

Word count 2010

### “The Price of Curiosity”

“NO TRESPASSING,” the sign spelled out clearly in bright orange block letters. Nothing obstructed the view of the sign, and yet my two cousins and I walked past it without hesitation, and carefully stepped over rusty barbed wire fencing. We didn’t need a sign to tell us to stay out. Our parents and our grandmother told us on countless occasions to stay out of the barn. Yet it stood right there on my grandmother’s property taunting us with strange occurrences for years. How could we obey?

“Careful, through these thorn bushes,” my cousin Beth said as she tamped down a thorny branch of a raspberry bush and pushed another back, holding it so her sister Paige could pass by it followed by me. The bushes were thick alongside the barn, making the trek slow going as we picked our way through the saplings, thorns and weeds. We had planned carefully, deciding it was best to approach the barn from behind and enter through a window which was hidden away in the thick vegetation. It was the only way to get in without being spotted by our grandmother. She had an unobstructed view of the barn from the windows of her house less than fifty yards

away. As we pushed through the weeds, I was thankful I had never contracted poison ivy, but I knew my cousins did. They may regret this adventure tomorrow morning.

The barn hadn't been used for at least twenty-five years. Time and the elements weathered its wooden planks, turning them gray and rough. Sunlight streamed through its cracked and missing boards producing a ghostly ambience. The tin roof long ago turned mottled orange as rust consumed it, producing large holes, which left the interior of the barn vulnerable to the weather. The door at the front of the barn always seemed to be open and banging, even though my uncle repeatedly latched it to stop the incessant noise. Occasionally, a light would flicker from within, making us wonder if a ghost was trying to tell us something in Morse code, which was futile because none of us knew Morse code. Perhaps most puzzling of all was the stomping sound, that could only be described as the stomping of a cow's hooves. The problem was, there hadn't been a cow in the barn for decades. Our parents told us it was the ghost of the crazy bull that used to torment them as children. He would charge after them in fits of rage, busting down fences in his path. Until one day, our grandfather had enough of the bull's antics and took him to the butcher. Was he still trying to torment his captors, long after he had been served up for dinner?

By the time we fought our way through the brush to the window, my heart was hammering in my chest. I wasn't sure if it was the fear of getting caught or what we would find inside, either way I was on edge.

"Mia you go first," Beth said looking at me. Panic pulsed through me. Why me? I was the youngest. Am I supposed to be the sacrificial lamb? I knew better than to argue. I fought hard to prove myself worthy to go on these adventures with my cousins. If I waivered now or

showed an ounce of cowardice, I wouldn't be included anymore. I would also have to endure the name-calling that was sure to follow.

“Ok,” I answered, taking in a ragged breath. I gripped the opening of the window and heaved myself up, swinging both legs over the bottom edge of the window before dropping down onto the dirt floor of the barn, sending a cloud of dust into the air. I moved aside as Paige dropped down beside me followed by Beth.

There was a wooden ladder to my left leading up to a loft and in front of me I saw the stalls which held cows and horses decades ago. Clumps of musty hay were heaped within the stalls. A smaller pen extended off the side of the barn, which must have held the pigs. The dirt floor was pock marked with small shallow craters. The work of wild animals maybe? I continued to scan the dark dusty interior and my eyes settled on an object that looked like a large plastic ice cube.

“What is this?” I asked kneeling down beside it, struggling to pull a cobweb I apparently walked through off my arm.

“It's a salt block.... for the horses,” Beth answered, as she removed an old oil lantern from the shelf near the ladder. The metal had rusted making the red paint flake away in various spots. The handle was stiff when she tried to dangle the lantern at her side and the glass was cloudy with age. Paige found a large ladle on the same shelf, as she lifted it a veil of cobwebs clung to it. She turned it over in her hands, the entire object was completely covered with rust. She was returning it to the shelf when a loud bang startled us, freezing all of us in place. Our eyes flew in the direction of the sound. The door had swung open and wind stirred up a cloud of dust. I remained still watching the door open and close trying to figure out why it suddenly opened.

“Hurry up and shut the door!” hissed Beth. “Grandma will see us if its open.” Each time the door opened we could see the front porch of our grandmother’s house. If she stepped out of the house to check on us, she might be able to see us moving around inside.

Paige and I rushed over and tried to stay out of sight as we reached for the door swinging and thumping against the side of the barn. We pulled it shut and struggled to get it latched.

“No wonder it keeps blowing open. The screws are falling out of the latch. The wind probably jiggles it loose every time Dad latches it.” Paige said as she finally secured it.

“C’mon let’s keep looking,” I said.

“Let’s go up the ladder to the loft,” Beth said.

Paige nodded and since she was standing next to the ladder she ascended first. I followed her. When I reached the top, I stepped onto the bowing floor boards of the loft. Sunlight streamed down through the holes in the roof illuminating the dusty space. There was a window on the side facing grandma’s house and another on my left. Musty hay covered the floor and chicken pens lined the far wall with holes large enough to let an animal bigger than a chicken through them.

“Look,” Paige said pointing to the wall. I directed my eyes toward the spot she was pointing at and saw a dancing light. It must be the light we often saw shining from the barn. I slowly turned expecting to encounter an apparition producing the light. To my relief, there was no apparition there. Squinting in the glare, I walked towards it and as I drew closer, I realized it was a small mirror, propped up on a shelf. The sunlight coming through the holes in the ceiling reflected off of it. Ropes dangling from the rafters above, swung in the breeze coming through the windows interrupting the beam of light and making it appear to flicker.

“Well that explains the light. No one trying to communicate through Morse code,” I was relieved now that I knew we weren’t going to run into any spirits.

“Why would they have a mirror in here?” Beth asked.

“Beats me,” Paige answered. The boards creaked under our feet as we kicked away the old hay to find anything of interest.

“Stop moving,” Beth snapped. Paige and I stiffened. What did she see? I followed her gaze out the window and saw Grandma standing on her front porch. Her hands were on her hips and she was scanning the yard, no doubt looking for us. We are so busted I thought to myself. Should we try to get out before she started calling us? I crouched down and started toward the ladder.

“Stop,” Beth said through gritted teeth, glaring at me. I stopped. We all crouched down, trying to be perfectly still and out of sight. It seemed like an eternity. My legs were starting to ache. I didn’t know how much longer I could stay in that position. Finally, Grandma turned and walked back into the house. We all let out our breath.

“Maybe we should go now, that was a close call. I think we have seen enough to know that there are logical explanations for everything that has been happening. We should get out of here before we get caught,” I said.

“You’re such a scaredy-cat,” Beth chided me. “There isn’t much else to look at though, so I guess we can go.” Even though she was downplaying it, I knew that was too close of a call for her comfort too. She would never admit it though.

We made our way to the ladder and all stopped abruptly at the top. The stomping of hooves echoed in the barn. Beth’s eyes were wide and her features strained in an expression of fear. Then a sound that could only be described as a snort sent us all scrambling down the ladder.

I missed a rung and landed on my rump at the bottom and wasted no time getting back to my feet and diving out the window. I instantly regretted my haste as I tried to stand and found my clothes snagged among the thorn bushes. I fought my way out and joined my cousins as we plowed through the thick vegetation. This time in a frantic retreat away from the barn. I disregarded all the tears to my flesh as the thorns snagged my skin.

“Was it the bull? Did you see it?” I panted as I followed my cousins.

“I didn’t see it,” Paige answered sounding as breathless as I did.

“I couldn’t tell either, with you two in such a tizzy. Now we will never know. I thought something was wrong with one of you,” Beth said trying to cover the tremble in her voice and act like she hadn’t been scared for a minute. I knew better. I had witnessed the look of fear on her face.

Not a moment too soon, we reached the clearing and stopped dead in our tracks. For a moment, I considered turning back and taking my chances with the bull. I couldn’t move. Grandma’s glare held me frozen in place. We were busted.

“You three get in the house! You know you are not allowed to be in that barn!” Grandma scolded us, shaking her tiny index finger in our direction.

“Mia was the only one in there we were trying to get her out,” Beth protested. Grandma’s fiery green eyes glared at me. I shrunk under her gaze and felt the stab of betrayal. I snapped my head in the direction of Beth. My shocked expression melted into a glare that rivaled Grandma’s. I knew I was beaten. It was two against one. Paige was nodding in agreement with Beth, seizing the opportunity to save her own hide.

The next day, I sat in my room contemplating all that had happened in the barn. I had plenty of time to think about it, since I was grounded for a week. From the confines of my room, I could hear my mother talking to my grandmother on the phone.

“I feel so bad that Beth and Paige got poison ivy all over them, trying to get Mia out of the barn,” my mother said. I couldn’t help feeling there was justice after all. Paige and Beth may have avoided punishment from their parents by betraying me, but in the end, they had to endure a different kind of punishment. Beth might have Paige on her side, but it seemed karma was on mine.