

THE OLD HANDWRITTEN BOOK

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Janet said. “In our basement?”

“Yes, I’m telling you that’s what the book said,” whispered Ellen to her sister.

“What book are you talking about?”

“You know, the old handwritten book I found in the attic a couple of months ago. We were up there looking for the scratching noise. What we found were nuts where the squirrels had stored them for the winter. The squirrels were getting in around the eaves. Remember?”

“Oh yeah, that nasty dirty old thing of a book. You actually read it?”

“Sure, I cleaned it up a bit. It was so old.”

“The handwriting was so faded and fancy. There were large loopy capital letters next to tiny letters that were so small you could barely see the alphabetical letters that were formed. How could you make out the words?”

“I put a piece of plain white paper behind each of the pages as I attempted to decipher the words. Then I wrote everything I could make out into another notebook trying to make sense of what I was reading.”

“You’ve spent a lot of time on this, haven’t you?”

“Yes. I wanted to know what was in the book. The only way to find out was to read it. The only way to read it was to do the job slowly word by word.”

“Show me where it says that our basement was the meeting place for witches.”

“I can’t right now. We have to go to the funeral. We don’t want to be late.”

The funeral was for Aunt Mintha who by all rights was not a witch unless witches have changed their allegiance from a hellish being to a heavenly one.

Ellen wanted to tell Janet everything she had read in the handwritten journal but she knew Janet wouldn’t accept the words that were written on the pages as gospel. As a matter of fact, Ellen didn’t accept them as the whole truth herself. She couldn’t make herself believe that her family was made up of witches and warlocks. That was just too hard to believe when she realized that for as long as she could remember, and that her parents and their parents could remember, her family had always lived in the Bible belt.

How could anyone hide the worship of Satan from the Bible-thumping, churching-going, religion-spouting members of her small town?

Ellen knew she had some strange family members. Oddly enough, she was looking at one of the stranger ones while she was standing in the church waiting for the funeral ceremony to begin.

Aunt Bessie was standing straight up suffering under the weight of the world that seemed to be placed squarely on her shoulders. She wasn’t bent over with the old age signs that all of her sisters were displaying. Her back was ramrod straight, her teeth were clenched, and Ellen was sure that if a smile ever sought the corners of her Aunt Bessie’s mouth, it would be bitten away from sight.

Ellen remembered talking to her mother about her prim and proper Aunt Bessie.

“Mom, why is Aunt Bessie so mean?”

“She’s not mean. She just has a lot on her mind.”

“Like what?”

“It goes way back but people have long memories, especially family members who aren’t that close to you.”

“What is it that’s so heavy on her mind?”

“Ellen, I’m going to tell you what I know. I don’t know the whole story because no one would ever tell me about it, not even your father. I didn’t ask too many questions because I would either get mean, ugly looks that say ‘mind your own business’, or the ones I was talking to flat out didn’t know anything about it.”

“Okay, tell me.”

“Your Aunt Bessie was married once before to another man named Jacob who, from the bits and pieces of information I have picked up, was really mean and abusive to her. It just wasn’t the way of the family to end a marriage with a divorce so your Aunt Bessie just had to endure the beatings and hopefully live through them. Your daddy’s family was really old-fashioned and divorce was against everything they believed as far as religion goes. They lived by the rule of ‘til death do us part’.”

Ellen’s mother paused looking as if she were going to change her mind about relating the rest of the tale to Ellen.

“Go on, Mom, don’t stop now. I want to know everything, please.”

“Okay, but like I said, don’t be telling this to anyone.”

Ellen shook her head in agreement but the excitement of a deep, dark family secret being revealed was just about more than she could handle. She didn’t know how she was going to be able to keep the secret hidden inside of her. She knew it would fight to get out.

“Aunt Bessie tried everything to make things better for her and her children who were also getting the stuffing beat out of them. There was an old lady who claimed to be a midwife that lived a couple of farms away who was known to cast spells.”

“You mean a witch?” Ellen asked in a skeptical tone.

“Well, yes and no. She didn’t claim to be a witch. She said she was a healer, not a doctor but a healer. There must have been a difference but I don’t know what it was. Anyway, Aunt Bessie went to see her because of what she referred to as female problems. What she was actually doing was trying to buy some potions or get the old lady to cast some spells that would make her problems with Jacob disappear. She wanted to change Jacob to make him a nicer, more understanding man who wouldn’t beat her and the children so often.”

“I guess it didn’t work,” said Ellen when her mother paused.

“Well, yes and no. Jacob changed by leaving Aunt Bessie and going to live with another woman. Men could do that. Women weren’t allowed to do the same thing, at least, not in the eyes of those who claimed to be in power. When Jacob got wind of the fact that Aunt Bessie was keeping company with another man, he totally lost it. He left his new woman, and went back to Aunt Bessie to reclaim her again as his wife.”

“Had he changed any?”

“Yeah, he was worse than ever. The beatings were nearly fatal sometimes and Aunt Bessie’s new man wasn’t going to stand around and watch her husband kill her.”

“What did he do?”

“Walter was the name of the new man in Aunt Bessie’s life. He called out Jacob one night, it was long after dark. Walter had been drinking and so had Jacob. They were both so drunk they could hardly stand but they could still talk and call each other names: ugly, bad,

awful names. Finally, Jacob had had enough of Walter and told him to get off of his land that he was going to go inside the house and whip everybody in there into shape, especially Aunt Bessie because she had kept company with the likes of Walter.

“When Walter wouldn’t leave, Jacob went inside the house and got the handgun. I don’t know what kind of gun it was but according to the tales that were told, the gun was fully loaded and ready to shoot. It appeared that Jacob was expecting trouble from someone.

“Jacob waved the gun around telling Walter to get out of there so Walter ran for cover behind some trees. When Jacob thought Walter had run like a scared rabbit, he proceeded to go back inside the house and beat on Aunt Bessie. Screams of terror and pain were penetrating every part of the outdoors and Walter couldn’t stand the thought that Jacob was trying to beat the life out of Aunt Bessie so he went into the house after Jacob. There was a fight over the gun and Walter was a little more sober than Jacob as it turns out because Walter was the one who walked away after everything was said and done.”

“He killed Jacob?”

“Dead.”

“What happened next?”

“After the proper amount of time for mourning, Aunt Bessie married your Uncle Walter.”

Ellen was thinking about what her mother had told her about Aunt Bessie. Then she realized that the book she had found in the attic probably belonged to Aunt Bessie.

Ellen watched her Aunt Bessie closely. Perhaps she wasn’t all bad and mean like she thought. Maybe she had a reason, a real reason, to be the way that she was.

Ellen knew Aunt Bessie was ignored by most of the members of the rest of the family. Ellen’s father, Ezra, was the only member that claimed to be close to Aunt Bessie. Out of the

five children born to Ellen's grandparents, Ezra was the only boy and Mintha was the youngest of the girls. Ezra and Walter, Aunt Bessie's second husband, were close friends since childhood. Ellen knew that if her father liked Uncle Walter, then he couldn't be all bad. Her father was a good judge of character.

The funeral ceremony began with the muted piano tones of Amazing Grace that seemed to be the song played at every funeral of a family member that Ellen had attended.

Ellen glanced at her Aunt Bessie and saw tears trickling down her wrinkled face to be brushed off immediately by a white-gloved hand. Aunt Bessie looked around her to see if anyone saw the signs of weakness she had unwillingly displayed. She straightened her spine, squared her shoulders, and set her jaw so that she would display tears no more.

"Janet, I'm going to ask Aunt Bessie and Uncle Walter to come to our house after the funeral."

"Do you think that's a good idea? Won't she want to go to the gathering at Aunt Mintha's house?"

"She will because she has no other place to go. We can go there to, but while we're there, we can ask Aunt Bessie and Uncle Walter to come to our place."

When the ceremony had finally ended, all of those in attendance were told to return to Aunt Mintha's house where her children and the members of her church had prepared a meal for all of them.

"Where do they think everyone is going to park, or to sit, or to eat, for that matter? Aunt Mintha's house is so small that if more than two people are walking around in it they would constantly be in each other's way."

“They have some tables in the back yard and the neighbors on each side and across the street said they could park in their driveways. There shouldn’t be too much of a problem.”

The drive took about a half an hour and the parking problem took even longer. Finally, Ellen and Janet entered the front door of Aunt Mintha’s house where they were confronted by a throng of people, friends, relatives, and neighbors of Aunt Mintha.

Ellen searched the faces of those before her trying to zero in on Aunt Bessie and Uncle Walter. Off to one side away from the crowd, Ellen saw Aunt Bessie and Uncle Walter as they each picked at a plate of food.

“Come on, Janet. They are over there. Let’s go say hello.”

“Why are you all of a sudden wanting to get chummy with Aunt Bessie? I thought you didn’t like her.”

“I didn’t like her but I think I was wrong. Let’s go say hi.”

“Okay, whatever you want.”

Ellen walked up to her Aunt Bessie from whom she had kept her distance in the past and threw her arms around her in a giant hug.

“What’s this about?” asked a startled Aunt Bessie.

“I’m just glad to see you two. Are you all right? How is your health doing?”

“We’re fine. Why do you ask?” asked Aunt Bessie who was a true nonbeliever that people can change.

“Just because,” was Ellen’s short response.

“It is nice to see you, Ellen. You, too, Janet. It has been a long time. I understand you are living in the old home place?”

“Yes, we are. We’ve done a lot of work on it to get it back into shape. When dad was sick, he wasn’t able to keep it up. After he died, we took over the repair work and we’ve done most of it ourselves. Haven’t we, Janet?”

Janet nodded in agreement.

“Anyway, what I really want to ask you is if you would like to come by the house after you leave here and visit for a while. We would really like for you to see what we’ve done. We want you to know that we care about the house and that we really want to do our best to get it back into shape.”

“You want us to come by the house today?”

“Sure, if you’re up to it?” Ellen answered quickly.

“I don’t know, Ellen. We should stay around here for a while. Mintha was my sister, you know.”

“Well, doesn’t look like they’ll miss you one little bit. Look at all of the people milling around in the house and out here. Aunt Mintha had a lot of friends and people who truly loved her. Must have been because she was such a church going person. She was nice, I mean really nice, sincerely nice, if you know what I mean.”

“That she was. It’s a shame we all couldn’t be like her,” said Aunt Bessie as she brushed at her cheek again.

“What do you say? Come on over to the house. We’ll put you two up for the night if you’re too tired to drive all the way back to your house. We wouldn’t mind having you stay overnight one little bit. Would we, Janet?”

“No, we would love the visit,” added Janet.

“Oh all right, but you two girls eat first. There is so much food here. Someone’s liable to get upset if you don’t stay for a little while.”

After each of them had finished eating an enormous plate of food, both girls were ready to leave. They weren’t much for family gatherings, especially funerals, and that seemed to be the only kind of family gathering they could remember.

“Aunt Bessie, Uncle Walter, we are going to leave now. You can come on over just as soon as you feel like it.”

“See you, Ellen, Janet. We’ll be there directly,” said Uncle Walter as he waved to us.

“I wonder if they will show up?” pondered Janet.

“Sure, Aunt Bessie will want to know what we’ve done to the house. You know how she was with her own house when we were growing up. She wouldn’t let us touch anything if we went for a visit. She will want to know if we are going to treat her like she treated us.”

As soon as they arrived home, Ellen and Janet ran through the house picking up this and straightening that until everything looked ship-shape. Just as they finished tidying up, there was a knock at the door.

“Come on in and have a seat. I’m glad that you did decide to come over to see the place.”

“You’ve done a lot, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, we have. We filled all the holes in the walls where old pictures were hung. We sanded and painted everything in sight. We’ve tried to bring the place back to life. How does it look to you?”

“It looks fine. You’ve done a really good job,” said Uncle Walter as he looked around in amazement.

“This room used to be blue, dark blue ask I recall,” said Aunt Bessie as a look of disdain appeared on her face.

“Yeah, I remember,” said Janet. “It was so dark and dreary looking. Wasn’t it, Ellen.”

“It was like walking into a cave. Why did everybody paint their houses with such dark colors?” asked Ellen as she looked at Aunt Bessie.

“Because they didn’t want to have to paint it every year. They chose dark colors to hide the dirt and wear and tear of everyday living,” explained Aunt Bessie as she glared at the brightness in the room that had been painted a soft white. “It must have taken a lot of paint to cover the dark blue.”

“It sure did. I didn’t think I would ever get it covered but I did, finally,” said Ellen jovially. “I didn’t show you the basement because we haven’t got to that area yet. We will though. There’s a lot to be done down there. It looks like the walls are all blackened with burning candles and there are strange signs painted on the bare wood. Do you know anything about what went on down there?” Ellen asked Aunt Bessie as she looked directly at her.

“No, nothing. Why would you think I would know anything?” asked an uncomfortable Aunt Bessie.

“No reason except that you used to live here. I thought maybe someone told you why those things are down there.”

Aunt Bessie looked uncomfortable. She started squirming around in her chair, tugging at her clothing, and wiping at imaginary dirt on her skirt.

Ellen knew why the walls were blackened with candle smoke and why there were strange devil worship markings on the wall. Aunt Bessie had been told to do those things by the instructions in the little handwritten book Ellen had found

“Did you used to keep a written journal, Aunt Bessie?” asked Ellen as she continued to pry into her aunt’s background.

“No, I didn’t. I’ve never kept a journal.”

“Well, I found one up in the attic. I thought it might belong to you. It was very old, probably too old for you to have written it. I thought maybe someone had given it to you for safe keeping.”

“Yes, yes. I remember having an old book. It was old when I was young. So I can imagine what it looks like now. You probably can’t even read it anymore with the pages being so old.”

“Well, it is old and yellowed. The pages are brittle but I have managed to read some of it. It had your name written inside the front cover so that’s why I thought it was yours.”

“Let me see it,” demanded Aunt Bessie as Uncle Walter scolded her for using such a stern tone.

Ellen left the room and returned carrying the old journal.

Aunt Bessie’s eyes widened in what appeared to be fright.

“That’s not mine. No, no, that’s not my book,” she whispered harshly.

“Do you know who it belongs to?” Ellen asked innocently.

“No, I’ve never seen it before,” Aunt Bessie stammered.

“It’s got the name of Ida Mae Barton written in next to your name. Do you know who that is?”

“She was on old lady that lived a couple of farms from here. She died many, many years ago.”

“Was she the one they called the healer?”

Aunt Bessie glared at Ellen.

“This must have been her book. I wonder why your name is written in it.”

“I don’t have any idea. Now, Walter and I have to get home. I don’t like to be away too long. You never know what will happen living in the city. Someone will probably steal us blind.”

“Aunt Bessie, why don’t you stay the night,” pleaded Janet. “We would love to have the company.”

“No, no, I don’t think so, too many memories are left in this house.”

Aunt Bessie hurried Uncle Walter along so they could get out of the house as soon as possible.

“I guess there are some really bad memories here,” said Ellen as she and Janet watched the car leave the driveway taking Aunt Bessie and Uncle Walter away for the last time that Ellen and Janet would ever see them alive. After all, they were both in their early eighties but who would have thought they both would have died of a heart attack as soon as they arrived home after Aunt Mintha’s funeral.

“What bad memories are you talking about?”

“Did mom tell you about Jacob?”

“You mean Aunt Bessie’s first husband?”

“Yeah, he would be Uncle Jacob, you know.”

“She mentioned him and that he died suddenly and that Aunt Bessie remarried about a year later.”

“That’s all she told you?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

Ellen told the story to Janet that her mother had told her years earlier.

“You think Uncle Walter killed Uncle Jacob, here in this house?”

“Yeah, I sure do. I also believe Aunt Bessie was the witch that practiced her craft in the basement and that was why Uncle Jacob is no longer with us. That’s why Aunt Bessie has so many bad memories in this house.”

“Ellen, you’re crazy. You’ve let you writer’s imagination run away with you.”

“Maybe – maybe not.”