

THE MONTEREY WIDOWS AND ORPHANS DINING CLUB

A Cozy Beachside Paranormal Mystery

By Eden Crowne

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CHAPTER ONE

SPOOKED

Olivia Mallory was born charming. Too bad she wasn't born lucky.

The gray Pit Bull, two Rag Doll cats, and Olivia stared at the woman's body sprawled across the green bedspread. They all shared roughly the same expression of surprise.

The woman was wearing an emerald green kimono several shades darker than the bedspread. It was embroidered with cranes, plum blossoms and pine, all lucky symbols in Japan. Sadly, they had not lived up to their promise.

Her long, wavy red hair covered her face. For which Olivia was grateful. Her arms and legs were splayed awkwardly. She had on one blue silk tasseled slipper with a kitten heel. The other foot was bare. There didn't seem to be any blood.

That was good. Bodies had a lot of blood. Too much.

The figure on the bed blurred and instead of one body, there were dozens, torn and bleeding across the slick linoleum. Men and women and James. Her James.

Olivia closed her eyes and counted slowly to ten.

Ruggles whimpered

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she breathed, perhaps more to reassure herself than the dog.

When she opened her eyes again, only the dead woman on the bed remained.

Okay, that was not exactly true.

The ghost was back as well. A barely-there phantom hovering above the bed.

Ruggles had woken her a short time ago barking at the foot of the stairs. He was actually a quiet dog. Very quiet for a Pit Bull. So Olivia paid attention. She pulled on her sweats, strapped the brace

tightly on her left leg, gathered the cats, and went to see. The ghost was hovering a few feet above the dog.

In proper horror movie style, they'd trooped up the stairs following the ghost. It passed one, two, three, four, five doors before stopping at the last room on the landing. They'd opened the doors to...this.

Olivia wanted an espresso. Or a drink. Maybe both as soon as possible. Which, once she called the police, was not going to be soon at all.

Huggles stretched up demanding to be hugged, her green kitty eyes wide. She was not happy. Though whether about the ghost or the body, Olivia wasn't sure.

Snuggles, her sister, was made of sturdier stuff. The big cat reared back on her hind legs and hissed at the ghost, batting the air with kitty uppercuts, determined to do battle. She'd been protecting Olivia the past two days from dust bunnies and stray socks. The undead were not going to deter Snuggles from her chosen role as the temporary pet-sitter's bodyguard.

The ghost didn't seem to take any interest in them, which was probably for the better.

Olivia pulled out her cell phone, no easy feat holding a twenty-two-pound cat. Rag dolls are not lightweights. She managed to tap 9-1-1.

"What's your emergency," came a man's voice on the line.

"My name is Olivia Mallory." Actually she said, "*mmph-mumble-pleah*," because Huggles shifted position and she got a mouthful of cat fur.

Spitting it out, she tried again. "Sorry. This is Olivia Mallory. I am at 1373 Rancho Verde, in Pebble Beach. There appears to be a dead woman in the upstairs bedroom of the house. I'm pet-sitting for Samuel and Amanda Beckett while they are away. This woman came by last night and the Becketts said via phone to let her stay."

An understandably surprised flurry of information flowed back and forth following this dramatic announcement.

After she assured emergency services she was not in immediate danger, Olivia hung up.

She took a moment to look around the room. the police were going to be full of questions.

It was a corner room at the end of the landing with two big picture windows opposite the door. A pair of high-back chairs and a lamp stand made a seating area between the windows. There must be a stunning view of the California coast when the curtains were open. They were closed now.

The bed faced the entrance door, not the windows, a few feet between it and the seating area.

The wall on the right had a chest of drawers. No TV. Another door directly to her right must lead to an en-suite bathroom.

Oddly, the wall on the left, the one that must form one corner of the house, had no windows at all. Instead, it was covered floor to ceiling, wall to wall, by an intricate and unnervingly realistic sculpture of thorny green vines.

Olivia stepped closer.

The vines were real wood and what looked like real thorns. Branch after branch twisted and turned over, under, and around in dizzying interlocking patterns.

What a strange piece of art for a bedroom.

What a strange piece of art period.

Rich people. Go figure.

Together, Olivia, Ruggles, Huggles – still holding tightly – and Snuggles, made their way downstairs to await the arrival of the police and assorted other public officials. Olivia winced as she took the steps. She needed her morning dose of ibuprofen. At least she could bend her knee now and didn't have to hop every step. That had been exhausting.

Disabling the alarm on the front door, she stepped out. They could all use some fresh air.

Ruggles paused to look back up at the second floor. She followed his gaze. Luckily the ghost seemed content to stay where it was.

Outside, it looked like a gardener's truck had tipped over and carelessly dumped its contents all over the driveway. Broken branches and leaves littered the wide front drive from the street to the front door. Detritus from last night's thunderstorm covered a midnight blue BMW. Series Seven if she wasn't mistaken.

A heavy branch from one of the Black Oaks had broken off and lay across the hood. The dent obvious even from where Olivia stood. Well, the woman certainly wouldn't be needing it.

Ever.

Her little Honda Fit was around the back of the house by the kitchen. Good thing, too.

The morning overcast hadn't lifted and the wind was still blowing hard. Probably more storms headed across the Pacific. She could see the ocean from the front doorstep. Angry white caps stretched to the horizon.

Shifting Huggles onto one hip, she did what any intelligent, phantom-seeing adult on this part of the Central Coast would do. She called Ella May Gainsborough, Co-Warden of the Monterey Widows and Orphans Club.

She glanced at the time on her phone: 7:30. What day was it? Tuesday? Ella Mae joined a walking group on Tuesdays. One run by the other Warden, Joan D'Angelo. They'd be together. Good. After attending her first meeting of the Monterey Widow and Orphans Dining Club she knew both women's schedules. In fact, she knew more about a great many things she rather wished she didn't.

Ella Mae answered on the third ring.

“Ella Mae, Olivia. Is Joan with you? Okay. There’s been a death here at the Becketts. A woman. Rachel something. Also, I’ve just seen a ghost,” she sighed. “I am not sure if it’s the same ghost from the beach house or a new one.”

Her life seemed to have rather a lot of ghosts lately.

Before Monterey she did not believe in spooks. Which was kind of ironic since she was one. Just not the supernatural kind.

Dead bodies they had in her line of work.

Ghosts?

Not so much.

Maybe she should have stayed a spy.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Weeks and Several Degrees of Sanity Earlier

Joan D'Angelo looked at the Tarot deck spread out on the table and frowned.

"Don't you frown like that, Joan," said the woman sitting across from her wagging a scarlet fingertip. "I know that smile. That's your 'there's a bundle of trouble comin' Ella May, and you can't run and you can't hide' smile!"

Joan's grin widened, "Not trouble," she corrected, "change. The cards show change and change can be fun."

"Hmph," snorted the other woman. "That's the Tower," She let her fingertip hover over the card, "and that is the xx. Change my butt cheeks. That spells trouble."

The two women were much the same age and the same shape due to a shared fondness for pie. Especially coconut cream. Joan carried her weight in her bosom, Ella May in her hips, so they balanced each other out very well. Both in weight and temperament.

Joan was blond - thanks these days to a little help from L'Oréal — fair with pale blue eyes, a heart-shaped face, a double chin, and smile lines around her eyes and mouth. She looked like her name should be O'Brian, not D'Angelo. Something her grandmother delighted in constantly pointing out in Italian when Joan was a child. The old battle axe.

Joan's signature store was Target. Today she was wearing white capris, sensible slide-on sneakers, a sky-blue tunic top, and a blue and white striped knee-length cardigan.

Her best friend Ella May Gainsborough was dark. Dark skin, dark eyes, black hair worn big and bold in its tight natural curls that framed her full-moon face. She had a wide forehead and a generous mouth and the wattage from her smile bordered on fusion reactor strength.

"So who is this change for!" Ella May demanded, crossing her arms over her ample breasts barely contained in a green knit shirt with a pink all-over geometric pattern. Ella May's signature store was Chicco's. No color too bright, no pattern too bold.

"Don't you say it's for me. Cause if it is, I don't want to hear it. You know how I feel. None of that glass half-full-half-empty BS. My glass is always brimming over with goodness and nobody better tell me otherwise!"

They were sitting at their favorite table at Tea and Tarot in Pacific Grove. Tea and Tarot always smelled richly of teas and coffee, fresh baked apple muffins, and an indefinable spicy scent that changed

depending on the time of day and alignment of the stars. Mercury was currently in retrograde and this afternoon the scent was nose-tickling and peppery.

The tea shop was housed in a little sandy-colored stone building far down Lighthouse, past the antique and resale stores, the auction house, the bank, and a dozen eating establishments small and smaller, almost to the Post Office.

It was bigger than it looked from the outside. Five tables with five chairs each stood on a circular midnight blue carpet with the major constellations in their classical Greek forms woven in gold wool. Ella May and Joan always sat at the table over Orion. Despite a steady stream of coffee and tea and tasty bites being carried across it daily, the carpet never looked soiled or stained. Every table held a thick white candle that burned from opening to closing time, those hours decided by the owners, Anita and Ray Ochoa.

A counter with nine stools stood to the right of the entrance. Joan and Ella May never sat at the counter. "High stools are not made for boldly proportioned women," Ella May always said and Joan had to agree with her.

Running the length of the wall in front of the counter was a glass display case, prep area, and the cash register. Wall shelves were lined with decorative jars containing loose teas as exotic as Nine Bend Black Dragon to familiar Orange Pekoe and English breakfast. Coffees were kept in their own metal lined bins under the counter.

The opposite wall held built-in wooden and glass display cases, some open, some locked. The locked cases were for Tarot decks for sale or to sign out. A few particularly resonant Ouija boards were kept here as well. Those were reserved for the truly gifted or cursed depending on your point of view. Ouija boards were no parlor trick.

Tame Tarot decks, Ouija boards, and collection of illustrated how-to guides sat stacked in the open shelves, free to use by patrons.

Tall bookcases lined the back wall arranged asymmetrically. They held a little lending library of fiction and non-fiction books on fantasy, the paranormal, supernatural creatures, and whatever took the Ochoa's fancy. Though no horror. Tea and Tarot did not approve of horror.

"I'm getting a weird vibe from your table," said Anita Ochoa, wiping her hands on a paisley-patterned dish towel and stepping out from behind the counter. She had just finished pressing out a batch of peanut butter cookies to pop in the oven. The Seaside/Sand City Spiritualist Society was meeting there tonight at seven. "Why am I getting a weird vibe?"

"Ask Joan. It's all Joan's fault," pouted Ella May, her mouth turned down in a disapproving frown.

Joan frowned back at her, sticking out her lower lip. “Now that’s not fair. The cards are in charge; I just interpret them. You know that.”

“Well interpret them to predict puppies and kittens and maybe donuts. Why don’t they ever forecast donuts!”

“Donuts?” piped up one of the customers at the counter, an older man with salt and pepper hair and the sun-stained, wrinkled face and forearms of a farmer. “If it’s donuts you’re looking for, Diablo’s is gonna’ have a pop-up over at the Rose Café next to Citibank this Saturday. Read about it online.”

Ella May nodded her head, “Now that’s what I’m talking about! Good news involving donuts! Thank you, Edgar! Thank you very much!”

“Diablo donuts,” muttered a lean young man with coppery hair and starburst of freckles forehead to chin, shaking his head. “Putin’ the ‘D’ in donuts is what he’s doing!”

The young man was one of two at the table resting on the Hercules constellation. His name was Jeff Jones. He and the other lad, Alan Chow, were regulars to Tea and Tarot, as were their mothers. The pair were still studying the Tarot and had several guides spread out over the table. Inseparable in or out of school, they always worked the cards together.

Ella May raised her eyebrows high at the young man, “Why Jefferson Andrew Jones! If you’re sayin’ the ‘D’ I think you’re sayin’ your mama...”

Jeff suddenly seemed to realize just what that ‘D’ could stand for. He threw his hands up in the air interrupting Ella Mae. “No, no, no! Not that ‘D’! Not di..”

His friend punched him in the arm before he could finish the word.

“Sorry,” his face flushed with embarrassment. “I meant the demon ‘d’. D for demon, not...uh...you know...”

“I think there may be a little bit of both in that man’s cooking, if you take my meaning,” declared Ella May with an exaggerated wink. “He is one fine lookin’ pastry chef. And personally, I don’t care whose claws are in the kitchen if he can turn out such damned fine pastry.”

“Emphasis on damned,” said Alan with a sly smile. The pair chuckled conspiratorially.

The man at the counter pointed a finger at his watch and tapped it, “You better get there early. Last time they had a pop-up the line ran clear around the block. All the cream filled, banana, and chocolate ganache were gone by the time I got inside. The only thing on the counter were those sugared donut holes.”

“I hope you said you didn’t wait all that time for some dang donut holes!” declared Ella May indignantly.

“I did. Me and about ten other people! Mr. Diablo himself pulled out a tray of jelly filled said he’d been holding back for us. They weren’t the same as his Chocolate Ganache but they were pretty darn good.”

“Better than donut holes, that’s for sure!” Ella May made an ‘okay’ sign with her right hand. “I will see you there bright and early Saturday morning. They open at nine o’clock?”

“Yep. Nine.”

“I’ll be in line by 8:30 at least.”

All right then, 8:30 it is,” said Edgar, turning back to his deck.

There was a brief whispered conversation between the two young men, Alan raised his hand. “Us, too! We want a chance to observe Mr. Diablo up close.”

“And try one of those banana creams,” whispered Jeff.

Anita laid a hand on Joan’s shoulder. “Now that we’ve settled what people are doing with their Saturday morning, perhaps you can tell us what you see in the cards that has Ella May’s feathers ruffled.”

“She saw change is what she saw,” Ella May said before Joan could answer.

Anita stood up straight, her smile slipping ever so slightly.

“See,” Ella May pointed, “see! Look at that face. That face knows change is trouble.”

Anita looked expectantly at Joan.

“Change, yes. Change for us. Us as in the Dining Club. That’s what this,” she pointed at a card, “first the Tower and then,” she tapped another, “the Wheel of Fortune.”

“Was your question for the Dining Club?”

“It was...” she paused to consider her words, “more about our, um, current problem.”

“Well,” Anita took a moment to regard the position of the cards, “you got an answer though maybe not the one you were hoping for. Looks to me like we’ll need to set another place at the table for next month’s Widows and Orphans Club meeting, don’t you agree?”

Joan nodded, “If all goes according to the cards.”

“Uh oh,” said Edgar from the counter. He looked over his shoulder at the women, frowning.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the two young men at the table on the Hercules constellation.

They also turned to face the three women.

“Um, not sure, but this might be uh oh, too,” said Alan. “Mrs. Ochoa or Miss De Angelo, could you have a look please?”

He and Jeff pointed to their cards.

Anita motioned to Joan who stood and walked to the table while Anita returned to the counter where she had been laying out her own cards. They were mostly covered with a light dusting of flour as she had been mixing cookie dough.

Joan spent a few minutes studying the boys' cards before walking to stand beside Edgar. He leaned away to give her a clear view.

"Okay this is weird," she said. "Everyone's doing a different spread. Five, seven and you, Joan, a Celtic Cross. But everyone has the Tower and the Wheel."

Going back to the counter, Anita slowly turned over another card and then another and then the final one.

Her eyes met Joan's.

Walking around the cash register, Joan spent a few moments to study the layout.

"Oh dear," she said at last.

"Yep. Me too."

Ella May looked on in alarm. "What's oh dear? Why oh dear?"

Joan said nothing, her hands clenched tightly.

Ella May lifted both arms to encompass the whole group. "Out with it!"

Joan took a deep breath before she spoke, "Well, Anita has the Tower and the Wheel as well. Someone is trying to tell us, no not tell, shout loudly that change is coming. However, Anita's last card was Death."

"Damn it," groaned Ella May, sitting down heavily, "Not again!"

The front door opened, jingling the little string of brass Tibetan bells hanging from a hook at the top.

All eyes at Tea and Tarot turned to look.

A woman in perhaps her early thirties paused in the doorway. Her auburn hair pulled back in a springy ponytail with a long drift of bangs halfway covering her large brown eyes paused in the doorway. Her face was heart-shaped, her skin caramel cream, strong brows, straight nose, and small mouth. Maybe five foot four or five. Trim but curvy with an hour-glass figure and good shoulders. She was dressed in a loose black turtleneck, steel gray yoga pants and most noticeably a high-tech jointed steel brace around her left leg, ankle to thigh.

She paused half-in, half-out of the doorway with a decidedly deer-caught-in-the-headlights expression. And who could blame her?

Seven people of very disparate ages and appearance were staring. Stepping back, though keeping one hand still on the door handle, she looked up as if to confirm something, then bobbed back in.

“Uh, hello...is this... um... is this Tea and Tarot?” She had a clear voice despite the hesitation, no accent.

Ella Mae cleared her throat pointedly and everyone suddenly got busy. The boys went back to their books. Edgar reshuffled his cards, and Joan and Ella Mae picked up their coffee.

Anita stepped from behind the counter to hold the door and usher the woman in.

“Yes, we are,” she said cheerfully. “I’m Anita Ochoa,” and she held out her hand. “This is my and my husband’s place. Welcome.”

The woman hesitated for a moment before shaking it, “O...Olivia,” she stumbled over the name, then meeting Anita’s eyes said more firmly, “Olivia Mallory.”

Anita gave her an even bigger smile and practically pulled her through the doorway, still holding her hand.

“What can I get you? Coffee or tea? And you must try one of our apple cinnamon muffins.” She chattered cheerfully guiding the newcomer to the counter – whether she wanted to go or not, Ella Mae thought

“My muffins are the best on the Central Coast if I do say so myself. Really the best.”

Anita pulled out the nearest stool. Despite the leg brace, the woman climbed into the tall seat easily enough.

“On the house,” Anita continued, smiling brightly at the newcomer, her cheeks creased in dimples. “First time visitors get coffee and a treat on the house. What would you like?”

Ella Mae and Joan exchanged looks loaded with the unspoken telepathy of old friends.

‘Free coffee and a muffin?’ the looks said, ‘Since when?’

“Thank you very much.” The woman, Olivia, spoke each word sharp and distinct like a newscaster. “I’m an espresso drinker. So... if that wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“Not a bit. And let me warm up your muffin.”

“Thank you, sounds good.”

Edgar abruptly stopped shuffling his cards. His head came up and he took several deep, audible breaths. Ella May watched as his hand shot out across the empty stool between him and Olivia.

“How do you do,” he said with a smile as big as Anita’s. “Names Edgar. Edgar Francis. I work in bugs. For the Agro business in Salinas Valley. Any bug trouble you got, I can handle it.”

Olivia automatically took his hand. Ella Mae thought she was trying not to look surprised at Edgars hearty outburst. She was doing a pretty good job.

“Bugs,” said Olivia, nodding, “I see.”

The older man blushed, the color climbing from his cheeks right to his forehead.

“Get me my Ouija Board,” demanded Ella May sotto voce to Joan. “Now!”

CHAPTER THREE

Hocus Focus

Olivia had paused before handing over her name to the tall, Hispanic woman with shining black hair as she reached to shake hands. Then she gave herself a mental shake. Olivia Mallory wasn't even her real name.

The agency-that-shall-not-be-named had given it to her twelve years ago when she'd given up her past to sign on the Federal dotted line. And even before that, her name wasn't her own. She'd woken up in the pediatric ward of a Phoenix hospital, a confused nine-year old with a head injury, no memory, and no one to claim her.

Olivia Mallory would do just fine. No one on the Central Coast had a clue who she was. Hell, Olivia didn't even know *she* was coming to Monterey until the day of her discharge from the hospital in Bethesda and an unexpected phone call from her teammate Rafael Santos. Rafe. Who cared if she used her fake-real name in this tea shop with everyone staring at her like she was an alien?

Californians were so weird.

The owner placed the espresso in a ceramic cup and the muffin with a scoop of what must be honey butter in front of Olivia. She could smell the fragrant aroma of apples, cinnamon, and honey rising off the plate. Spreading the butter on a piece of muffin – which broke off cleanly, she noted not crumbling to bits -- she took a big bite. Yum. Melt in your mouth moist

California's might be weird but they were very hospitable.

The man next to her, white haired and with the deep wrinkles and dark tan of a life spent under the sun and Anita continued to smile at her as she smoothed the honey butter on another bite of muffin.

Really hospitable.

Too hospitable.

She tuned into her inner self. Oh crap. Her charm-o-meter must be on 'high.' She'd been surprised when everyone looked at her in the doorway. Except for the doctor and the therapist at the VA clinic in Marina, she'd barely spoken to anyone in the weeks since she arrived. The sudden attention made her jump and her charm automatically clicked into its fight-or-flight protective mode. It was an automatic response. Make yourself so charming no one wanted to hurt you

Olivia had been born charming.

With a mental effort, she toned the meter down.

“What brings you to Tea and Tarot?” asked Edgar.

It was Olivia's turn to blush. "I came for the meeting of the Monterey Spiritualists Society," she said, aware that the other customers were probably listening. "It's starts at five, I think? I'm a little early. Or is this, or rather, maybe are you, the Spiritualist Society?"

Anita glanced over Olivia's shoulder and Olivia swiveled around to look.

There were two women at a table behind her, one dark, one light, one dressed in bright colors, the other more muted tones. The darker woman had her back to Olivia and was bent over something on the table, her arms moving almost imperceptibly.

The other woman answered, "A little early. Your group always sort of straggles in. They should be here shortly."

She was tall and strongly proportioned. Not fat. Sturdy, Olivia thought. Kind of like a linebacker. She had fair hair, a little thin, and pale skin. Her eyes behind a pair of tortoise shell glasses the lightest of blues. Her face was deeply lined but in a lifetime of smiling good way.

"Anita is just making peanut-butter cookies for them."

Anita bent down and in a second there were cookies on Olivia's muffin plate.

"Here, try them," she said brightly. "Best on..."

"The Central Coast," finished Edgar.

'Damn it charm-o-meter, down!' Olivia growled at her inner self. 'Down, I said!'

She hoped the group would show up soon because she was on the verge of running out the door as fast as her gimpy leg could manage. It had taken a lot of internal convincing and not an insignificant amount of courage to come here. A spiritualist meeting for heaven's sake. Inner reflection was not on her internal CV. Never had been. Not as a foster child and not in covert ops.

Olivia believed in intel. She believed in analysis. She believed in herself and two other people. Her teammates Rafe Santos and James Monroe. Her heart gave a twinge. One, now. She believed in one other person.

For twelve years, Olivia worked as a Field Agent on the intel gathering side, identifying potential assets and helping to recruit them. She did not assassinate targets, or drug people with little poison pills, or tie them up and throw them in the trunk of late model BMWs. Well, not often.

It had been *at least* a year since she locked a man in the back of a Volvo and driven him across the Ukrainian border. In her defense, he'd asked her to do it.

Her official title was a Protocol Officer in the U.S. Foreign Service. The cover gave her the flexibility to zip in and out of embassies or any official entourage anywhere in the world. The State Department needed Protocol Officers to navigate the complexities of other cultures and political systems. They routinely popped up at every sort of official or unofficial function. They were wallpaper. Extremely useful wallpaper in Olivia's case.

“Ghosts!” said the dark woman in bright colors straitening up abruptly. “I see ghosts!”

“You too?” said Olivia wide eyed, then clapped her hands over her mouth.

The eyes of all seven turned to look at her again.

Crap. She hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

People who saw ghosts were crazy. The agency-that-shall-not-be-named did not believe in ghosts. They did believe in crazy. The government overlords liked crazy, but only specific varieties. Like Rafe. Rafael Santos. Her teammate and currently her landlord. They loved his kind of crazy. Rafe excelled at knocking people out, locking them in car trunks, and driving them secretly across borders. He thought it was fun.

If the Agency learned she’d been seeing ghosts they’d never put her back on the active duty roster once her leg fully healed. In fact, they’d probably place her on a three-day lock-up with a full dose of anti-psychotic meds.

Maybe she needed them.

