

Turning in a circle, Katie studied the room again. Faded wallpaper curled and peeled above the dusty wainscoting, but the walls themselves appeared sturdy. On the far side of the entryway, and dominating the wall, stood a mammoth fireplace with an ornately carved hearth. Her attention was immediately drawn to a painting of a woman in nineteenth century dress that hung prominently over the mantel.

“Who is she?”

The sheriff turned to the dusty, sun-bleached portrait in the heavy carved gilt frame. “One of the previous owners, they say.” He shrugged. “The family history kind of got lost with the house. Everyone around here calls her the Widow of Lacewood.”

Katie stood spellbound. The woman was clothed completely in black, but the magnificence of the gown gave the impression of sophistication and class. Her chin was slightly elevated as if to project strength, yet there was more than a hint of sorrow and pain in her eyes.

“She looks so sad.” Katie spoke without removing her gaze. “And so young. How could she be a widow?”

The sheriff had already started to walk away, but he turned back and glanced at the painting. “Not sure, but they say she never remarried.”

Katie’s heart suddenly struggled to beat. The anguish in the woman’s eyes kept her riveted. She could see the pain. *Feel* a heart ripped apart. Something was missing that could never be replaced. Katie had felt such loss before. In a way that’s why she was here.

“You coming?”

Katie heard the sheriff calling from the next room, and turned to follow. With one quick glance back, she noticed particles of dust now swirled and danced in a shaft of light, almost like

a living thing. Her breath caught in her throat as the dust seemed to materialize into the form of a woman, her eyes dull with the same tortured despair and disbelief as the one in the portrait.

Katie jerked her head around for a closer look and blinked. The woman was gone.