Scary.”

“I was a scary kid.”

“Are you still scary?”

“I have my moments.”

I looked at her. She smiled.

“Oh this!” she said. She looked at the toilet paper and drano in her handds.

She was in a sleeveless white t-shirt and rolled up dungarees. She had on glasses, her hair was unkempt. And she had just come from getting a pedicure so the cotton was still stuffed between her toes. She knew that all that she had to do was to take off the glasses, tease her hair a bit, don some heels and put on a little makeup, and she simply was a knockout. But at a moment like this, she felt completely under the weather and lacking in any social graces. She had rushed out the house to get her errands done. And now she just wanted to slink on back to her place. She was especially not into meeting anyone looking like this.

“So what deep dark secrets do you know about Katie Holmes?” I asked.

“It’s not as if every girl is waiting for a man to rescue her. Guys can be real dicks. That’s why I’m the only one who’s going to do anything for this girl here.”

“You don’t have an attitude.”

“More like a reality.”

“That’s why you’re out to get the Drano and toilet paper.”

“A girl’s got needs. And if the toilet is all plugged up, then those needs aren’t going to get met.”

“You could call a plumber.”

“I’m in a bitch of a mood right now. The last thing that I want to see right now is some guy crawling around my bathroom.”

“Was it something you did?”

She seemed put off, “I wasn’t stupid enough to stuff my toilet with tampons if that’s what you’re thinking. You’re not one of those guys who can’t deal with a woman’s biology.”

“I’m pretty comfortable with anything about anyone.”

“That’s being deliberately vague.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“What do you do, Mr. Vague?”

“I’m a writer.”

“Like I’m an artist.”

“No, I just signed a book deal.”

“What kind of book is it?”

“A novel on psychic phenomenon

She quizzed me, “Is that what you tell all the girls?”

“I tell girls what they want to hear.”

“So do you know all about the future and that?”

“The book’s more about possession.”

“Really. Well, I should get back to my apartment to see what’s possessing my pipes. Maybe another time.”

She had been so friendly, but she felt the need to get out of there.

“I’m not trying to pick you up. But I’m working on a book on psychic phenomenon.”

She felt a little feisty, That’s what all the perverts say these days.”

“You just seemed to know something about it all.”

“Yeah,” she answered nonchalantly.”

I didn’t want this moment to get away. She really knew something. And I wanted to find out more.

“Did you come to the grocery store for some kind of redemption?”

“You could say that. What are you doing now?”

“Cleaning up shit. Tell you what. If you buy me a coffee, I’ll meet you at that place next door around five.”

“Agreed.”

“My name’s Joan.”

“I’m Steven.” I shook her hand.

At five, Joan was already inside and relaxing on the couch.

“Did you bring your ghostbuster kit?”

“I didn’t know that it was haunted here.”

She was dressed pretty much the same as before. She still had on her glasses. But it was a little chilly so she was wearing a silk bomber jacket. It had a decoration of a Betty Boop type pin up girl riding a rocket. It said Hot Hussies underneath.

“Nobody’s going to yank your chain.”

She acknowledged, “Yeah! So you were perfecting your technique in the supermarket.”

“I’m really serious about ghosts.”

“Have you had any experiences of your own.”

“Nothing to speak of. That’s why I love to listen to other people’s stories.”

“Are you a believer?”

“I try to bring a scientific eye to it all. I work hard to remember all the details of the stories. But people like to embellish their own experiences.”

“So you have your doubts.”

“I’m full of doubts. That doesn’t mean that there couldn’t be something behind all this. But the best that I can tell is that a lot of it is bull shit.”

“You tell people that.”

“No. I just listen. “

”It’s pretty wild.”

“What?”

“It’s almost as if you feed off of other people’s adrenalin.”

“You might say that. I dig stories. That’s why I’m a writer.

She became excited as she spoke, “I wanted to be a writer. I used to write stories.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I became an adult. I have to work.”

“What do you do?”

“Waitress in East Atlanta. Come by and visit me.”

“Cool!”

“I’ve told myself that I’m going to go back to school. But there’s just too much living for me now.”

I was only a little older than her. But she seemed very mature.

“Do you read?”

“Now and then. Nothing too serious. Mystery and romance. I hate to admit it, but I do follow celebrities. I know it’s shallow. And I really hate those bitches. But I love the glow of that life.”

“Could you ever be an actress?”

“Hell no, I feel as if I’m ancient. I’m almost thirty.”

“I thought that you said that you were twenty three.”

“I might as well be sixty three. You get older, and your body ain’t what it used to be.”

“I’ve got a walker out in the car.”

She backtracked, “Ok, it’s not that bad. But I do have my crosses to bear.”

“I thought that you don’t let it get to you,”

“I don’t!”

“So why all this pity party about your poor aching bones.”

“Because I’m not a spry eighteen year old anymore.”

“Does it make a difference.”

“Once in a while. When a guy give you that look.”

“What look?”

“Like he’s throwing you back in the fishing hole with them other crawdads.”

“You get that now and then.”

“I hate to admit it, but I do.”

I wondered, “So what’s the big deal. I thought that you don’t let guys get you down.”

“I don’t. I just don’t feel all that sexy half the time.”

“Maybe that’s just an artificial feeling anyway like celebrity gossip.”

“But I am a girl.”

“So!”

“I like to feel feminine.”

“I’m not taking that away from you. You should let it affect you that much.”

“It does. I’m not a moody person. But it gets to me now and then. Like when you saw

me at the grocery store. I was a mess.”

She didn't look all that different now.

“I think that you always look pretty great.”

She took the compliment in stride, “You hardly know me.”

“I have an imagination.”

“You're the one who doesn't believe in ghosts.”

“You do.” I challenged her.

“I've got a past.”

“I'm ready to listen.”

“My mom was pretty young when she had me. And she was already on her own. The guy didn't stick around. She hardly had enough money to take care of the both of us. So I got sent to live my granny. Things were OK for a while. As long as I wasn't a terror. I was a well-behaved baby. Years later I started to develop this independent streak. Something totally natural in a kid. And my grandmother couldn't take me stepping out of line. Her initial reaction was to try and discipline me creatively. But that only made me worse in her eyes. So she started cracking the whip. I was three or four and she had me doing chores all the time. If she just thought that I was being insolent, she'd lock me in the closet.”

“That's hideous.”

“That's not the half of it. My mom would come visit me. And she had no idea what was going on. If I said something I would have got punished just for being honest about things. So I was a prisoner in my granny's house. I didn't think that it could get worse. But the woman seemed to have entered a stage of dementia. She was ready to burn away what remained of my self. Everything that she did was based on some justification. She was careful not to hurt me in a vacuum. But her justice became more and more capricious. If I failed to look her in the eye, that would be ground for a greater charge against me. And with that finding, she could dig her nails into her poor victim.”

She continued, “Besides the twisted logic that motivated her, she needed to do everything in her power to hide her activity. This was almost like a dominatrix hiding her torture chamber. The house had literally become a house of pain. But when my mother arrived, granny would do everything that she could to conceal her behavior. Mother suspected that something was wrong because grandma became more erratic. In my mother's eyes things had not progressed sufficiently to do anything.”

I listened closely to her story.

“I couldn't take the abuse. I felt that I had been worn down by the torturer's method. There was nothing that I could do to limit the application of my Torquemada. Reality seemed to have less and less clarity of reference to allow me to escape the terror. So I retreated into myself. I made friends with the shadows. I created a world out of my dreams. If she could break me down in the daylight, I found a reality in darkness where that she could not penetrate. Even though her haphazard style made it hard to predict how she would apply the rack, I lived in a place that she could not penetrate. No form of interrogation could make me reveal my secrets.”

“Wow!”

“My grandmother knew that she no longer had a hold over me. But she did everything that she could to penetrate the mystery. But this had gone on too long. I had developed my own

form of resistance to her method. This only made her more frustrated. But it wasn't as if she was acting in a rational fashion. So she became easier to fake out."

Joan took a sip of water. She regained her composure to tell me the rest.

"Of course, I was not my grandmother's child. Try as she might to control me, her guardianship was contingent on my mother's situation. Over time, my mother was better able to deal with her own life. And the conditions of her hardship lessened. She wasn't yet able to take me away from my jailer. But she started to spend more time with me. And she noticed the unnatural state of my withdrawal. It took her some time to figure it all out. She even took me to a doctor. As conscientious as grandma had been, she had still left some unusual marks on my body. The doctor brought these up with my mother. From that point on, it became obvious what had been happening. And I went to live with my mother. Except in my nightmares, I never saw the monster again."

"For all my mother's concern, she was limited with regards to the time that she could give me. She did what she could to repair the damage to my body and to my soul. But there were effects too deep for her to recognize. Many of these remained underground. They would only surface on the rarest occasion. I spent much of my time by myself. And I had some difficulty relating to other kids. I sustained the world of illusion that I had created for my protection. It became more apparent that this was only an escape from reality, but the phantoms still, beckoned me."

"This is fascinating!"

"It was oh so real for me. I did what I could to extricate myself from the nether world. When things got tough in school, I would again retreat. As I grew older combined this bizarre experience with my interest in reading. So I could now disappear at will. Thus I was able to integrate myself into so-called normal society. No one was able to tell the difference. On the other hand, I began to suspect that there was something strange with regards to everyone else. They had a similar to darkness to myself. But there was little that they could do to control these feelings. At least, I had become an expert at navigating the depths."

She continued, "Instead of any sort of sadness, I was numb. I was the perfect little girl. I would do all my homework. I would help my mother. But I really wasn't there. I existed in my underworld. No one could touch me there."

"My mother did what she could to encourage my development. She even had me talk with a psychologist in the hope that he could compensate for my imprisonment. But he could do little to ward off my demons."

"When I was ten years old, I began to recognize the fundamental paradoxes of existence. I was an adult for myself. I did what I could to support my mother. She had time for little else but work. The house was neat. When she was off, she cared for me and maintained the our home. She saved what little money she had to buy me presents. She wanted me to have a happy life. She felt guilty for what had happened."

"I don't want this to be a tale of woe. And my grandmother's influence only had a limited effect. But I was still young. And I had not put in a sufficient distance from that time. So I had to reconcile myself to what remained of the nightmare. Since we didn't have a lot, I couldn't always participate with the other kids in their various activities. I did what I could. But I had difficulty making friends."

“The parents also recognized that something was wrong. Because my grandmother had been so capricious, I developed a suspicion of adult tutelage. While my mother was very consistent in her actions, other parents were not. They had their subtle ways to discipline their little devils. The children were none the wiser. But I gave the adults a knowing glance that struck the fear of the lord in them. I had explored the darkness, and they knew it.”

“These parents were also guarded about the modern world. They felt if they controlled everything for their children that the result would be model children. And the intent worked for a short time. But the children ultimately became more rebellious. Having me around became a convenient excuse. Rather than blame their own lack as parents, they felt that I was the unsavory influence on their kids. They even assumed an unhealthy attitude about sex on my part. For the safety of their little brats, they felt justified to ban me from their domiciles.”

“I let it pass. If they were running their own prison camps, I was not going to be the whistleblower. I simply hopped aboard my bike and rode into the sunset. I would not be around when the empire went dark.”

She had really spun a story. I needed more background to understand her more clearly.

“What about guys?”

“I thought that we were going to stick to supernatural visitors.”

“It might make the whole story make sense.”

“It’s sort of a private matter.”

“You’ve already told me quite a bit already.”

“Exactly. I’ve told you enough for now.”

“You want to get together again.”

She had almost forgotten about her coffee. She took a sip.

“This is a little cold.” She paused. “I can tell that you’re one of these analytical types. And I had a run of that kind of thing. But it got me nowhere. I learned that I’ve got to live if I want to come out on top.”

“Of course,”

“So that’s what I need to do. No stupid attachments.”

“Sure!”

“This is like a one time thing. I don’t want to play psychiatrist couch with you. That’s never a good way to start a relationship.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

She was withdrawing. I wanted to keep her talking. I needed to come up with a lure.

“When was your first time?”

I threw her for a loop. She knew what was coming. But it still hit upside the head. She recovered slowly.

“I know that guys like to think of it as this slam bang event. And girls will sort of give them what they want when they talk to them about their first time. But I no longer think of my life that way.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m not saying that I was forced my first time. But I really didn’t want it. And I do my best to forget that it happened like that. I know that I was probably a lot more vulnerable than a lot of kids. Until I was in my teens, everyone left me along. When guys started showing me

attention. I really thought that it was something special. At the same time, I was all wound up in myself. And I didn't like to give up too much of myself. So I'd get drunk now and then so I could go along. But nothing too much. Just some dirty games. But guys thought that they could take advantage of that situation. And I tried to fight them off at first. Then I said what the hell."

I let her talk on, "That made me more vulnerable than ever. I was in a couple of dangerous scrapes. But I wasn't that naive. I had grown accustomed to the ruthlessness of the adult world. And these boys had already adopted those aggressive skills. It was always this tricky contest between me and the guy. And I always seemed to walk away intact. But my will was getting eroded."

"When it did happen, it wasn't meant to. And I didn't feel good about it. I sort of hated the guy. And that was that. I felt as if something had been stolen from me. But also felt that there was nowhere that I could make my case. So I dealt with it."

"There were guys that I really liked. But they seemed to ignore me. I don't want to say that I had a reputation. However, some of those guys felt that they could say anything that they wanted to me. That I would just get off on them saying nasty things to me. Those guys I started to hate. The boys who looked forward to college."

It was a natural break in her story. She got another cup of coffee, then she came back to the table.

"It took a while for me to find myself again. High school was just a dead end."

"That's why you didn't go on to college."

"I like to read. I had the ability. But I didn't want to deal with school shit anymore. All these types who thought that they were God's gift to the world. So I just did my own thing. I got a job. I found an apartment."

"You were alone."

"I was by myself. But I started to make new friends. People who didn't judge me."

"And that was better."

"A million times better. I felt as if I was living my own life for once. Except for work, there was no one to tell me what to do. I could party all night. Or I could just keep to myself."

"Were you angry at the world?"

"Not at all."

I returned to the earlier subject, "The ghosts just disappeared."

"Not at all. I was living with this one guy. A musician. And he was doing work around the country. Studio work. And he came back from a trip to find me staring into space."

"What did he make of it?"

"He thought that I was in a trance. I mean it looked as if someone had hypnotized me."

"Were you on something. You weren't drunk?"

"I had seen a ghost. It was freaky shit! I was mesmerized. It was this guy who used to live in this place. And he had died there years before."

"What did you do?"

"I broke up with the guy and moved out."

"The ghost really freaked you out."

"To hell it did. I had no idea what was going on."

"That was it with your supernatural experiences."

“Not at all. But I didn’t want to stick around in that apartment. I felt that the ghost was going to do something really weird to me. Like I was going to be his slave. So I ran out of there first chance that I got.”

“Why did you break up with the guy?”

“He had no idea what happened. And he really didn’t understand either.”

“He probably thought that there was something wrong with you.”

“There was something wrong with me. I had seen a damn ghost.”

She laughed.

“That is a wild story.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I felt cold all over. Almost as if was being lowered into a coffin. But I also felt damp in a weird way.”

“Maybe your ghost was taking you to an underground sea.”

“I was being kidnaped by Poseidon.”

“Sounds like it. So you’ve had other experiences.”

“Loads of them.”

“I’m ready to listen.”

“I do feel a little embarrassed. These stories are all about having sex. They’re really personal.”

“Yeah.”

“I feel a little ashamed. They make me seem like some kind of whore. Like all that I care about is sex. And it’s really not like that.”

“I believe you.”

“I knew this one guy from this bar where we hung out after work. Other girls had got with him. They talked about him. I thought that he could show me a good time.”

“You didn’t want anything more.”

She admitted, “I didn’t think so.”

“Did you hook up at the bar?”

“I was drinking. A little too much. And running off my mouth. And he took advantage of the situation. He knew how I was feeling.”

“Cool!”

“We headed back to his place. And he had drunk a lot less than me. He knew where it was all headed. I couldn’t do a thing about it.”

“You weren’t helpless?”

“No. But I felt desperate. And he was coming on to me. So we got back to his place. And the whole thing was terrible. He got all aggressive. Nothing tender. I felt like a wild steer at a rodeo.”

“Crazy!”

“Yeah, it was. And he went off like Independence Day fireworks, and that was that. I could have just left. But I feel asleep in his bed. I think that I had fallen asleep. I was having one of those weird dreams where you don’t know whether you’re away or dreaming. I tried to call out. The next thing I know he was on top of me. He was inside me. I didn’t want it to happen. But there he was. I got confused. Had I ever been asleep at all. Then I remembered how terrible the whole experience had been. The next thing, I’m floating above the room and

watching us having sex. It was weird. It was real. I thought it was real. And it was all happening right there before my eyes. The two of us.”

“How did you come down?”

“I don’t know. The next day I asked him about it. He denied the whole thing. He was so embarrassed with what had happened earlier in the night that he did want to talk any more about it. But there were all these bruises on me. I was sure that they didn’t come from the first encounter.”

I tried to learn more, “Are you sure that you didn’t just sleep wrong. Or you could have fallen out of bed.”

“I could have done loads of things. But I do remember floating above the room. I was out of my body.”

“No drugs?” I asked.”

“That was another time. I was a little drunk. But I hadn’t taken any drugs. I don’t know what prompted that feeling.”

“You’ve never had an out of body experience since?”

“Not in that way.”

“That is totally out there.”

“It really got me thinking.”

“There was this one guy who worked as a bartender in our restaurant. And he had a bit of a reputation to live up to. He started flirting with me. And one night we ended up back at his place. It wasn’t a big place. And he had a roommate. So we snuck off to his bedroom. He was lying on his bed. There was no doubt about what was going on. And I felt in control of things even though I was shaking all over. I had my back to him. I could even look him in the eye at this moment. And I let my skirt dropped to the floor. I was in a pair of tight panties that just hugged my ass. This was the view that I was giving him. Totally gratifying his fantasy. I felt proud like nothing could knock me from my pedestal. I stood there in triumph. Not saying a thing. I realized that he was getting aroused. I loved every second of it.”

“I’m almost getting excited hearing about it.”

“We had taken mushrooms earlier. And my body felt so elastic. A little after that, they started to kick in. I dropped my panties and crawled on top of him. He rubbed my body down from the top of my back to just before my ass. And I could sense him under me. And I opened up and drew his penis inside me. I’m not sure why I’m telling you all this. Because it just wasn’t about the sex. More about how I was thinking about myself. That dull intensity that sung throughout my body. I had no second thoughts. I didn’t feel weak. I felt so much myself. I felt close to him for a while. But his excitement seemed to go on forever so that I could feel the two of us blending into one. That is so cliché. But it was real.”

“More extreme than meeting a ghost.”

She smiled, “Things were just as strange. The more that he was with me, the more that I felt that it had nothing to do with him. Just like the other time that I told you about. But my feelings of estrangement didn’t diminish my pleasure. To the contrary, I found this place of bliss where I floated on and on. I don’t want to say that it was the mushrooms that made everything so electric. I wasn’t even sure if they were working. I just felt like another person. So complete. None of the pain that I had carried around with me all the time. I felt as if I had cleaned of all

that filth which still hung over me.”

“That’s incredible.”

“I was a little afraid because I didn’t want to become dependent on my feeling. Even though I thought the mushrooms had nothing to do with my high, I experienced this weirdness that I was going to get addicted to this kind of thing. That fear was like a pit in the bottom of my stomach. I didn’t want it to disrupt what I was enjoying at that moment.”

She went on, “I tried to let go of the feeling. And I watched it dissipate all around me. I was able to hide from my negative thoughts. The guy tried to share the intensity of my passion. He did his best to include himself in what was going on. But it really had little to do with him. I could sense him disappear along with the rest of the world. I kept soaring. Nothing could slow me down. He was fatigued. Somehow his body found the resilience to keep going. He barely let up. That was enough for me. At one point, he said something to me. But I seemed to ignore him. I was in another place. I suppose that he believed since we had been together for so long that we share something really deep. I thought that we made love for hours. But it wasn’t like that at all. I wouldn’t say that he nauseated me. I just wanted nothing more to do with him. I pulled away from him.”

“What an ending.”

“I know. I didn’t want it to be like that. I guess that he really did piss me off. He thought that he was something special. I felt as if I had really shown him.”

“But you gave so much of yourself to him.”

“I think that was the weird thing about sex for me. I didn’t know how to be intimate without surrendering too much of myself. I found out that I enjoyed being with guys with whom I had little in common. If they mistreated me a little, that made it better. Then it was easier when I left them. I always felt in control.”

“That is unusual.”

“I know. But I could get away with it. There were those moments when I felt that nothing could touch me. I still came down hard. That was when I needed to be by myself. All in all, it was just better. No guy really had a hold over me.”

“Did you try to stay with some of these guys?”

“I tried all the time. That was what it was all about. Even if I needed my time alone, the sex was always overwhelming. It became such a big deal not for itself. But it gave me a chance to chart my own world. For a while, I would pretend that the guy really did make it all possible. But they had nothing to do with it.”

I asked, “You never got trapped by the situation?”

“All the time. I’d try to get rid of the guys. And they’d put up a fight. We’d argue for a while. I’d let them stay. Then the same thing would happen all over again. The sex wouldn’t be enough to let me stay.”

“How would you pick these guys?”

“Like some secret code. They could just see what I was about. They knew how to press all the right buttons. And it would happen again and again. Sometimes, I would tell them to fuck off and go home on my own. But I felt this irresistible urge. I would just give in.”

I needed to complete the puzzle, “Do you still see ghosts?”

“Just trails. Things here and there. When I’m alone I hear noises. Not just boards

creaking or noises in the ceiling. Scraping on the floor. I know that something is there. That's one reason that I hate to be alone."

"Do you have a roommate?"

"Not now. I have a cat."

"Yeah."

"She keeps me company. And the my bad pipes."

"But you stay away from the plumber."

I wanted to reassure her, "It's been great talking to you."

"Same for me."

"I'd love to get together again."

"Maybe. But I don't like to think about this stuff too much."

"We could talk about other things."

She smiled nervously, "It would be great to go out for dinner. But I don't want to make promises and stand you up. I don't want to sound mean. But you're not really my type."

"I wasn't thinking about it like that."

"I know. But I had to get it out there. You have this need to set the world right. I'd always be afraid that you were judging me."

"I'm not like that."

"But I am. And I've told you too much already. I feel as if you have this power over me. It's way more than I could ever bear."

"Yeah." I didn't know what else to say. It seemed silly on my part.

"I have a lot to work out on my own. And no one can really help me."