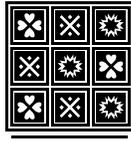


*There are ghosts from my past who've owned more of my soul
Than I thought I had given away
They linger in closets and under my bed and in pictures less proudly displayedⁱ*



Chapter 1: Skeletons In My Closet

“Minnie, I think the kitchen’s on fire.”
Not the sort of thing you want to hear your four year-old grandson say to you, but, hey, that happens a lot with me. Scrambling up off the floor as fast as my forty-eight-year-old bones would allow I rush into the kitchen to find the grilled cheese I had been cooking burned beyond repair.

Hey, I’m not the best of cooks but I *can* cook a grilled cheese sandwich. When I’m alone. Uninhibited. *Not* watching my potential terrorist of a grandson, adorably packaged in the non-threatening appearance of a chubby, ginger-haired, big-blue-eyed deceiving parcel of innocence. When I can give the frying piece of butter, bread and cheese my complete, undivided attention rather than having to remove shards of potential stitch-requiring glass resulting from the broken lamp in the living room.

“I didn’t break that lamp, Minnie.”

“I know, Liam.” I say in a slightly tired and ‘been-there-done-this-one-too-many-times’ tone of voice. “It just fell.”

“It did not *just* fell, Minnie.” Implied in the statement was also the phrase ‘*and we both know it,*’ an expression I’ve used a time or two with my precious, first and (thank God) only grandson. A phrase I’ve had to eliminate from my vocabulary because of said grandson’s penchant for repeating – tone and all – similarly voiced phrases in alternative scenarios that make my daughter give me a ‘are you sure you’re up to this?’ expression of doubt and concern.

“Oh no?” I’m having fun now, despite the lingering aroma of burned food floating through the kitchen. “How’d it happen?” Sometimes disasters are all worth it just to hear the detailed explanations that get spun. I wipe the pan clean and efficiently begin to butter bread for ‘toasty-cheese’ take two.

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Once the two sandwiches are busy toasting – *on very low heat* – I take Liam by the hand, sit him on the couch, and resume my diligent hunt for glass slivers. We’ve been to the hospital once ... *okay, twice but the daughter doesn’t know* ... So far, I’ve been able to avoid stitches and I’d like to keep it that way.

“Goliath did it.”

I don’t bother looking up. Time enough for that later, as the story is just starting. “Oh?” I say. Another phrase Liam can imitate perfectly when he chooses, including the arch of his eyebrows and slight left tilt of his head.

“Yeah, you know, Minnie, the giant.”

“I thought David killed him with his sling.”

“Nah, he was wearing a helmet. He just played dead so that David wouldn’t cut his head off with his big, shiny sword.”

I sigh and look up at my grandson as he stares at me intently, waiting ... How come boys always get the great eyelashes? Is he smart enough to bring up another one of my disasters in order to deflect attention away from himself? He’s only four for goodness sake ...

Liam looks at me and then glances at the DVD cabinet by the television. “Unless, I’ve got it wrong, Minnie.” That little ...

Okay, so I bought a fabulously expensive collection of “Great Stories Of The Bible” for Liam to watch. Mistakenly, I thought it would be a brilliant time filler when things are ... heading out of control and I need the magic of electronics to flash and dazzle where I cannot ... or will not go. The very first video we watched was “David and Goliath,” which included a terrific cartoon reenactment of David having just slain the giant, climbing up on Goliath’s body, lifting his very large, sharp, shiny sword and severing Goliath’s head. Stunned with horror, I hadn’t been quick enough to grab the remote and shut the movie off. Hence we were both treated to the sight of David lifting the bloody head by the hair and waving it around victoriously as blood dripped copiously from the decapitated ... Well, you get the picture. Despite the fact that I then *immediately* turned the movie off – *never to be viewed again* – my daughter heard about the brief showing – *for weeks* – and Liam has been reenacting the vicious decapitation ad infinitum with his father (who had a good laugh), his friends (much to their mothers’ horror), his stuffed animals, and, in times of real desperation my cat, Harry. The fact that he doesn’t have a sword (No Weapons Allowed) a ruler, pencil, wrapping paper tube or stick will do just fine, thank-you very much.

“You’re not watching the video, Liam. It was a mistake that Minnie made and *will not make again*. It’s too violent.”

“Can’t we watch a different one?” He gets off the couch, takes the long way around the glass shards and me to get to the video cabinet and selects a video: *Joshua And The Battle Of Jericho*.

Wasn’t Joshua helped by a prostitute or something?

I make a decision to hide the entire collection *after* Liam’s been picked up for the day. Satisfied that my glass shard removal is successful (I’ve already dust-busted, vacuumed, used damp paper-towels, and searched using my extra-strong reading glasses ... What? Trust me, it’s not over the top. You Don’t Know Liam.) I take my precious grandson’s hand. “Sweetie, come into the

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kitchen with me. We'll get the stepstool and you can help me clean the grapes to go with our sandwiches."

Having lost the battle – but not the war – Liam concedes. "Okay, Minnie, I'll go get the stepstool."

Within minutes he's working at the kitchen sink washing grapes while we listen and wiggle to some of the Christian rock music I've been listening to lately ... "*Like a thief in the night, Like a runaway train, Like a first class, lightning fast hurricane, I'll keep my ear to the ground, And my eyes to the sky, I'm ready now but somehow, I know You'll take me by surprise*" ..."

Welcome to my life ... now ...

I'm called Minnie not because of my remarkable resemblance to the famous rodent or the financially challenged southern old lady who wore price tags hanging off her clothes. It was the closest thing Liam could manage to "Grammie" when he was first speaking and ... well, it was cute. You do stupid stuff, things you swore you'd never do when grandchildren arrive. Trust me.

My daughter, Erin, picks up Liam promptly at three-thirty. She's a fourth grade teacher right here in town. A *poor* fourth grade teacher, struggling to make ends meet, which consequently means that she must teach summer school for the months of July and August to pick up some extra cash. I watch Liam on Tuesdays and Thursdays giving my grandson and I an opportunity to bond and cause as much worldwide destruction as an old woman and a little boy can manage. The other days of the week some dedicated professional named "Miss Nancy" takes responsibility for him and the lives of thirteen other preschoolers who Liam comes in contact with. More power to her. Erin and I discuss our final week of summer vacation which will include her working up through Wednesday and only needing me for a final Tuesday. *One more day*, my head thinks. *I've only got to keep us both alive and unharmed for one more six-hour period*. I think I can do it.

With Liam and Erin's exit (and my full disclosure of the broken glass and kitchen fire – hey, Liam will only rat on me anyway) I morph back into the moderately capable, semi-competent, usually reliable ... vaguely lonely and uniquely insecure woman that I am.

With a nice tall glass of iced tea and today's paper that I never got to, I settle in the lounge chair on the back deck only to be interrupted by the phone. "Hello?" Not happy that I've had to traipse all the way back into the house I suppose I don't sound too welcoming.

"Lainey? That you?"

Great. My ex-husband, Paul. "Who else would it be, Paul?"

"You're crabby. Liam just leave?"

I have a policy with Paul. I try to never give him accurate information. He's one of those men who always thinks he knows everything about me. Which is highly annoying. Which was Reason Number One why he's my ex. How can someone believe they know you with enough forceful confidence to *argue with you* about it when you're not even sure you understand yourself? "No, Liam didn't just leave." *He left almost twenty minutes ago*.

"We need to talk."

Does that sentence ever bring about good results? "We are."

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“No, I need to do it in person. Face-to-face. What are you doing for dinner?” *Not eating with you*, I think with firm conviction. “When was the last time you left that house, Lainey? Come on, tell me what day.”

“Look, Paulie,” I call him Paulie because he hates that name more than I hate Lainey, “you were annoying when we were married, now you’re positively maddening. I talk with you on the phone because I haven’t gotten around to caller ID. I will not subject myself to an in-person conversation while you try to psychoanalyze me and advise me on reducing my caloric intake.”

“Have you ever tried that elliptical machine I bought you so long ago? Or are you still hanging damp towels on it to dry?”

Paul, the husband who never gave a gift that didn’t have an agenda attached to it. Paul, psychologist extraordinaire who never met a person he couldn’t somehow improve. “I’m ending this conversation now, Paulie. *Good-bye.*”

“Olivia called me.”

Paul didn’t elaborate. He just lets those three words do their powerful damage.

“*Why would Olivia call you?*” Olivia. My older daughter. The daughter who prefers not to speak to me unless her world is in flames. Olivia, my daughter, who hated her stepfather Paul with such a vitriolic vehemence it became Reason Number Two why he became my ex.

“She asked me to do her a favor.” Paul lets the random thought patterns spin out in my head as I struggle to figure out what possible favor Paul could do for Olivia.

I stand there with the phone to my ear looking at the grade school hallway pictures of my girls. Pictures that successfully managed to hide a multitude of homebound disasters and personal demons. My lifetime of guilt – so large that it is now carefully and diligently maintained in a securely locked mental stronghold - begins to rumble. I sit down on the steps and rest my head in my hand. “What does she want, Paul?” I fight back an overwhelming urge to go to bed.

“I’ll pick you up at six-thirty. Will that give you enough time to get ready?”

Get ready: a term, for me, that has nothing to do with my physical appearance and everything to do with how long it will take to get my expired prescription of Xanax refilled. “Are you taking me to a public place so that I will be forced to maintain a controlled level of behavior?”

“No, Lainey,” Paul says in a patient, ‘I’m a trained psychologist and you’re a damaged piece of goods I can transform’ voice, “I’m taking you to a nice restaurant, because I know how difficult things are between you and Olivia and, *if you’d let me*, I know I could help you untangle this terrible knot of a relationship. Plus, I know how much you hole yourself up in that house and it’s good to get out and about now and then. I’ll buy you a nice piece of broiled fish and a salad.”

Ah, yes. Let’s not forget the calorie count. The childish side of me – something that’s regularly in control of my life when Paul is near – plans on buying the fettuccini alfredo and cheesecake. I sigh in defeat. “I’ll see you at six-thirty,” and hang up before Paul can upset me any more than he already has.

I stare at my forty-eight-year-old face in the bathroom mirror in my attempt to ‘get ready’ to have dinner. I wear my hair shoulder length and it tends to have a mind of its own, curling wildly all over my head. Of course, the hair gets ‘touched up’ every six weeks or so to hide that annoying gray.

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I have green eyes and a clear complexion with very few visible wrinkles ... yet. I've got that puffy darkness going on under my eyes that has begun to concern me. I like to describe the way I look as not beautiful but not scary looking either: *uniquely average*.

Despite Paul's opinion, I don't think I'm overweight. Oh, sure, if I had a wish or two I'd drop fifteen or twenty pounds, but who am I kidding? I exercise ... sometimes. I use that damned elliptical machine or walk or ... have really good intentions of exercising tomorrow. It's not anyone's business how I eat; I make an effort to be healthy.

Paul's idea of punctuality is to be five minutes early. My idea of punctuality is to get there ... eventually. Hey, I can get there on time if it's really important. Things just rarely are ... that important.

Six twenty-two p.m. the doorbell rings and I am stark naked. I read one time the difference between 'naked' and 'nekkid,' which always stuck in my head. 'Naked' meant you had no clothes on. 'Nekkid' meant you had no clothes on and you were up to something. I sigh. I haven't been up to anything in a very, very long time. I open my bedroom window and shout, "You're early," at Paul down on the front step.

Paul, dressed casually yet elegantly in tan trousers with a crease that could cut through steel and a dark blue dress shirt, open at the neck, looks up at me. Taking the time to remove his sunglasses to perhaps catch a glimpse of what my bare shoulders imply, he shouts back, "And you, *of course*, are late."

It feels fantastic to flip him the finger and shut the window without a word. Seconds later I hear him in my front hallway. "And you *still* don't lock your front door," he shouts up to me.

I sigh. It's going to be a long, painful dinner with no end in sight. I put on my favorite black, high wedge sandals, which make me just slightly taller than Paul – something that always annoyed him. Black cotton trousers, a bright pink, loose summer top, and my favorite gold earrings and I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Especially without the Xanax.

Paul and I were married for three years, two months, and sixteen days. He was part of my 'maybe some class and style will rub off on me' stage. A stage that was both astronomically detrimental and amazingly insightful at the same time. During my time with Paul - being corrected, improved, and refined - I hit what was perhaps the lowest level of self-confidence that is humanly possible this side of suicide. Let's face it, when you reach a point where you don't feel sure enough of yourself to food shop, dress yourself, or speak unless spoken to, you're pretty bad. Imagine an untrained but enthusiastic puppy that gets corrected, leashed, shaved, caged, and trained to such an extent that it's afraid of everyone and everything and all it can seem to manage is to piddle on the floor when you look at it. That was what I became during my marriage to Paul.

But somewhere during those three years, two months, and sixteen days, I decided that my lack of class and style was perhaps exactly what was so critically important to what made me *me*. Why should I try to become the approved female version of a self-absorbed, abrasive, condescending man like Paul? Was I out of my mind? Apparently, for a few years I was. Which led to the remarkably positive decision to embrace the uniquely bizarre woman that I really was and dump Paul, quick.

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My modus operandi for the evening is to remain silent, cool, and alert. Something I've been unable to achieve *in this lifetime* but which is always a commendable goal nonetheless.

"Nice shoes, Lainey," Paul manages as we step out my front door and make our way down to his flashy BMW. I sigh mentally and think with fond regret that one of the best things I got out of my marriage to Paul was the alimony ...

Paul tries for small talk in the car. Psychobabble 101: *Relax severely damaged patient with casual conversation.* Will I be teaching fifth grade again in the fall? How many years have I been in the educational trenches anyway? Shouldn't I be aiming my sights higher for some type of administrative position? How much additional training would I need? Do I have any higher aspirations? How is my interesting hobby of quilting coming along? Have I ever made a sale? Completed a project? Followed a pattern? Have I formulated a business plan? Spoke with a financial planner? Applied for an 'LLC'? (Whatever the heck that is ...)

Does he realize that I'm not answering or is this so much a part of what he does day in and day out that he doesn't even realize? "Sometimes, silence is best, Paul. You should try it." We finish the remainder of the ride in silence mixed with my satisfaction and Paul's anger.

Dinner is filled with Paul's accounting of all the children he's saved, and the new things he has learned and feels a need to share, and his many stellar goals for the future. It isn't until over coffee and dessert (yes, I had cheesecake) that Paul unveils the primary reason for this farce of a dinner: Olivia's request. "Olivia has been seeing a therapist for the past few months. Did you know that, Lainey?"

I take a sip of my coffee and mentally gear up for The Challenge of the night. "No. We haven't spoken in quite a while about personal things and the last time we did talk it wasn't to disclose her need for psychotherapy."

"Well, I was very pleased to find out that she's been working with a very qualified woman by the name of Aileen Burkart. She's eminently capable of dealing with the *numerous* issues that Olivia has."

"And what issues are those?" I feel compelled to ask.

Patently, he ticks off a pile of issues, enumerating each one with a well manicured finger, "Abandonment, anger, low-self esteem, alcoholism ..."

"*What's the favor, Paul?*" I say through gritted teeth and for once he seems to actually read me correctly and know that I am at the end of my self-control.

"She'd like me to convince you to give her the name and last known location of her father."

A nuclear bomb detonates within my head and heart but I make the gargantuan effort of concealing the devastation. I begin collecting my purse and jacket, making motions to leave. "I don't know what ridiculousness Olivia and you are playing at. She knows the name of -"

Paul interrupts me. "Lainey," he says with some volume, "Olivia and Dean had a blood test," he puts on his solicitous, psychologist face and reaches out as if to touch me consolingly, "and it seems as if the time has come for you to be forthcoming about some of the ... *secrets* ... you seem to have been keeping about your past."

Like hell I will.

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I leave him standing in the restaurant with the dinner bill and no disclosures about any of my closeted skeletons. Good thing I've got taxi money in my wallet.

ⁱ "Martyrs and Thieves," Jennifer Knapp, *Kansas* Album

ⁱⁱ "By Surprise," Joy Williams, *Joy* Album