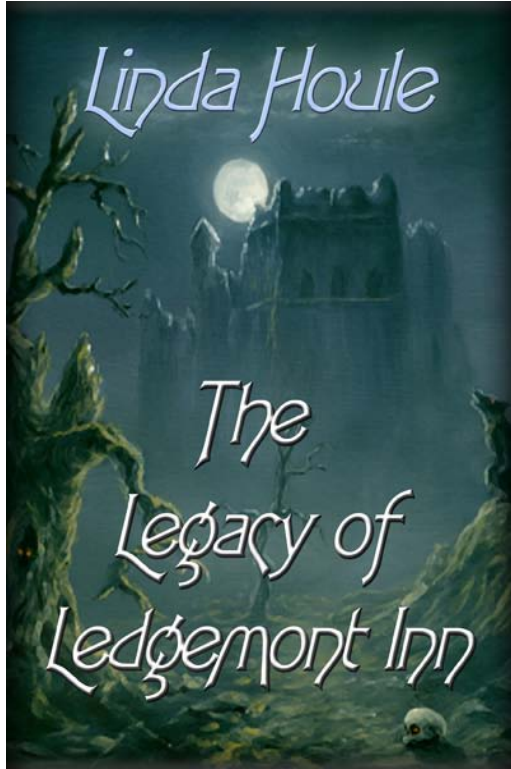


Linda Houle

The
Legacy of
Ledgemont Inn



THE LEGACY OF LEDGEMONT INN

by Linda Houle

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The Legacy of Ledgemont Inn

“Oh my goodness—this is amazing!” Fran sprinted down the dormitory hall, littering the carpet with pieces of mail. Breathless, dimpled cheeks flushed, she clutched the precious piece of stationary against her chest and pounded on her best friend’s door.

“Open up already. Hey Justine!” Trembling, she looked at it again. In the corridor’s dim lighting she had to squint to see the hand-written words. Flowing black cursive penned on thick ivory parchment—a rarity in this day and age—a message proclaiming her legacy:

Dear Francis,

As your family’s long time lawyer, you know your grandmother asked me to continue watching over you after she was gone. I hope I’ve lived up to her expectations as I’ve administered your trust fund, and seen to all your needs while you attend college. My letter today is about the future of Ledgemont Inn.

You may remember three years ago, during the last month of her illness, your grandmother made special arrangements with your father, Arthur Sutton. She requested he move back from Hawaii to become the caretaker of Ledgemont Inn. He arrived following the funeral, after you’d already left for college.

Grace always hoped your mother would move back home and take over the Bed and Breakfast, sadly her dream was never realized. Your mother’s accidental death five years ago changed a lot of things, including Mrs. Montgomery’s endowments.

Now that you are about to turn twenty-one, I am obligated to reveal the final term of Grace Montgomery’s will. On the date of your twenty-first birthday, you, Francis Grace Sutton, will inherit Ledgemont Inn, all its contents, and all surrounding family owned property.

Your father has planned a special celebration in your honor, and requests that you join him in Texas next weekend. He wanted me to tell you he’s looking forward to seeing you again. Enclosed is a check to cover your travel expenses.

Congratulations!

Ronald W. Trumble

Justine’s door opened several inches. “Franny—you’ll wake the dead with all that pounding. What’s going on?” Rubbing her eyes and yawning, the attractive auburn-haired twenty-year-old swung the door wide open then stumbled backward. “I was up late last night studying, and now you’ve interrupted my nap.” She smiled and winked.

“Oh really? Whose body were you studying this time?” Fran looked around, but Justine was alone. She knew all about the curvy coed’s ‘study’ habits. The over-sexed girl cared little about her education at Blythe Academy, having already earned an honorary Master’s Degree in men.

Plopping down on her friend’s messy double bed, Fran held up the lawyer’s letter.

“You’re going with me next weekend—no arguments!” The petite curly-haired blonde squealed as her toes tapped out a staccato rhythm on the wooden floor.

“Where?” Justine snatched the paper from Fran’s shaking fingers. “Well I’ll be damned. Texas!”

“I thought Gram left the B&B to my father. Well, she once told me she was leaving it to my mother, but with community property and all, everything of my mother’s belongs to him. I figured I’d be a middle-aged woman before I inherited Ledgemont. This letter says she changed her will after my mother died. Gram never mentioned...”

She stopped in mid-sentence and yelped as lightning flashed and a thunderous boom rattled the windows.

Justine draped her arm around Fran’s shoulders. “I thought you were over your fear of thunderstorms.”

“Oh Justine, it’s not the thunder, I’m so nervous. I haven’t seen my father since I was a baby—do you think he’ll be upset I’m inheriting the Inn and all the property?”

Justine was the only person who understood Fran and her fears. Justine’s parents enrolled her in the private college on their way to Europe three years ago—she seldom heard from them except to receive her expense checks and an occasional postcard. Alone in a different sense, Fran had never desired to return to Texas, with both her

mother and grandmother gone. She and Justine made the best of it and were more like sisters than best friends. Always watching out for one another, they lived year round in the old Wembly Hall dormitory house.

The thunderstorm intensified, increasing Fran's apprehension, the clouds turned daylight into darkness. Hail hit the bedroom window like blasts from a pellet gun.

"Franny, I'll be there with you. Don't worry." Glancing at the clock on her nightstand and realizing she was going to be late for a class, Justine yanked off the oversized t-shirt and tossed it onto the floor.

"Oh heck, I'm late too! Meet you over at the Academy." Fran picked up her letter and hurried out the door, gathering scattered mail all the way back to her own room.

* * * *

"I'm glad we're finally here. I hate flying. Well, you know I'm a nervous wreck most of the time anyway." Fran snatched her brown leather suitcase off the luggage carousel. "Look, isn't that yours?"

Justine looped her arm through the black satchel's strap as it snaked past. "Got it. Let's go look for Lurch!"

Laughing at Justine's new nickname for Fran's middle-aged chauffeur, during the flight she'd tried to forewarn her friend about the 'unusual' man. She'd described him as resembling the monster-like butler from the Addams Family television show.

"His real name is Nathan. I'm surprised my father kept him on staff. He never showed any interest in having a life outside Ledgemont—I guess poor Nathan had nowhere else to go, besides his apartment over the garage."

Leaving the baggage claim area, the girls stepped through the automatic glass doors and out to the curb as a black stretch limousine with the Ledgemont Inn logo pulled up.

Justine gasped. The dark-haired man who stepped out towered over them, his movements stiff and ungraceful as he took their suitcases and deposited them in the trunk. Fran's description of a giant reanimated corpse with pasty skin suited him perfectly.

"Thank-you, Nathan. We appreciate you coming all the way down here to get us. I could have rented a car, you know." Fran's call last week to Ledgemont confirming her plans left the girl puzzled. Instead of reaching her father, an unfamiliar woman answered the phone. Jean Davis claimed to be the new manager. Arthur Sutton had taken ill again and was confined to his bed, unable to take her call. He'd left strict instructions for his daughter not to rent a car, instead Nathan would pick her up.

Justine snuggled into the plush upholstery and stretched out her legs, admiring the TV, DVD player, and fully stocked bar. "This is nice. And now it's all yours, Franny."

Nathan's large head jerked to the side as he glared at Justine. "Miss Francis, we weren't told you were bringing someone along this weekend."

"Is the Inn full of guests? In that case Justine can bunk with me, in my old room."

"Noooo." Nathan answered in a long low growl.

Justine poked Fran in the ribs and whispered to her, in a voice loud enough for Nathan to hear. "Yep, he's just like Lurch all right—even sounds like him!"

"Shhhhh—stop it. Be nice." Fran covered her mouth so Nathan couldn't see the big grin on her face.

* * * *

Friday's sunset glowed like a raging forest fire burning in the woods behind the Ledgemont Inn. Justine's first view of the imposing estate sent shivers down her spine.

"It's not much like you described it to me—it's rather creepy. I thought there was a rose garden out front."

Fran gasped at the ruinous sight. "What's happened, Nathan? Gram's beautiful gardens..." Tears filled her eyes and she crossed her arms, disgusted with the decaying façade and dead foliage. Thick mold smothered the once charming stone building, which now seemed better suited for a horror film than a country Inn.

"Your father doesn't like roses." His gruff voice barked the answer.

"What about the groundskeeper? Is Luke still working here?" Luke loved tending Grace's award-winning roses

and arranging bouquets for the tables. Fran's heart sank even further knowing her one real friend at Ledgemont must be long gone, like the flowers.

Pulling the limo up in front of the house Nathan hit the brakes hard, sending the girls tumbling onto the floor.

"My goodness, you needn't stop the car like that! I'm sorry if I upset you, and you must miss Grandmother too. How very sad..." Struggling to get off the floor and out of the car, Fran bit her lip and tried not to bawl. Gone only three years, how could the grand manor deteriorate so much? Shaking her head to straighten her blonde curls, Fran smoothed down her beige skirt and tugged at the hem of her matching blazer.

"Luke...errrrr...yes. He's still employed by Mr. Sutton. Only part time, though." Nathan grumbled at the girls. Yanking their bags out of the trunk, he followed them up the stone stairs to the massive arched walnut double entry doors.

"So Luke's still around..." Uneasy, Fran embraced the fast encroaching twilight, thankful she could no longer see the rotting remnants of the gardens. Shaky legs carried her up the precarious leaf-covered steps. As her hand touched the doorknob it abruptly swung inward, opened by an unpleasant, dried up old crone. Thin as a rail and wearing a tight long-sleeved black dress, her skirt almost touched the floor. Worn black loafers, the type of shoes that wouldn't make a sound as she sneaked around the house at night, peeked out from underneath the frayed hem.

"Gee, you startled me." Heart pounding in her chest, Fran frowned, staring up at the odd-looking woman. "Ms. Davis, I presume?"

"Yes." A single croaked syllable replaced the Inn's customary warm Texas welcome. Fran turned to glimpse her friend's reaction to the grey-haired woman. Nothing moved except Justine's eyes, they shifted from the woman in the doorway to Fran and then back again. Tight-lipped for once, the girl blinked a few times, then her hand reached out to clasp Fran's clammy palm.

"May we come in, ma'am?" Justine's shivers returned, resonating in her words, and her knees almost knocked together when the woman finally moved aside to let them enter.

"Francis, you did not inform me you'd be bringing a guest. Now we'll need to make some *adjustments*..." The impertinent woman turned her back to them then headed for the staircase.

Fran noticed dust and grime had built up on the hardwood floor and paneling, cobwebs hung from the banisters, and the foul scent of mildew permeated the vaulted entryway.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Davis. Justine can stay in my room, I don't mind." Fran expected Nathan to bring up their luggage, but he'd vanished. She shrugged to her friend and they picked up their bags and followed Ms. Davis up the massive staircase. Fran's and Justine's high heels clattered on the oak, but the old woman's shoes made no sound—until she reached the second step from the top, and the loose board creaked.

"That's not necessary, we have vacancies. There are ten guest bedrooms after all, each with their own private bath. Having grown up here you already know this, of course." In the landing at the top of the stairs she turned to face Justine. "It's a grand southern home, with expensive furnishings and an artwork collection befitting a gallery. That's why Fran's Grandmother decided to make this into a B&B. *You* can stay in the blue room, across the hall." Opening the first door on the right, Ms. Davis gestured for her to go inside.

"Thank you, we'll get settled as fast as we can, then I'd like to see my father." Fran's high-strung nature ran on overdrive, dealing with so much stress all at once—she bit her lip and her body tensed.

"Perhaps." The prune-faced woman glared at the girls. "I'll see if he's up to it tonight. I told you he's been very ill, confined to bed for over a week."

"Isn't he feeling any better? I should go to him right now." Fran started down the hallway.

"No!" Jean took a hostile stance, blocking Fran's path. "Please, girls, go freshen up, and then come downstairs to dinner. I'll see if he's up to joining you."

Frustrated, yet feeling obliged to comply, Fran had to satisfy her curiosity about something else. "Ms. Davis, how many guests are here this weekend?"

"Only two. My brother and his wife, Earle and Mary Davis." The woman hurried away before Fran could ask

any more questions.

“That’s odd, just her family? Probably staying here free, too. No wonder this place is going to hell. Come into my room for a minute.” Fran opened the door to her old bedroom, hoping everything in it hadn’t shriveled up and disappeared like the rose bushes.

Fran held her breath as she turned on the light, then she sighed and relaxed, relieved for the first time since she’d arrived. “Thank goodness. I was so worried after I saw the grounds. I don’t see how they can stay open as a Bed and Breakfast, the way they’ve let the place go.”

“I love your room! It’s like a fairy tale—with a bed fit for a Princess.” Justine giggled and dove onto the pink satin comforter, propping herself up on the mountain of embroidered and tasseled pillows. Her jaw dropped when she looked up at the ornate carved crown molding. White dressers trimmed with gold leaf, handcrafted chairs with pink velvet cushions, and expensive paintings of the English countryside completed the room’s decor.

“Your room is nice too. It was my Grandmother’s suite. I *hope* they’ve kept it as it was...” Fran headed across the hall to help Justine get settled.

Justine managed a half-smile at her accommodations. “It’s comfy, but nothing like your room.” The hair on her scalp prickled. “Didn’t you tell me she died in her sleep?” Both girls stared at the bed.

“You silly thing, she’s not haunting this house, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t for a moment believe in ghosts!” Fran laughed then shoved her friend farther into the large suite. Decorated all in blue, almost as big as Justine’s room, large paintings of roses covered the walls.

“Unpack, change, and we’ll go see what the *charming* Ms. Davis has prepared for dinner.” Fran choked on the word charming.

“First I met Lurch the butler, and now the ‘Wicked Witch’ housekeeper is probably boiling some eye of newt. There had better not be a zombie in the closet...” Justine’s joviality didn’t sound convincing.

* * * *

Trying not to make a racket with their shoes this time, the girls tip-toed down the curved staircase. Looking around the too quiet house, Fran noticed cobwebs in every corner. The place needed a thorough dusting, and patches of mold and mildew dotted the dingy and neglected wooden floor. Fran reached over to turn on another table lamp in the dim living room and discovered a burned out bulb.

“I can’t believe this filth. My Grandmother is probably turning over in her grave right now.”

“Please don’t say that. I’m sleeping in her bed tonight. Holy crap!” Justine grabbed Fran’s arm when a previously invisible door almost hit them as it popped open out of the wood paneled wall.

Fran startled and jumped back, then her eyes lit up and she smiled. “*Oh*, it’s you, Luke. What are you up to? I thought you knew better than to use the secret passage.” She couldn’t remember the last time anyone opened that panel in the wall. Gram didn’t want any guests to know about it, so she instructed everyone living at Ledgemont not to touch the door.

“Franny! Lord, it’s *good* to see you.” Grabbing her in his arms he spun her around until she begged him to stop.

Recovered from her fright, Justine cleared her throat, waiting for an introduction. She’d have to wait a little longer as the tanned, muscular young man with sun-bleached blonde hair gave Fran a big kiss.

“Really, Luke, not now...” Blushing, Fran gestured to her friend. “This is Justine, my best friend from college.”

Justine tipped her head to the side and whispered into Fran’s ear. “He’s no zombie—he’s scrumptious—you never told me about *him*.” She grinned and winked at the handsome twenty-something boy with the British accent.

“A real pleasure, Miss Justine. I’m glad Fran didn’t come home alone.” His smile transformed into a serious expression. “Franny, we’ve got to talk. There’s something...”

“Excuse me.” A woman’s harsh tone interrupted Luke in mid-sentence.

Guilt washed over their faces as the trio turned toward Ms. Davis—like a group of students who’d forgotten to do their homework and were about to be punished.

Francis spoke first. “Ms. Davis, would you please set a place at the table for Luke? I’d like him to join us for dinner.”

“Miss Sutton, the *help* does not eat in the formal dining room.” The old woman clucked her tongue. “*You* should know that. What would your Grandmother think?”

Luke looked down at his feet, his face crimson with embarrassment.

“Will my father come downstairs for dinner?” Fran attempted to take some of the attention off Luke.

“No, Miss. I’ve given him a sedative and he *must* remain in bed. Perhaps tomorrow he’ll feel up to seeing you.”

“Excuse *me* Ms. Davis. I don’t know what’s been going on here since I left, but as one of the owners of this house I would like to invite my friend Luke to join us for dinner. *You* may join us as well, since your brother and his wife are guests at Ledgemont.” Fran’s hands rested on her hips as she faced off with the brusque woman.

Scowling, Jean’s dark heartless eyes glared back at the girl but she decided not to argue, answering in a quieter tone. “As you wish...” She pushed the swinging doors to the dining room open, latching them in place.

* * * *

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Davis.” Courteous, amiable behavior masked Fran’s growing fear. It wasn’t just her nerves. Besides the oppressive mustiness, a strange, almost hostile atmosphere permeated everything and everyone at Ledgemont. Shaking hands with the couple before they sat down to dinner, the woman’s touch felt like grasping an ice tray, and Mr. Davis gripped her fingers so tight Fran gasped in pain. He held on much too long, tickling her palm as he let go.

“So you’re the famous Fran Sutton. We’ve heard a lot about you—from your parents.” His thin mustache reminded Fran of a comic book villain. “Yes, you’re one lucky *young* lady.” Looking her up and down, his raspy voice took on an almost seductive tone, matching the gleam in his eyes.

“Earle, isn’t she the picture of her mother? Blue-eyed, with the same curly blonde hair. Just stunning.” Stout, middle-aged and rather plain, Mary Davis gushed at the beautiful girl.

“You knew my mother? Did you live in Hawaii too?” Fran couldn’t hide her surprise, and jealousy.

“Why yes, didn’t you know? Earle and Arthur worked together, on the real estate project on the Big Island. We spent a lot of time with your parents. Your mother never stopped talking about how proud she was of you, and how much she missed you.” Mary’s cold dark eyes didn’t quite match her glowing smile.

Jean brought in the soup tureen and served all the guests, including Luke, but he kept his gaze down whenever she came near. He’d put on a corduroy jacket, the best attire he could manage on such short notice, and chose a safe seat—between the two college girls.

“I’m glad you’re here, Luke. We’ll talk later.” Fran spoke to him in a quiet voice, reaching down to squeeze his knee under the table to let him know she still had feelings for him. He blushed.

Jean scowled at Luke to send him a silent warning, and he barely spoke throughout the rest of the meal. Neither did her brother and sister-in-law. The housekeeper seemed to dominate everyone at Ledgemont.

When they’d all finished dessert Mr. and Mrs. Davis excused themselves to go up to their room.

“Luke, may I see you in the kitchen, please.” Luke shuddered like a beaten dog at Jean’s commanding tone.

“I’ll see what she wants, then I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Ms. Davis had already gone through the door into the kitchen when Luke risked bending down to kiss Fran’s cheek.

Fran patted his arm and tried to give him her most reassuring smile.

* * * *

As the girls strolled past the living room windows, something outside caught Fran’s attention. A car’s taillights, heading down the driveway toward the front gate.

“Did you see that?”

“What?” Justine’s eyes were glued to the bookcases full of rare leather-bound volumes and other treasures.

“You’ve got quite a collection here.”

“I just saw a car leaving. Mr. and Mrs. Davis said they were going upstairs so it wasn’t them. Could Jean have sent Nathan and Luke into town at this late hour? I hope not.” Fran turned toward the bookshelves then frowned.

“What’s going on here? A lot of the first editions seem to be missing!” Looking closer, dust patterns marked the outlines where books once stood. “I’ll have to ask my father where they are. I love those old classics, and some of them are worth quite a lot of money.”

“Franny, I’m dying to see the other guest rooms.” Justine urged her toward the staircase.

“All right, I’ll show you. Though I’m not certain where Mr. and Mrs. Davis are staying. Let me check.” Fran stepped over to the oak roll top desk, lifted it open, and reached inside for the ledger.

Shocked at the desk’s disarray, she had to blow dust off the large black book and the spine crackled when she opened it, like it hadn’t been touched in years. “Oh this can’t be right. Ms. Davis must be using a different book now. The entries stop the same month my Grandmother died.”

“Let’s not have another encounter with *her*. You can ask that old sour-face about it in the morning. I want to explore the Inn— come on!” Waving for her friend to follow, Justine had climbed half the stairs before Fran caught up.

“Let’s stay on this side of the house for now. The Davis’ are probably in the west wing.” Francis headed for the room next to hers and opened the door, flipping the wall switch...nothing happened.

“I know where there’s a table lamp.” Fran struggled to find it in the dark, fumbling for the knob. They heard it click, but no light came on. “This one doesn’t work either. I don’t understand.”

After their eyes adjusted to the darkness Justine pointed toward the wall over the bed. “There’s an outline on the wallpaper but no painting. And look, nothing on these other walls either.”

Anger swelled in Fran’s chest at the sudden realization her father might be selling off the art collection! Of course until last week everyone assumed the estate belonged to him. Grace really meant it to go to Francis some day, and the terms of the new will made it *her* property now. Those missing items were *her* books and paintings. Fran’s first inclination was to march into his room right then and there, except, according to Jean Davis he was already asleep, under heavy sedation.

“First thing tomorrow morning I’m going to insist on seeing my father. I’ll get to the bottom of what’s going on around here...”

* * * *

Justine waited until almost midnight to tap on Fran’s door— she knew the over-stressed girl needed some time alone. Hearing a faint ‘come in’ she peered inside.

“So did you ever find Luke? What happened to him tonight?” Now dressed in her favorite flowing white nightie, Justine slipped all the way into her friend’s room then glanced around.

“The way Luke reacted when he saw you I expected to find him in bed with you. Is he hiding in the bathroom?” Justine attempted to lighten the mood by traipsing around, peeking behind the drapes and under the bed, but her friend still wouldn’t smile.

“Now I know why you’ve been so prim and proper at Blythe. You’ve been saving yourself for the boy back home!” No amount of her naughty teasing could take away Fran’s anxiety.

“I’m not in a joking mood. Sorry. I’m too worried.” Fran stood up and paced back and forth.

“First that old prune Jean Davis kept me from reuniting with my father. And while you were in your room I looked everywhere in the manor for Luke—he seems to have disappeared!” Fran stopped pacing long enough to gaze out the window. “Oh no, I see lightning in the distance. I think a storm is heading this way.”

“This is no time to give in to your phobias.” Justine pointed toward the hallway. “I should be the nervous one, I’m about to sleep in a death bed.” Looking back at Fran, Justine made a sudden decision. She climbed into the pink Princess style bed, pulled the covers up to her neck, then let out a loud sigh.

“You really prefer my room, don’t you?” Fran forced herself to move away from the window. “I get the not so

subtle hint. Tell you what—I'll go ahead and trade with you. I'll take Gram's room tonight, I don't mind."

"You're so sweet. Thanks Franny. I'll see you in the morning. Just not too early, OK?" Eyes already half closed, Justine didn't even notice Fran turning off the light on her way out.

* * * *

Justine sighed again and rolled over, pulling the covers up even higher as she nestled in for the night. Even in this house full of spider webs, secret rooms, and creepy characters she felt certain she wouldn't have a ghostly encounter in this secure room. Complete peace. Quiet, blissful serenity...Justine drifted into the fluid zone that existed between awake and asleep.

An eruption of blinding lightning strikes sent a shock wave through her body and she sat upright, clutching the comforter to her throat as powerful claps of thunder shook the bed back and forth.

The old-fashioned wood framed window rattled as the storm forced its way inside. Justine's heart skipped a beat when the latch gave way, the two halves swung wide open, and the pink satin curtains billowed forward like gigantic arms reaching out for her. Large drops of rain blew inside, soaking the plush carpet.

"Ah nuts." Overcoming the initial shock, she jumped out of the cozy bed and grabbed both sides of the window. Struggling against the unexpected gale force wind and blinded for a few seconds by another vivid flash of lightning she stood frozen in place. In the tense moment that followed a tremendous boom of thunder masked her death scream.

The busty auburn-haired beauty dropped face down to the floor with a pair of razor sharp pruning shears protruding from her back. Dark red blood gushed forth, saturating her semi-sheer dressing gown.

Floating like a cloud the essence of a girl emerged, hovering on the ceiling, surveying the gruesome scene below. A figure dressed head to toe in black wearing gloves and a hat climbed out the open window and down the trellis.

Swimming in a sea of air Justine labored to follow the attacker, trying to see their face. Who—who *killed* her?

"Dead. I'm *dead!*" She couldn't get out the window. Dead, and *stuck* in this house.

Thinking she should hear bells or see a beam of bright light and angels, instead Justine's spirit drifted back down to the floor and she stood there a few moments, staring at her lifeless form. Looking down at her hands, she could see the carpet right through them. An ethereal being. Here and not here at the same time. In an instant she realized what just happened.

"Franny! *She's* in danger. Whoever did this meant to kill Fran, not me." Justine's spirit essence labored to float through the large door but she kept banging her head against the carved wood panels.

"Say, this always works in the movies." If she wasn't already dead she'd have one killer headache by now.

Pressing her shoulder against it didn't work. Kicking the door wouldn't send her through either. Could her spirit be trapped forever in this one room? She reached for the knob. "Well, naturally..." Justine's spirit opened the door the conventional way then tip-toed over to the blue bedroom.

"Pssst, Fran. Hey, wake up." Justine heard her own voice, but could Fran hear? She jiggled the bed. The girl rolled over and yawned. The ghost reached down and grabbed her shoulders, jostling the sleeping girl.

"Hmmm. What, who?" Fran's eyes blinked open. Lightning flashed again illuminating the room for only a split-second, enough to give Fran a glimpse of a human shape leaning over her.

Fran's piercing shriek cut through the air before Justine could muffle the sound with a semi-transparent hand. "It's me—Justine. Look at me Franny."

Francis pushed her friend away. "Justine, what do you mean by trying to scare me? Just because you were too frightened to sleep in this room, I traded, and now you're trying to creep me out by powdering your face to look like a ghost. I won't let you scare me. Now go back to bed and I'll see you in the morning." Fran's eyes fluttered closed.

Dead *and* frustrated, Justine wondered how to protect her friend. Stay in here, as a bodyguard? Go after the killer? She heard the girl's steady breathing—already sound asleep.

“Well shoot. If the tales I’ve heard about ghosts are true, then I’m not going to ‘rest in peace’ until I find my killer—and also keep them from killing Fran.”

Deciding to hunt down the attacker she headed back out the door and across the hall into the pink room to look for clues. “What’s this? *Gone*. My beautiful body. Where—who—why?” Scratching her translucent head, Justine’s troubled spirit began wandering the manor.

* * * *

“You idiot. How could you kill the wrong girl?” A dark figure spoke in muffled tones.

“Sorry. Who knew they’d switched rooms? Let’s get rid of this one, and try again.” Both clad in black, they struggled to carry a blanket-wrapped body down the back staircase.

* * * *

Cold, wet, miserable—Luke shivered and rubbed the back of his head. He felt a huge painful knot on his skull where someone hit him before dragging him out into the woods. “I’ve got to get back, to warn the girls...”

Disoriented, the young groundskeeper stumbled through the thicket, determined to save Francis. “She’s *got* to be all right. I don’t know how I’ll live with myself if they’ve killed her.”

Moonlight filtered through the dense overhang. The storm had passed, but rain kept dripping from the leaves and the muddy ground made running difficult. Luke stopped to catch his breath, the sound of his pounding heart echoed in his eardrums. Loud crickets and frogs added to the din in his aching head then he heard something else, muffled voices.

Posing like a statue, Luke didn’t dare move a muscle as he watched two people make their way between the trees—less than twenty feet away from him with a huge bundle slung between them. Perspiration ran down his face as panic gripped his soul. It must be a body—his dear Francis? Squinting, he tried to make out who they were. Surely it wasn’t—no, not Jean Davis. She didn’t have the strength. Who were they? The same ones that attacked him?

* * * *

“Let’s leave it behind this fallen tree. We’ll come back and bury *both* bodies later.”

“Yeah. But what’d you do with the shears? In case someone finds the stiff we gotta pin it on Luke!” A hoarse voice chuckled.

The two crept back to the Inn as Luke watched, still unable to clearly see the men, or was one of them a woman? One seemed a lot taller than the other, and their voices were too low for him to identify. Once they’d gotten far enough away he stumbled over to the blanket wrapped form.

Relieved the face he uncovered wasn’t Fran’s, yet—how terrible. Her lovely friend, murdered and dumped in the woods. Then he remembered—the killers said ‘bury both bodies’ later.

“Oh Lord, now they’re going back to kill Francis!” Luke forced his shaky legs to propel him toward the house.

* * * *

Fran awoke from a strange dream. Confused, it took a moment for her to remember where she was—at Ledgemont—in Gram’s bedroom.

“Justine!” What a prankster, pretending to be a ghost. Or was that part of the dream?

Fran slipped out of bed and into her lavender robe, then walked across the hall to talk to Justine.

“Not here?” She stared at an empty bed and then glanced at the illuminated hands on the travel clock. After two in the morning. “Oh, the bathroom, of course.” Rapping on the door, no answer, and no light shone from underneath.

“Justine?” Fran opened the bathroom door and turned on the light to another dead end. Could the girl have gone searching for a late night snack? If they were back at college she’d know Justine was out having another one of her ‘study’ sessions.

* * * *

“Now where did my body run off to?” Justine’s wry wit lived on, despite her physical death. By staying in Fran’s room she wasn’t worried about seeing a ghost tonight—but she never counted on *becoming* a ghost. “When I find whoever did this to me I’m going to scare the shit out of them!”

Her best friend’s life still very much in danger, the girl had to keep searching—someone at Ledgemont Inn wanted to kill Francis Sutton. Arthur Sutton seemed the most obvious suspect, but would a father really murder his own daughter just to keep her from inheriting the B&B?

“I’m going to sneak a peek at the supposedly ‘sick’ man, if I can ever find his room...”

* * * *

Ducking behind a large tree, Luke watched the two figures in black enter the manor’s rear door. Not sure how long they’d stay in the kitchen, he decided to take a more direct route to warn Francis.

“I hope this old trellis can hold me!” Adrenaline coursed through Luke’s veins as he scaled a rickety redwood frame up to the second story, ignoring the sharp splinters and prickly vines until he managed to reach the sill and climb in through the open window.

“Fran, are you in here?” Moonlight illuminated the elegant suite, shining on an empty bed.

“Where is she? I’ve got to find her.” Luke opened the room’s door a few inches and peered down the hall. Seeing no one, he stepped across to the adjacent suite.

Darting inside he closed the door and stood still, then while waiting for his eyes to adjust he heard the sound of someone breathing. He inched closer to the bed, straining his eyes, trying to spot them.

“Ugh!” Luke’s knees buckled as a heavy object struck his head, for the second time tonight.

* * * *

Traces of moonlight filtered through the ivory sheers, draped over the tall living room windows. Wishing she’d packed a flashlight or two, at least Fran knew the manor’s layout well enough to find her way around at night. She headed to the kitchen first, thinking perhaps her friend simply wandered downstairs for some tea or a soda.

Fran’s slippers made soft clicks on the wooden floor and the only other sound in the long dining room was the swish of her robe. The girl’s momentary hope of finding her friend withered when she reached the dark kitchen.

“I might as well get something to drink while I’m here.” Planning to look for some cola in the fridge, Fran pushed the swinging door all the way open and felt along the wall for the light switch. As she flipped it upward with her index finger the girl shrieked and slipped on the tile, clutching at the countertop to keep from falling. Jean Davis stood on the other side of the butcher-block island, scraggly long grey hair cascading over her bony shoulders. The old woman’s shocked expression proved she didn’t expect to see Francis either.

“What—what are you doing in here?” The sour woman stammered and cinched the sash on her Chinese silk robe a little tighter. Fear and astonishment pervaded her wrinkled face.

Fran recovered her composure. “I should ask you the same thing. It must be close to three in the morning.” Hearing footsteps in the adjacent mudroom the girl called out. “Justine? Is that you?”

Both women looked toward the home’s rear entry. Someone *was* there—but not Justine. Fran’s heart fluttered, watching, waiting for them to step forward...

* * * *

Justine’s spirit checked the guest suites on the second floor, finding them all unoccupied, and most of them also void of artwork. “Fran’s probably right, her greedy father is selling off the art collection.”

Only two more rooms in the West wing—one had to be the Davis’ and the other—Arthur Sutton’s. The filmy figure of a girl slipped into the next room where she spotted a pile of large black luggage near the door, and an unmade empty bed.

“Where are Mr. and Mrs. Davis? It’s the middle of the night.” Justine peered into the bathroom. No toiletries and an empty closet too, but they hadn’t left the manor yet, not without their luggage.

“Hey, what’s this?” Darkness almost prevented her from noticing a tote bag next to one of the suitcases—brimming full of leather bound books. “Maybe they’re the ones stealing the collection. In cahoots with Mr. Davis’ sister!”

And that old crone was keeping Fran’s father sedated, who knows for how long. Justine sprinted out the door, filmy negligee billowing behind her.

* * * *

Bound and gagged, Luke struggled to open his eyes. Stars danced and sparkled in the darkness, yet he wasn’t outside. At least he was still alive! Nearly choking on the binding, waves of nauseating pain rushed through his battered body.

As he struggled to inhale he recognized a familiar musty odor, the smell of Ledgemont’s basement. The way his body felt they probably tossed him down the stairs. Now how could he save Franny?

Rolling onto his side, the boy writhed and squirmed his way toward a faint glow drifting down the staircase. He knew a few tools hung on the nearby wall—perhaps he could cut the rope off his wrists.

Minutes of crawling seemed like hours. Lying on his back, he used his shackled feet to knock down a handsaw. Turning his back to the wall, Luke began the arduous task of cutting the rope with the saw’s dull rusty teeth.

Bearing down harder, hoping he wouldn’t rip into his flesh, the boy focused on his escape, trying not to think about what might be happening to Fran upstairs.

* * * *

A tall man came forward, stepping into the glare of the kitchen’s old-fashioned overhead light. Fully dressed in black casual attire, his astonished gaze mirrored Jean Davis’ reaction at the sight of the young woman.

“You must be Francis.” Other than his pallor, the man didn’t appear weak or ill. “I’m sorry—please forgive me. It’s just—you are the exact image of your mother.”

Not the loving reunion Fran expected, and quite a bizarre situation—in the middle of the night, in their now rundown Bed and Breakfast Inn. The girl’s instincts told her to run, but that didn’t make any sense.

“Yes. I’m Fran Sutton. And *you* must be my father.” Petrified for a moment, no amount of effort made her legs move, even though she wanted to step forward and shake his hand.

“Oh my dear, let’s go into the living room and sit down. You must have a lot of questions.” The man shot a poisonous glance at Jean then moved closer, reaching out for Fran’s arm.

Sidestepping away she hurried ahead, switching on a tiffany floor lamp then settling down in a leather club chair. Adjusting the flimsy robe to keep her nightgown covered, the disgruntled young woman crossed her arms, bit her tongue, and waited for him to speak first. An accusation was no way to begin their reunion.

* * * *

Yanking open the door to Arthur’s suite Justine expected to find him unconscious, or perhaps dead. Shocked, the ghostly girl stared at yet another empty bed. “Did they drag him off too?” Now she had to find *two* bodies.

“Everyone must be downstairs, including Franny. Dear God let her still be alive!” Convinced the Davis’ were thieves, Justine wondered if they were also murderers...

* * * *

Fifty-something, slender, and grey at the temples, Arthur Sutton possessed an elegant yet imposing demeanor. He strode past Francis and sat down in the club chair facing hers. Clasp his hands together, he appeared to choose his words with great care before he spoke.

“My dear. I hardly know you. Yet, we are of the same blood. Suttons are strong-willed, and I’m sure that trait has helped both of us endure the pain of the past few years.” His voice trailed off.

Furrowing her brow, feeling defensive, Fran sensed an attempt to play on her sympathies. Did this complete stranger expect Francis to relinquish the inheritance?

“Father.” Swallowing her nervous tension in one big gulp Fran tried to bring up the subject of the missing paintings, but something stopped her. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better. I guess your ‘strong will’ pulled you through the illness?”

Arthur turned, looked around to see if Jean had followed them, then leaned toward his daughter and spoke in a hushed tone. “Darling, I made a big mistake when I hired Jean Davis. My business partner Earle recommended the woman, his sister, but ever since she’s been here I’ve suffered recurring bouts of unexplained maladies. At times I felt I was very near death.”

“Mr. Sutton.” They both jumped when the unpleasant woman’s sharp voice cut through the air.

“I beg your pardon, Jean, but my daughter and I were getting reacquainted. What is it that you want?” Sounding fatigued, Mr. Sutton leaned back in his chair.

“I made you both some tea.” Jean’s hair was now smoothed back into its usual tight bun but she still wore her nightclothes. The woman placed a small lacquered tray on the coffee table then scowled at Arthur. “You really should get back into bed.”

“I think you’re right not to trust Jean Davis. I took an instant dislike to that woman the first time I set eyes on her.” Fran spoke her mind after the housekeeper left the room, concern replacing her previous anger. She managed a smile, encouraging her weak father to have some of the Earl Gray tea.

“Say—since it’s after midnight and you’re now twenty-one, Ledgemont is officially yours! Congratulations, my dear.” Arthur raised his teacup to clink hers and they both took a long sip of the soothing beverage.

Startled by a sudden loud creak, Fran turned toward the sound and was relieved to see Justine beginning to descend the staircase. She blinked her eyes a few times, noticing a weird glow surrounding the girl. Fran realized she could see right through her friend! Dropping the china teacup, she keeled over in a dead faint.

* * * *

Ecstatic to see Francis, Justine flew down the stairs. The unfamiliar man with her must be Arthur Sutton—also alive and well.

“Oh no, she’s fainted!” Justine stopped, not sure what to do next. Fran saw her earlier, but could Mr. Sutton see her spirit form?

“Francis, what’s wrong?” The girl’s father smoothed her hair and tapped her on the cheek. “Wake up—come on.”

“Arthur Sutton!” Justine addressed him, then waited for a reaction.

Glancing up and seeing no one, he focused on shaking Fran’s shoulders, trying to revive her. “Fran, sweetheart.” Her eyes fluttered open.

“What—happened?” Confused and exhausted, Fran stared up at the man and rubbed her eyes.

“You must have fainted.” Arthur knew someone called his name and now he glanced around the room, expecting to see Jean Davis lurking in a corner.

“I, oh, Father—I think I’m having hallucinations.” She gave his hand a squeeze, then stood up. “I think we both need to get some rest.”

“Good idea. I’m sure I’ll feel *much* better in the morning.” Arthur had a peculiar smile on his face as he glanced down at his daughter. A moment later he caught her when she collapsed into his arms, unconscious from the drugs he’d slipped into her tea.

* * * *

Free at last! The frayed rope fell away from Luke’s hands then he removed the gag and untied his feet. Unsteady at first, the boy gripped the handrail for support and crept up the narrow cellar stairs.

Opening the door into the mudroom, relieved it was dark, he realized that it also kept him from seeing potential attackers. He’d been taken by surprise twice and the only reason they hadn’t killed him—he was their scapegoat.

Fran might not be so lucky. Unsure what had taken place during the time he'd been tied up, Luke still held out hope. Making his way over to the old-fashioned stove, he pulled the largest knife out of the wooden block and took a few deep, painful breaths—preparing for battle.

* * * *

Justine didn't want to frighten Arthur while he carried Francis up the staircase so she tiptoed behind him, trying to sort everything out in her mind.

Earlier the two girls suspected Arthur was up to something, but as the night went on Justine feared he might only be an innocent victim. Then the three Davis' strange attitudes and activities kept her guessing—did Jean drug the tea? If so Arthur should pass out at any moment. Luke was still missing, and she hadn't seen Nathan since they arrived.

Justine glanced around the hallway, wondering what happened to Jean Davis. Frustrated that she'd lost track of the dour woman while following Arthur, the ghostly girl vowed she wouldn't leave Fran's side again tonight.

The tall man took his daughter into the pink bedroom and placed her limp form on the satin sheets, then as he gazed down at the attractive girl he shook his head and grimaced. "What a shame." Arthur turned around when he heard a low whistle. Moonlight shining through the open window revealed a woman's figure draped in the nearby chair.

"Is she dead, or just unconscious?" She spoke in a coarse whisper.

"Not dead—not yet. But you'll see to that for me, won't you, Mary?" Arthur's eyes gleamed and he snickered.

Justine gasped then watched the woman get up and saunter over to Fran's father. It was Mary Davis draping her arms around Arthur's neck and the two embraced, sharing a passionate kiss.

* * * *

Luke made his way from the dark kitchen into the living room. His head still throbbed as he staggered over to the roll top desk, to the one telephone in the old house. At last he had a chance to call the police.

"Damn. No dial tone." Of course, they cut the phone line... and nobody even bothered trying to use a cell phone out here—no signal towers in this remote wooded area of Texas.

What really worried Luke—he didn't know which one of them killed Justine. Unable to trust anyone, the exhausted young man fingered the polished wooden handle of the butcher knife then started his climb up the stairs.

* * * *

"I love you *so* much." Mary reached up to caress Arthur's cheek, then she turned and sauntered toward the bed. Glancing back at him over her shoulder, a fierce passionate fire smoldered in her eyes. She puckered her painted lips and blew him a kiss.

Nodding at his accomplice, the stone-faced man crossed his arms and stayed out of her way, watching the determined woman pick up a soft feather pillow and then force it down over the helpless girl's face.

Shocked, Justine leapt forward and pulled Mary's hair, then ducked when the startled woman spun around.

"What are you doing, you fool?" Hissing, she glared at Arthur.

"What do you mean what am I doing?" Keeping his voice low, the man put his hands on his hips and snarled. "Get on with it!"

Still clutching the pillow, Mary climbed up onto the bed next to Fran for more leverage. Again she felt a tug on her hair, but this time she ignored the sensation.

"Stop it *bitch!*" Justine shouted into Mary's ear and wrapped her cold, transparent hands around the woman's throat.

"Get *off* me." Choking out the words while still smothering the girl, Mary bucked and swayed to shake Justine off.

"What in the hell is happening?" Arthur had clearly heard another woman's voice. Fearing Francis was fighting

back, he reached for the light switch.

Just as light flooded the room the heavy wooden door flung open and knocked Arthur out cold. Luke jumped over the man's body to join the struggle on the bed.

"Get away from her *now* or I'll kill you!" Luke wrenched Mary's arm with one hand and waved the huge knife at her with the other.

The combined force of Justine and Luke sent Mary Davis tumbling to the floor.

"I should have killed you earlier you little *bastard*." Red-faced and belligerent Mary tried to get up, but a heavy weight settled onto her chest and kept her pinned.

Justine's ghost remained prone on the combative female, shutting her up by clamping a hand tight over her ugly red lips. Directing vile threats into her ear, Justine whispered all the horrible things she'd like to do to punish the savage woman. Mary's eyes bulged at the terrifying threats and she couldn't imagine what was happening, since she could feel and hear Justine but not actually see anyone.

Luke yanked the pillow off Fran's face. Semi-conscious and already stirring, her eyes cracked open and she managed a smile at the sight of the long lost Luke. "It's about time you showed up."

A charming Prince bringing his sleeping beauty back to life—he pressed his lips hard against hers and smoothed her tousled hair. Relief and desire combined in their passionate kiss and time stood still—until a set of bony fingers seized Luke's neck in an iron grip. Lurching backward he managed to reach up to grasp the attacker's wrists then kicked and struggled, attempting to break free.

"Oh *God*—get off him!" Fran screamed as she tried to get up to stop Jean. Spotting the butcher knife Luke left on the bed she grabbed it with both hands and waved it at the woman.

"You don't scare me." The laughing old crone wrapped her entire body around Luke, long fingertips still embedded deep in his throat. He dropped to the floor hoping that would loosen her grip and gasped for air, his face now a bluish color.

Sliding off the bed, still unsteady on her feet, Francis held her breath and jabbed the shiny steel blade into Jean's arm. The strategy worked—the grey-haired woman screeched and let go. Still clutching the knife, Fran stepped backward and bumped into someone.

Strong arms encircled the girl and Fran looked up at her father who now held her tight. "I'm all right, but Luke needs help!"

Luke still wrestled the obstinate woman and they clutched one other, rolling back and forth, each trying to gain an advantage. Jean's bleeding arm smeared crimson stains on the expensive beige rug.

As Arthur moved toward the door taking Fran with him, in one sickening moment the girl realized her grim situation. The long male arms around her weren't meant as comfort.

"What are you doing?" Twisting and trying to break free only made him squeeze her harder, and the knife dropped out of her hand. "Luke—help!"

The boy looked up at the horrifying sight—Arthur dragging Francis out of the room. Scrambling to his feet he managed to take two steps toward Fran, then Jean grabbed his ankle and brought him crashing back down to the floor.

"Let her go." Depleted from the earlier beatings Luke had less than half his normal strength, and if he couldn't fight off an old woman, how could he hope to rescue Fran this time?

A loud cracking sound startled Francis and Arthur's arms dropped away as he went limp then fell to the floor next to her.

"What?" Doing an about-face Francis shrieked at the monstrous form, then she recognized him—Nathan, wielding a large baseball bat, now cracked and bloody from its impact with Arthur's head. Fran staggered back so he could get into the room and assist Luke next.

Jean didn't need much convincing to give up her fight. She cowered against the foot of the bed with her hands up in surrender. Luke pushed himself off the floor and took Fran in his arms.

“Nathan. What about the other guy?” Luke realized one of the Davis’ was unaccounted for.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about him, he’s all ‘tied up’ at the moment. I caught him loading the manor’s paintings into his car—I discovered he’d already made one trip into town and had come back for seconds.” The staid chauffeur surprised them all with an animated expression and huge grin.

A woman’s weak moans emanated from somewhere on the other side of the large bed and Fran let go of Luke, taking hesitant steps across the room to investigate.

Blinking a few times she shook her head, staring in utter disbelief at Justine—glowing and filmy like she’d appeared on the staircase—straddling a prone Mary Davis! “Dear God. What am I seeing?”

Luke stood next to her and they looked at Mary lying there limp and disheveled, but he didn’t quite understand Fran’s extreme reaction since he couldn’t see Justine. “Yes, it’s Mary Davis, the woman who just tried to smother you. I knocked her out but it looks like she’s coming around.”

“No. Don’t you see her? Justine!” Fran’s knees trembled and buckled then she collapsed into the chair next to her dresser.

“Franny, darling, I’m so sorry, it’s not Justine—she’s dead. I saw them dump her body in the woods...” He realized the gravity of the news and leaned down to wrap his arms around her.

“But...” Fran stared at the unmistakable likeness of her best friend.

“*Don’t worry about me Franny, I’ll be all right, now that you’re safe.*” The entity’s voice grew faint and Justine faded away.

“Oh my God, she’s—gone.” Fran sobbed, exhausted from the melee then news of a dear friend’s death. “*Why? I want to know why...*”

* * * *

“The police are on their way.” Luke’s amateur phone line splice worked. “Nathan, are they bound up good and tight?” Scanning all the sullen faces, Luke rubbed his weak right arm and rotated his shoulder. He wasn’t in the mood for another fistfight.

“They won’t give us any more trouble.” The hulking man towered high above the row of felons he’d lashed to Ledgesmont’s expensive wooden dining chairs. The two women hung their heads, the men glared back at him.

“Please tell me everything, Luke.” Fran clutched his hand as they settled down together on the couch.

“I’ll tell you what I know, and then maybe these goons can fill in the blanks.” He shot a ‘don’t give me any trouble’ glance at the criminals.

“When Mr. Sutton took over, everything went downhill. He closed the Inn to guests. Your grandmother had insisted he keep Nathan and me on and he did, but Arthur ordered me to let the gardens go—said he didn’t like flowers. I’ve been more of a part time amateur plumber and handyman than groundskeeper.” Ashamed, Luke hoped Fran now understood why the flowers disappeared.

“Nothing much went on until the past few months. Jean Davis came to work here, and then Earle and Mary Davis moved in for an extended stay. Mr. Sutton would only tell me he was getting ready to start a new chapter in his life. I hoped he was finally coming to his senses and we’d fix the place up and have a grand re-opening.” Duped by them all, Luke shot an angry glance at Arthur.

“Later, I got suspicious when they’d all stop talking if I came into the room. I noticed they had a lot of late night meetings, so I hid in the secret passage and listened in. Mr. Sutton found out you were inheriting Ledgesmont—they were determined to stop that from happening.” The young man pulled a tattered photograph out of his jacket pocket.

“I found this in a box of odds and ends in the attic. He thought he’d destroyed all the incriminating photos.” Luke’s hand trembled as he handed the picture to Francis.

Squinting at the snapshot, the girl recognized her mother, and the man next to the woman must be her father. She hadn’t seen any photos of her father since she was little. The couple was somewhere in Hawaii by the looks of it, and going by the date on the back, this one was taken not long before her mother died. Fran shook her head and

got up, taking slow, deliberate steps toward the man who claimed to be Arthur Sutton.

“This isn’t you at all! You’ve got a similar build and the same color hair. Close enough to fool just about everyone.” Fran’s choked on the next question. “What happened to my father?” She already suspected, but wanted a full confession.

“He’s dead.” No emotion, just a matter-of-fact statement. “He was another one of my business associates. Earle, my main partner, liked to gamble, and he managed to put us deep in the hole. So when I found out Arthur was inheriting Ledgemont I killed him and assumed his identity.” Now he smirked at the girl, like killing another human being was no different than swatting a fly.

Fran slapped his face—hard. Her red handprint matched the bloody mess in his hair.

“You little *bitch*.” Arthur spat on the floor.

“And then when you found out I was to inherit the Inn you decided to kill me too. Only you killed Justine instead...” Tears welled up in her eyes and she bit her lower lip. “If it wasn’t for Luke I’d be dead.”

Luke stood up and helped Fran back to the couch. “That one is also a killer.” He pointed to Mary. The last piece of the puzzle. “She may be married to Earle, but she’s been carrying on with Arthur—or whatever his real name is. I heard him promise to make her lady of the manor—if she was willing to help him dispose of you. You’re the one who killed Justine, am I right?” Dark cold eyes stared back at him. She didn’t deny it.

“And Earle here—still a gambling man—was stealing books and paintings to keep up his habit.” Luke shook his head at his own stupidity, wishing he’d realized sooner what was going on right under his nose. “At least he didn’t get them all. I’m sorry, Franny.”

He looked over at the final member of the gang. “Old Jean, the loyal one, taking care of everyone, and always looking after her crook of a brother. She helped him make off with the artwork and...” Pounding at the front door interrupted Luke.

Nathan answered, letting in a group of police officers. Without saying a word he pointed to the Inn’s private line-up of murderers and thieves.

* * * *

“I don’t know how I can ever thank you, Luke.” Fran yawned as she stared out across the property.

Their long night of horror came to an end after the coroner took care of Justine’s body and the police hauled off the frightening foursome. Nathan returned to his apartment over the garage, and the young couple stood together on the stone porch, watching the indigo predawn sky transform into pale orange.

“You really did save my life. I’m still in shock. It’s going to take time for me to adjust—losing my best friend, and also finding out my real father is dead. I’m *really* alone now, and a little lost.” Fran managed a weak smile as they headed back inside the Inn.

Luke closed the heavy door then clasped Fran’s hands. “Don’t go back to that stuffy old school. I want you to stay here, with me. I’ll help you get the place going again. Nathan will help too.” Now free of Arthur and Jean he took on a new energy and a new purpose—his eyes sparkled and he kissed her cheek.

“Oh Luke, of course I’ll stay.” Blushing, she kissed him then collapsed into his arms, resting her tired head on his shoulder.

The sunrise bathed everything in the living room with a glorious golden glow. No longer oppressive and dreary, the manor’s atmosphere transformed into an aura of hope and possibility as it welcomed Francis Grace Sutton home.

Fran took a deep breath then let it out in a long sigh. “Ledgemont Inn—it’s my legacy...”

* * * *

About Author Linda Houle

As a “Transplanted Texan” – true to the saying Linda got here as fast as she could! Committed to helping authors realize their dream of becoming published, Linda co-founded the publishing company L&L Dreamspell with Lisa Rene' Smith. Years spent as an artisan helped Linda transition into doing the cover design and graphic artwork for L&L Dreamspell. She now creates covers for all authors, through her *Cover of Your Dreams* website.

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With a BA in Behavioral Science and interest in people and new age Spirituality, Linda’s stories and books range from paranormal romance to non-fiction self improvement. She has a handy guide to navigating the changing publishing world *The Naked Truth about Book Publishing* ISBN 978-1-60318-803-6 available in multiple ebook formats for only \$2.99. Visit www.thenakedtruthaboutbookpublishing.com

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