

**THE
MEMORY
CLOSET**

**BY
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Prologue

It was a scorcher, August, over 100 degrees in the shade and I wasn't in the shade. I was on my knees beside a road, the sun beating down on my back, both hands dug into the dirt like I was trying to grab hold of the earth and hang on. The stink of gasoline and burning rubber filled every breath; I was staring into a fire, dancing red-yellow flames and black smoke.

Suddenly, the world started to recede. It zoomed away from me, getting smaller and smaller, like looking through a telescope backwards, until reality only existed in a puddle of searing light at the end of a black tunnel.

A voice in the light, hollow-sounding and unnatural, called out, "Annie! Annie!" Somebody out there in the light was screaming, too, wailing, and the howling echoed off the smooth tunnel walls, the sound fracturing and multiplying.

I sensed the tunnel widen behind me, like it stretched out forever. Lit by a soft, golden glow, it felt inviting, familiar and safe.

Ka-chunk.

The tunnel went silent; pieces of shattered scream clattered to the floor and the golden glow behind me dimmed.

Ka-chunk.

It was closer, louder, the light weaker still.

I sneaked a peak over my shoulder and a great, malevolent darkness was gathering beyond the glow.

Ka-chunk, the sound of a whole panel of stadium lights suddenly switched off.

The darkness expanded; it was coming for me.

I bolted down the tunnel toward the voices in the searing light. The darkness nipped at my heels, gobbled up the world faster and faster.

Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk.

I tumbled out into the heat and stink of reality barely a step ahead of the darkness, and everything in the universe behind me blinked with a little sparkle like a soap bubble and vanished.

Out in the real world, flames still licked the bottom of black smoke. Jericho leaned over me, trying not to put any weight on a foot sliced open to the bone. He called my name. “Annie! Annie!” And the screams went on and on until my throat was raw and my voice so hoarse I could only croak. And cry.

But the thing was, I didn’t know anymore what I was crying about. It’s been 25 years now and I still don’t.

CHAPTER 1

Mama’s bony fingers suddenly gripped my arm so tight her nails dug into my flesh like an eagle’s talons. “Sweet Annie, I never meant for it to happen.” The sea-green eyes that caressed my face were clear and riveting; the last shot of morphine hadn’t kicked in yet.

“Never meant for what to happen?”

She strangled back a sob and began to cough, fighting for air her poisoned lungs couldn’t process anymore.

“Mama, don’t get all worked up. You need—”

“I swear before God I didn’t intend to ... I wouldn’t have ... “ The little burst of emotion-fueled energy flamed out and her grip loosened. Her hand dropped to the sheet and her words were soft, a whisper on a breath.

“I didn’t mean to, I swear.” Another wheezing gasp. “But I’m going to burn in hell for it just the same!”

She closed her eyes.

“Mama? *Mama!*”

She didn’t answer. Either couldn’t or wouldn’t. I think maybe she’d just said everything she had to say.

She died before sunup.

A month later, I was in Goshen, squinting into the afternoon sun at the house where Mama was raised, the house we lived in when I was a little girl. It was a big old house that hadn’t followed the rules about childhood places. It was supposed to seem smaller now that I was all grown up. It didn’t; it seemed bigger.

I'd been out of the car for only five minutes and already my nose and bare shoulders had turned the color of a good steak grilled medium rare. No big surprise there. I could get sunburned from a picture of a beach on a postcard.

The prairie puffed a gust of wind at me and it carried the fine dust that rains down out of the sky in front of a sandstorm. It wouldn't be long, a few minutes maybe, before it struck.

I'd seen a monster sandstorm once from the air, out the window of a little Piper Apache. The vast Texas plains below had been clear and empty, but back west toward New Mexico, a red-brown ball of churning earth was gobbling up everything in its path like fog rolling in off the sea.

I knew I ought to get inside before this one hit, ought to climb the worn wooden steps, cross the slat porch and push the button on the brass plate by the door that would set the bell in the parlor singing, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong-ding.

Actually, I didn't even have to ring the bell. I could let myself in. Nobody locked their doors in Goshen, Texas. But I couldn't just barge in on her like Sherman marching into Atlanta. Freaking out Bobo was near the top of my Don't Ever Do *That* list, right up there with licking a frozen flagpole and playing chicken with a team of Clydesdales and the Budweiser beer wagon.

Besides, I didn't want to go in. I wasn't ready. Not yet. I wanted to stand on the sidewalk and take it all in, breathe that world into my lungs and my soul again. The huge weeping willow tree, its limbs dangling to the ground in a gently swaying forest around the trunk, the gladiolas, cannas and irises outlining the porch railing in a profusion of red, purple and yellow blossoms, the rickety wooden swing that protested its use with an awful wreek-wreek, wreek-wreek sound—at least it used to.

And the white frame house that was the background image behind all the ghostly shadows on the edge of my vision—the ones that hid, frightened, the ones you couldn't look at face up or they'd turn to ash and blow away in little gray whirlwinds. Those shadows beckoned to me from the corner of my eye, from the edge of my reflection in a mirror, a windowpane or a wine glass. They whispered secrets to me about that old house in dreams and screamed crazy images from it into my mind in horrifying night terrors.

Somehow, the real house managed to appear just as brooding and foreboding as the dream-warped distortions. The looming, three-story structure was creepier now than when I last saw it two-plus decades ago.

The wind picked up. The fine grit no longer rained out of the sky; it came at me horizontally. It was still only dust but I really needed to go in, or at least go sit in my car parked on the street. I could stare at the house from the car; I didn't have to stand in the front yard in a sandstorm like some kind of nutcase.

And that's what the neighbors would think. They'd think Anne Mitchell had lost it, that she was as loony as that grandmother of hers who was likely sitting with her dress on inside-out and her shoes on the wrong feet in a squeaky platform rocker in the parlor behind that big oak door, singing old hymns—"There's a long ole trail a'windin' to the land beyond the sea"—in her husky, off-key voice.

And they'd be right. Little Annie Mitchell's mind was at least half a bubble off plum and slipping farther away from level every day.

Suddenly, the wind slammed into me, almost knocked me off balance, whipped my hair in a frenetic dance. The grit sandblasted the side of my face and my bare arms, filled every breath, gathered in the corners of my squinty eyes and somehow found its way into my mouth—and it wasn't because I was smiling!—so when I bit down it crunched between my teeth.

Every branch of the willow tree lashed out like a cat-o'-ninetails, and the hanging pots of blue pansies on the porch swayed back and forth, straining at the thin wires that affixed them to s-hooks in the ceiling. The tall, skinny juniper trees next to the street cavorted like the blow-up tube figures you see in front of car dealerships and grand openings.

I stood firm though, held my ground.

Maybe the sandstorm itself will help shake the memories loose. Oh, not all of them! I'm not ready for the whole herd. Just some. A few. Ok, one, just one memory.

I willed my mind to retrieve a lone recollection, a simple, ordinary memory, waited to see a thin slice of dark purple haze peek out between the door and the jam of the place in my head where they were locked away. A tiny opening just big enough for one little memory to escape.

Other people have vast stores of childhood memories. They can recall the time their father got up barefoot in the middle of the night and stepped on one of the jacks they left on the hardwood floor, how he danced around on one foot, hollering so loud Mama was afraid the neighbors would think there was an ax murderer in the house. Or the day their little brother almost got his finger bitten off by a snapping turtle and Grandma had to use the pliers to pry its jaws open. Or the yellow-eyed mutt that got old and ripped out hellacious doggie farts, but the whole family loved him so much they pretended it wasn't happening even when the stink got so bad they had to open all the windows and turn on the fan.

I had memories like that, too. The difference was, they weren't mine. They belonged to somebody else.

My earliest memory wasn't the heart-warming, Christmas-morning-basset-hound-puppy image I described whenever somebody asked: "What's the first thing you remember?" A little girl with freckles I sat beside once on a

bus told me that one and I snatched it up like a card shark palming an ace. I needed a charmingly innocuous recollection—of droopy-eared doggies or butterflies, something like that—because I couldn't very well chuck my *real* first memory into casual conversations. The real one was the kind you tell a shrink about and he'll ship you off to Saint Somebody's Home for the Bewildered.

Over the years, I'd cataloged hundreds, maybe even thousands of other people's recollections and filed them away so I could pull one out, dust it off and pretend it was mine whenever people started talking about what they did as children.

Every time I listened to tales of other people's growing-up years, I felt a tangled mixture of envy and terror. Envy because I ached to have a past, too, a mental library of sunsets at the beach, Christmas mornings, birthday cakes, chicken pox, spankings, hugs and most-embarrassing-moments that were uniquely my own. And terror because I understood that something profoundly evil, a fierce, savage Boogie Man, lurked in the swirling purple of my recollections, in the deepest dark ditch there. Fear of facing him trumped the yearning in my heart to be like everybody else. It trumped the niggling itch of curiosity.

Fear trumps everything; always does, always has, always will.

Fear held me hostage for a quarter of a century. Like a schoolyard bully, it twisted my arm behind my back and forced me to accept that my life began at age 11, on my knees in the dirt on the side of the road with the wind blowing smoke into my face from the gulley where our old Dodge station wagon was burning like hell had opened a crack in the world right there in the back seat.

Ok, maybe it was an overstatement to say I had *no* memories. I could remember the basic facts about the first decade of my life—like you remember the multiplication tables or the recipe for bean dip. I remembered faces frozen in a handful of snapshots. Like the one of my little brother, Joel, who's a gardener now in Albuquerque. He's sitting in a high chair with chocolate birthday cake all over his face.

I had a little sister, too. Wendy. But her name brought no face to my mind. Her likeness was not captured in a single one of the few remaining photos and she didn't grow up to be anything. All I knew about Wendy was that her life ended in the car fire the day my life began.

The wind changed directions. It hit me from behind, blew my hair into my face so I could barely see. That's when the big oak door swung open and there stood Bobo. Gratefully, her print dress appeared to be on right-side-out. With my hair in my eyes, it was hard to tell for sure. It looked like she might

have her slip on outside her dress, though. Mama said she did that sometimes. But maybe it was an apron.

She was smaller than she used to be. Of course, she never was very big—5 feet 2 or 3—but age had shrunk her, bent her back in a dowager's hump so she had to jut out her chin to see anything besides her own feet. And the years had stolen so much of her wispy white hair that pink scalp showed through in spots like a bad paint job.

She told me on my 12th birthday that my hair was like hers had been when she was a girl. She was parting my long, pale tresses so she could “plat” them—her word—into two fat braids tied at the ends with ribbons.

“I was a cotton-top, too, hair so light it was almost white, and straight as a stick—just like yours. It hung all the way to my waist ‘fore I come down with the fever.”

Her fingers make three sections of hair into one so fast it's hard to follow the process. “We all got it, near everybody in town took sick.”

She describes how a woodpecker made a small hole in the side of the wooden water tank that stood 120 feet tall, with “Tahoka, Texas” emblazoned on its side in big, white letters. Other birds found the hole to get into the tank, but apparently most were too stupid to find their way back out again. Those that couldn't flew around and around in circles until they were exhausted. Then they drowned. The town's only water supply was soon contaminated, full of dozens of decaying bird carcasses.

“Every bit of my hair fell out. I was bald as a baby's butt and when it grew back in, it wasn't pretty no more like it was before.”

Her voice is surprisingly deep, almost gravely. She sang tenor in the First Presbyterian Church choir.

That husky voice called to me from the open door.

“I swan if you ain't changed one bit—still don't got no more sense than to stand outside in a sandstorm.” It was like she was picking up the threads of a conversation that ended just a few minutes ago rather than greeting the granddaughter she'd seen only a handful of times in the past quarter century. “Get on in this house, child, ‘fore you blow away. I got sody-pop in the fridge—that nasty orange stuff that tastes like cough syrup.”

She turned on her heel and disappeared, left the door wide open, and some papers—a newspaper or junk mail, maybe—blew across the parlor floor.

I hurried up onto the porch, shook sand out of my hair and brushed grit off my clothes, then stepped inside. When I shut the door behind me, the parlor was plunged into gloom. Bobo hadn't turned on any of the lamps and it was lit only by the shafts of dull, dust-freckled sunlight that peeked through where the drapes on the two floor-to-ceiling windows didn't quite meet.

The furniture was little more than shadows—a couch, end tables, chairs, a coffee table, and an antique platform rocker that sat beside a full-sized Philco radio.

I caught just a hint of the typical musty, old-house smell hanging in the air—moth balls and ancient dust—before my nasal passages were assaulted by the distinctive aroma of my grandmother.

Ahhh. Medicated vapors. Breathe deep and they'll open your sinuses so wide you could shove a hand grenade up your nose.

Bobo slathered some portion of her anatomy, nobody was ever sure exactly what—or why—with an industrial strength combination of Mentholatum and Vicks VapoRub. Every day. Always had. It was so potent you could follow the scent like a coon dog tracking a rabbit. And I did, sniffed my way across the darkened parlor, around the big oak table and its massive sideboard in the dining room, and into the kitchen on the back of the house.

Bobo stood at the sink in front of the window that looked out on the back yard, her hands submerged up to her elbows in soap suds. She was wearing an apron after all and her shoes appeared to match. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“Maria’s a slob; I’m tired of cleaning up after her,” she said over her shoulder without bothering to turn and look at me. “So this morning, I fired her.”

I had no idea who the recently unemployed Maria might be. Mama told me that Bobo had a part-time housekeeper/caretaker named Julia, a Hispanic woman Mama described as “a saint,” but she never mentioned anybody named Maria.

“So you ... uh ... fired her?”

Bobo turned, drying her hands on her apron.

“Fired who?”

“Maria.”

“Who’s Maria?”

I stared at her, confused and disoriented; she stared back at me, her face completely blank.

Then she suddenly cracked up, actually cackled, laughed so hard her milky blue eyes watered and she had to wipe them with the back of her hand.

“Your mama told you I’m crazy, didn’t she? Go on, admit it, said I’s batty as a bed bug.” Her laughter dissolved into hiccupping giggles. “Well, you come all this way and I sure didn’t want to disappoint you!”

Still chuckling, she pointed to the refrigerator.

“The sody pop’s in there. If it ain’t cold enough to suit, there’s ice in the freezer—in trays, though; I don’t have me one of them fancy icemaking machines. Help yourself, but when you’re finished, refill them trays or there won’t be no ice when you go looking for it next time.”

Then she turned back to the sink and plunged her hands into the soapy water again.

I stood looking at her bent back. That was it? I'd moved heaven, earth and a good portion of hell along with it to get here, spent 10 hours in an airplane and 18 in a car, and her only response was "the sody pop's in the fridge?"

"Hello, Bobo." There may have been just the tiniest bit of a quaver in my voice and I cleared my throat to get rid of it. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Glad don't have nothing to do with it. You're here and that's the fact of it. Makes me no never mind one way or the other; I ain't going to be in town but a few more days."

According to my mother, Bobo had been living out of a suitcase for going on three years, ever since her stroke, refusing to unpack because she was always "going home at the end of the week." Home was an old farmhouse outside Tahoka that had burned to the ground the same day Neil Armstrong took a small step for man and a giant leap for mankind.

"Ok, I'll go get my things out of my car."

I guess I sounded like my feelings were hurt. Probably because my feelings were hurt. She turned around abruptly and held out her arms to me, dripping dishwater into puddles on the black-and-white, checker-board linoleum.

"Come on over here and give your Bobo a big hug!"

A smile settled into the mold of its shape in the folds and creases around her mouth and cratered eyes. A lifetime in West Texas had withered Bobo's face. Lines crosshatched every square centimeter of her sagging, spotty skin like hairline cracks in antique wood.

If she had one more wrinkle, she'd have to hold it in her hand!

The sun had carved deep trenches into her forehead and plowed furrows on both sides of her mouth from her nose to her chin. But her smile looked genuine and I ached for somebody to be glad to see me, so I stepped forward and let her fold me into her boney arms.

You and me, we're going to do just fine." She patted my back as furiously as a new mother burping a baby. "Just fine. Welcome home, Sugar." Her wet hands dripped a comforting dribble of warm soap suds down between my shoulder blades. "Welcome home!"

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window over the sink as she hugged me. I never looked at my mirrored image if I could avoid it, particularly in dim light. There were things in the backgrounds of reflections sometimes, hidden in the shadows so you could only see enough of them to know they were there. Things you maybe didn't want to get a good look at.

But I looked at my image then and the most remarkable thing about the face that looked back at me was that there was absolutely nothing remarkable about it at all.

I missed my calling. I had a bright future holding up liquor stores. Nobody'd ever have picked me out of a police lineup.

Yes, sir, Anne Mitchell was imminently forgettable. Not pretty. Not ugly. Not tall. Not short. Not fat. Not skinny. Ok, maybe skinny. No distinctive characteristics whatsoever. There was the long blonde hair, of course, but lots of women were platinum blondes. I just didn't have dark roots, that's all.

I wore no makeup and my pale eyebrows and eyelashes were invisible, so the face that peered at me from the window bore a striking resemblance to Resusci Annie, the mannequin they used to teach CPR classes at the YWCA.

I fixed myself a soft drink, Piggly Wiggly house brand orange cola—and it did taste like cough syrup. I carefully refilled the ice trays before I began to unload my car. The sandstorm raged unabated so I only lugged in a few things. A couple of boxes, my laptop and, of course, Petey.

"That ain't no bird cage, is it?" Bobo asked when I hauled in what was unmistakably a huge bird cage and set it on the floor in the parlor.

The room was dark again. Before I went outside, I'd opened the drapes to let in what little sunlight there was, muted and dull, shining through the brown air. Obviously, Bobo had closed them again as soon as I was out of the house.

"You got a bird in there?"

"Uh huh. His name's Petey. Why'd you close the drapes?"

"I'm practicing bein' blind!" she snapped. "Listen here, I don't want me no bird in this house. I don't trust nothing that looks at me with only one eye at a time."

"Aw, come on, he's adorable." I lifted the blue cover off the cage, leaned close to the bird inside and made smooching sounds. "Aren't you, Petey boy?"

The bright green parakeet perched on a swing cocked his head to one side in a herky-jerky bird motion and made smooching sounds back at me.

"See! And he can talk, too, knows almost a dozen words." I began a circuit around the room, turning on the lamps. "He can say his name and 'hello' and—"

"Can he say goodbye? 'Cause I want him outta here."

Ok, this is a hill worth dying on.

"Petey stays, Bobo." I tried to sound pleasant and firm at the same time. "I got him when I first moved to England and I went to enormous trouble to get him into this country."

It would have been easier to get a pipe bomb through customs in Newark than that one little, green bird.

“He’s important to me.” I paused, then continued in a soft voice. “There have been times Petey was the only friend I had.”

“You don’t get out much, do you.”

She leaned a little closer to the cage to get a better look. “The only good bird’s one frying in a skillet.” She straightened up. “Which reminds me, I got to go pluck a chicken.”

“You still keep chickens?” That filthy, old chicken house had been a health hazard 25 years ago. Surely, there were city ordinances that banned such things by now.

Of course, we’re talking Goshen, Texas, here, home of not one, not two, but—hold onto your britches, Mildred!—three traffic lights.

Bobo ignored my question and headed toward the kitchen. Then she stopped in the dining room doorway, turned and glared back at me.

“I got me a friend, too,” she said, and then mimicked in a singsong whine, “and there have been times he was the only friend I had.” She turned back toward the kitchen. “Name’s Butch,” she said over her shoulder. “He’s a big, yella alley cat.”

I picked up Petey’s cage and started up the stairs with it.

“Don’t you worry about Butch,” I whispered. “I bet you a bag of birdseed that big, yellow alley cat is curled up right now in the lap of the recently unemployed Maria.”

I took a few more steps and then paused. Shadows began to seep out of dark corners just beyond sight, spreading out toward me like ink through the fibers of a blotter. A glacier chill ran down my spine and I shivered. Bobo’d have said, “Somebody’s walkin’ over yore grave.” My heart took up the pounding beat of a lunatic fist on the padded door of a padded cell and I drew a deep, shaky breath to knit together the tattered edges of my courage.

There are secrets here, the walls whispered, things you don’t want to see, Annie girl. Run now while you still can.

I faced the truth then for what it was. I was here to fight the Boogie Man and if he won, Anne Mitchell would cease to exist. Not in some cosmic, metaphorical sense, but literally. If I challenged the Boogie Man head on and lost, this time he would kill me.

And he knows I’m coming. The Boogie Man knows it’s Showtime. He knows it’s either him or me.