

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Sally Gray. I'm 70, fit in shape and sound of mind, although some would question the latter. I don't see dead people. I hear them. Voices. Messages. This isn't new for me. Years ago, it was my life. I mistakenly mentioned a recent return of these occurrences to my daughter-in-law Olivia at dinner the other evening and she bristled, leading to what she always calls a "discussion."

"What's a five-letter word for bored?" I ask, glancing her way. I rattle the newspaper for effect. It does no good. She is busily attached to her computer in the corner of the living room. If anyone should know the answer, she should. She's an editor, for God's sake. Some supposedly high-brow publishing company that doesn't pay her enough.

Amanda is sprawled out on the couch, her face buried in her mobile. She is 15, hates her mum, adores me, which also has led to more discussions. No one answers so I sigh. Long and loud. Olivia turns to me, scrunches her brow, scratches her head.

"Really, Sal. I'm on a deadline. Up to my eyeballs."

She slashes my name in half like that when she's annoyed.

Amanda interrupts. "I googled it, gran. Ennui."

"Ah, fits perfectly," I say, inking it in. "Thanks, love."

Amanda grins and goes back to her phone. The youth of today. What will happen to them, I wonder? Will they be able to parse out a thought of their own without checking with some "thing" else?

They go back to their preoccupations while I rest the newspaper on my lap feeling the fullness of the word. It fits the squares exactly as it does my life. My youth was exciting, mysterious. But all that's gone now. As is my husband, George. And Charles, my son.

We've had to scrape by and have done so, but the money George left me is running thin. After Charles died last year, Olivia decided, as only she can decide, to take the job offered her in Philadelphia. Why not work remotely, I asked her. She seemed surprised I was aware of such things. Her retort, as only she could retort, was that this particular editor needed her onsite for meetings and special research. Only one year, a trial period, she promised me and Amanda.

I didn't want to move from Southampton, England, but I was part of the package, as I've always been. All we could find on a temporary basis is this cramped flat in Philadelphia on Rittenhouse Square. So, for the present, we are camped here.

Leaning toward the window, I peer down from our second floor. The Saturday morning is bright and cheery, belying my feelings. Birds twitter, tree branches leaf out, flowers bloom. Below, pedestrians rush to work or shopping or whatever it is they rush to.

"I'm going to the corner coffee shop," I announce. It has become a daily ritual for me, my only reprieve from the prison of this hum-drum life.

Olivia nods her head without looking at me, and Amanda removes the mobile from her face for a nano-second, smiles at me, and returns to the screen.

I put on a light jacket, hoping it gives me not only some warmth, but a shape, a figure so that they can see I am not invisible. Outside, the sweet, cool air fills my lungs as I navigate

the redbrick sidewalk two blocks ahead to Tony's. A dog walker whisks past me maneuvering four pooches on leashes; a woman hails a taxi; a man in a business suit chats on his phone, leaning against a mailbox. They have lives, I tell myself. Everyone around me seems to.

My self-pitying is interrupted mid-thought when a familiar energy blindsides me, drifts behind my eyes, through my ears, bounces in my brain. It's not really a voice, as in audible words, but a feeling. And this time, it jars me to a stop. I wait to see what follows. Nothing specific other than the sensation that lingers, echoing from heart to head to the ground.

It's dread. Pure and terrible dread. Something horrible is going to happen. But what? To whom? And when?

I shake it off but the feeling persists as I pick up my step. For decades, I pushed away such portents, busying myself in my work as a therapist and counselor. Only recently have they returned in force, perhaps because an unfulfilled space needs to be occupied with some substance.

The cafe is empty, except for a lone man sitting two tables away. I settle into my regular corner booth and shrug off my coat and the trepidation. Cozy is a belabored word, but that's what this place is for me. About eight tables, a scarred counter with round red leatherette stools, worn curtains that allow some light through streaked windows. The owner, Tony, is a nice chap. He hates when I call him that and often says my accent is a mix of Yankee South and Brit, which must sound like "That's bloody rubbish, y'all." I retort that he sounds like Ricky Ricardo. He is from a small village in Mexico that I can't pronounce and I don't care if he's legal or not. He's a good man.

He spots me and waves from behind the counter. Within minutes, he brings the usual to my table, tea with two sugars and a sticky bun.

“Buenas dias, Senora Salee,” he says with a grin that’s filled with crooked teeth. He always accentuates the last syllable of my name with a flourish, which tickles me.

“And how are you today, Tony? All well with you and your family? Your wife? Little girl?”

His grin dims and he looks down at his scuffed shoes. I’m not sure how to take this and wait for him to speak.

“Mi hija. She needs to see a special doctor and, well ...” He stops, his eyes taking in his cafe. It’s not much. And no customers. I’ve been coming here for about six months, shortly after we arrived in the City of Brotherly Love, and the number of patrons seems to dwindle with each day. I wonder how he survives. Making ends meet. I know what that’s like.

“But somehow, I find money for my daughter because she—” He stops mid-sentence as the man at the other table calls him over. He seems insistent and I’m not sure what his hurry is about. He wears an air of distinction. What is his type doing here?

“I go see what that *gringo* want and be back,” Tony says and excuses himself.

I bite into my pastry and gaze at the man again, who is gesturing animatedly at Tony, pointing at his plate of scrambled eggs. Late 60s, slim frame garbed in an expensive suit, face creased with a few wrinkles and well-trimmed graying hair, beard and moustache, glasses perched at the end of a narrow nose. He borders on being handsome for a man of his age, but

not quite. He waves his hand at Tony as if giving him leave, then focuses on his phone with what seems consternation.

After going to the kitchen and placing a new plate in front of the man, Tony returns and I ask what all that was about.

“He come here a few times. Always complain about the food. Something wrong with the eggs or coffee too cold. I don’t know why he come back.”

A mystery to be sure, but I’m more concerned at the moment about Tony’s daughter.

“My daughter is sick. We do not understand why. Rosa cries at this. And business here? You can see.”

He says all this in his fragmented English as I stir the tea, thoughtfully. A familiar wave of knowing fills me as I sip the steaming brew, put the cup down. I haven’t done this in awhile. With anyone. But Tony has become a friend, of sorts.

“Things will change for the better for your daughter.”

He looks at me, puzzled. “How? You are kind Miss Salee but it would be a miracle from God.”

I take a pen and paper from my purse and jot down some numbers that are swimming in my head. I slide the paper across the table to him.

“Here. Play these this evening in the lottery.”

“How can you know this?” He says this loudly, so much so that the man nearby turns to us. “How you know I can win this?”

“Just play them. You’ll win some money,” I say with another sip and a sly smile.

“Enough to help your daughter. You’ll see.”

The gentleman at the table puts down his phone and his body language shows me that he’s listening to our conversation. Hard not to, I suppose, in such an empty room. I muster up my best smile for Tony.

“You’ll see,” I say again, patting him on the hand.

That evening at the dinner table, Amanda is sulking. She does this well, as only someone of her age can do – bottom lip puffed out, arms crossed, an angry crease between her eyebrows. I give allowances for her outbursts. After all she lost her father, my son, only two years ago, and was ripped from the only home and friends she had ever known in England. Planted in a new city where everyone is a stranger.

My daughter-in-law doesn’t put up with it. She is all Brit. Stiff upper lip, carry on and all that nonsense. I, on the other hand, am a hybrid, American born, Nashville to be specific, but living long enough in British society, thanks to my late husband, that I assimilated.

Amanda maintains her surly attitude while Olivia counters with a steeled expression, cutting her pork chop with intent into miniscule pieces.

“Are you all right, Amanda?” I ask my granddaughter.

She glares at her mother.

“Mum keeps after me. Badgering me. She doesn’t get it. Gets absolutely nothing at all.”

She says the last part in her precise British accent and I've wondered how challenging it must be for Amanda to fit in, to belong. I understand this too well. My early years were of a vagabond, traveling from state to state, from fairs to circuses to sideshows, never finding a home. Until I met George with all his English charm and wiles.

I pass her the bowl of peas and carrots, staring at her beauty. Milky flawless skin, pink cheeks, sparkling blue eyes, except for now, filled with anger.

"What doesn't your mom understand?" I ask as quietly as possible. If I question more forcefully, Olivia will accuse me of interfering. But she is my granddaughter and I want a say, some input.

Olivia takes a break from her methodical masticating, puts her fork down, wipes her lips with the napkin. "She refuses to get involved at school. It's been six months here and she needs to find something to be involved in." She pauses and stares at me and the intent is unspoken but heard loud and clear. Me, too.

Settling myself with a sip of water, I ask, "And what exactly do you want her involved in?"

"Debate team. Chess club. Anything. Instead of moping around most of the time, whining that she hates it here. We're here and that's that. Make the best of it."

Well, then. I settle myself yet again, this time with a deep breath.

"Amanda, why don't you tell your mum and me what school is like for you."

"I've tried to tell her. But she doesn't listen," Amanda says, now sobbing. "I hate her. I hate it here."

With that, my granddaughter pushes her chair back, storms away into her bedroom, the door slamming.

“There. Now you’ve done it, Sal. I won’t get a word out of her for days.”

“Honestly, Olivia, I’d think you’d be more tolerant. More understanding. Amanda’s lack of involvement, as you put it, has nothing to do with me and I won’t take blame for it. We’re all finding our way. She’s lost her father—”

“And I’ve lost my husband. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to have a lie-down.” She leaves the room, a chill trailing behind her.

What now? I sit at the table, alone, staring at the picked over, uneaten meal. Olivia has lost her husband, Amanda has lost her father. Don’t they realize I’ve lost my son?

I tap on Amanda’s door. “Let’s talk a bit, sweetheart. I really want to understand.”

A muffled “OK” greets me and I find her flopped on her bed, belly down, face planted in the pillow. I sit next to her and begin rubbing her back. She finally turns to me, sits up and falls into my arms, tears splashing down her face.

Stroking her hair, I don’t ask questions. I simply listen. The kids at school think she’s stuck up and posh because she talks with a weird accent. She has no friends. She misses her dad who would always want to know about her day and take her to buy ice cream on Sundays.

I take her face in both hands and stare into those puddled eyes.

“I know, sweetheart. I know. I miss him, too. And I know what it’s like to feel you don’t belong.”

She snuffles and rubs her nose. “You do? How?”

“It was a long time ago, another life ago.”

Memories flit through my head uninvited, a kaleidoscope of towns and people and all wanting to know what to do, what’s next, should I take this job or move to this city, will I meet the man of my dreams, and on and on.

“How about we plan a trip tomorrow to the park and then get ice cream? You can tell me more and I can tell you about Madame Zora.”

“Who’s that?”

I hug her again, so close I can feel her heart bucking against my chest. She’s all I have left of my son. And she deserves to know who her gran really was. I’m mulling over how to tell her about my past when the feeling, the knowing strikes again, so forcefully that I’m shivering and cold.

“What’s wrong, gran? You’re shaking.”

I hold her close again, not saying a word, not wanting to think the worst. But a voice, uninvited and garbled, fills my head and I recognize it. My late son’s: *Protect Amanda*.