

The Corpse's Secret Life.

Pat tried to make her question sound offhanded. "Syda, have you ever had a paranormal experience?" she asked her best friend as they sipped coffee in Syda's art studio.

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"Have you ever had someone who has passed on connect with you? You know, like have you had a dead person talk to you in a dream? That sort of thing."

"Oh sure," Syda gave her hand a flippant wave. "My cousin who died on Flight 93 has talked to me. Even though she was several years older than me, she was still too young to die. We were close and I idealized her like a big sister." Syda sighed and added wistfully, "Sometimes, when she's in my dreams, I feel like she's still looking out for me."

"What does she tell you...when you...talk to her?"

"She reminisces about taking me to the beach and about giving me advice about schoolgirl crushes. Oh, and she helped me find my keys once when I misplaced them."

"That's not your cousin talking to you; it's your own brain working. You remember beach days and boyfriends. You remembered where you left your keys. No, I mean have you ever had a dead woman—someone you never met—lead you to clues about her death, clues that no one else has noticed, clues that tell you she didn't die the way everyone says she did?"

Syda formed her mouth into an O and leaned toward Pat. "You mean like have I ever chatted with a real live dead person?"

Pat could only nod wordlessly because she had to work hard to keep from giggling at Syda's phraseology.

"We're going to need more coffee and probably some chocolate while you tell me all about it," Syda murmured, her tone somewhere between enthralled and horrified. "Does your fabulously charming Sheriff Sergeant Tim Lindsey know you commune with dead people?"

"No, he doesn't, and we're going to leave it that way for the time being. He's still worried about me after the funeral murder case. My arm isn't fully mended yet and the doctor says it will be at least another month before the break is completely healed and the cast can come off."

Pat sighed, "Tim was relieved when I told him I was being hired by the City of Watsonville to find the family of a dead woman. He assumed I would have a nice, safe job, sitting at my desk and working from my computer all day. I don't want him to change his mind, so I haven't told him anything about what's been...look, you're the first and only person I'm talking to about this and I'm swearing you to secrecy. You can't mention any of what I'm about to tell you to Greg even though he is your husband because he's Tim's friend. You have to promise to keep quiet or I won't tell you anything else. And I certainly won't let you help me work on the case if you can't promise to be discreet."

Syda raised her right hand and grabbed a few paint brushes off her work table with her left hand. She clasped them to her heart. "On my honor I hope to never paint another picture if I break my word. You can be an annoying best friend—telling me I can't even tell my husband anything—but I promise. Now spill. I want to know what exactly I can't tell anyone, even Greg."

"It started yesterday when I met with the County Coroner at his Soquel office," Pat began. His name is Jurick...

